Himachal Journal of Agricultural Research 34(2):88-92, 2008

Situational analysis of girl child in district Kangra of Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract

The present study focuses on analyzing the situation of girl child in Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh with regard to their educational status, economic, social aspects, household responsibilities, marriage, health and aspects of puberty. A sample of 253 school going girls of age 12 to 17 years was identified from nine villages from two blocks of Kangra district. Focus group discussions were held with the girls and data was analyzed through percentages. The results revealed a better schooling status with most of the girls placing high value on education. They were interested in taking up skill-oriented training in different areas. They were supposed to behave in an approved manner, were restricted to interact with members of opposite sex and were unaware of the various legal rights pertaining to girls and women. A lot of time was spent on household and farm activities. Discrimination in feeding practices was observed as the girls were denied of various kinds of foods. They did not have any choice in mate selection. The girls faced various kinds of health problems during puberty but did not take any remedies.

Key Words: Gender, situation, girl child, and discrimination.

Introduction

In India the status of girl child reflects serious gender based differences, inequalities and discrimination. Preference for son in the society and discrimination against girl child are interlinked due to interplay of different factors. Despite widespread progress in improving the health, nutrition and education of children, the situation of girls continue to be disadvantaged compared to that of boys. Girls are often seen as less important to family and community life than boys regardless of the fact that girl children constitute one fourth of population in India.

Equity is an essential assumption in the philosophy of humanity and finds a place in the constitution. Yet, gender inequity exists in many divisions of social sectors in which family is the most important part. Sex segregated norms are practiced among all sections of Indian people, irrespective of caste, class and ethnic communities which is common in rural as well as urban communities. Women are continued to being treated as property and as sex objects that has relegated them to a secondary status. She is not treated as an individual in her own right and has no say even on her own. Thus she becomes physically, economically, psychologically as well as socially dependent on men (Tandon, 2000).

Gender bias is deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of the Indian society. It is a society that idolizes sons who are considered ritually and economically desirable. They are also expected to become the economic support of parents in their old age. This is due to the socialization process in which the girls are brought up (Chaterjee, 1995). The girls are made to accept the male supremacy and to look themselves as inferior and having less authority than boys. Thus they are viewed as burden and liability as investments made on them brings no returns, instead when she gets married, a sizable amount of dowry has to be given to her. According to Kapur (1995) the facts of girl child being deprived underfed, neglected, overworked and nurture denied, low education and health care access, discriminated, exploited and abused are becoming increasingly widely recognized.

Keeping in mind the picture of an Indian girl child, an effort has been made to have an in-depth analysis of situation of girls in the state of Himachal Pradesh. The present study takes into account the situation of girls with respect to education, economic and social aspects, household responsibilities, marriage, health and pubertal aspects.

Methodology

A sample of 253 girls aged between 12 to 17 years and studying in 6th to 10th standards was

taken for the present investigation. A total of 9 villages from two blocks of Kangra district namely, Panchrukhi (5 villages) and Bhawarna (4 villages) were identified for the study. The government schools located within these villages were selected and focus group discussions were held with the girls. The tool consisted of a self structured guide for focus group discussion which consisted of questions on various aspects like schooling status, economic and social aspects, upbringing practices, work pattern, legal and health aspects and information on puberty and marriage. The data collected was analyzed through means and percentages.

Results and Discussion

The situation of the school going girls of district Kangra can be analysed by going through the various responses which came up through the focus group discussions.

Schooling status

This section reveals the importance of school and education in the lives of the girls. (Table 1)

- Majority of the girls went to schools by foot located within the village (78%) at a distance of one to two Kms away from their homes.
- Parents encouraged their children for study and mostly fathers (60%) provided books and other stationary materials.
- The advantages of education as perceived by girls included the opportunity to get good jobs, as being able to educate children including fulfillment of specific aims like becoming doctors, engineers, etc.
- Watching television (88%) emerged as one of the most common hobbies of the girls followed by playing games, doing embroidery, stitching, knitting, etc. (Table 1)

Economic aspects

This section included questions on awareness of different programmes run by government and other agencies (Table 1).

- All the girls were interested in taking up skill oriented training as it would enhance their economic share in their families. They wanted trainings on the areas of stitching, weaving, knitting, cooking and kitchen gardening to be imparted to them.
- Girls had less knowledge about different vocational facilities and governmental agencies existing in their villages and less aware of the transactions in bank.

Table 1. Schooling, economic and social aspects of girls

S. No.	Aspects	% (N = 253)
I.	**Schooling status of girls**	
1.	Location of school	
	- Within	78
	- Outside	22
2	Distance of school from home (in kms.)	
	- 1-2	88
	- 3-4	12
3	Encouragement for study	
	- Father	60
	- Mother	40
4	No. of hours spent at home for studies	
	1-2	68
	3-4	32
5	Provision of books / stationery	
	Father	82
	Mother	18
6	Access to news paper	34
7	Hobbies	
	- Watching TV	88
	- Playing games	54
	- Embroidery, stitching, knitting	54
	- Studying	22
II.	*Economic and Social Aspects*	
1	Interested in skill oriented training	100
2	Awareness of Vocational facilities	37
3	Awareness of Govt. programme	58
4	Awareness of Bank transactions	92
5	Attend functions (Within village)	66
	Outside village	84
6	Permitted to	
	- Chat with friends	94
	- Go to friend's house	84
7	Write letters	12
8	Friends accompany to school	73
9	Parents accompany to market	100
10	Friends accompany to friend's house	76
11	Siblings accompany to friend's house	24
12	Interaction with boys	78
13	Disapproved behaviour	
	- Fighting, quarrelling	58
	- Spoiling things, breaking things	21
	- Stealing, telling lies	51
	- Not doing housework	25
14	Punishment given	
	- Slapping	100
	- Beating with sticks, canes	63
	- Pulling ears	6
	- Pulling hair	29
	- Abusing	9
15	Approved Behaviour	
	- Studying, Getting good marks	100
	- Doing housework	80
	- Obeying elders, respecting elders	60
	- Helping people, doing good things	17

Social aspects

- No girl was a member of any youth clubs working in the villages.
- They mostly attended functions and ceremonies within the villages and were less allowed to go outside the village.
- They never went to school alone and were accompanied with their friends, mothers to the market and other places.

- The girls were not at all aware of their rights and duties and were not allowed to interfere in family matters.
- The disapproved behaviour for the girls included fighting and quarelling (58%), stealing and breaking things (51%), followed by disobeying and not doing housework. Girls were punished for showing such kind of behaviour and punishment included slapping, beating with sticks, canes, pulling hair and ears and abusing.
- It came through the discussions that behaviors approved by their families included studying, getting good marks, doing housework, obeying and respecting elders, etc. They were also rewarded in form of verbal praising followed by giving money, clothes and eatables.
- Various types of restrictions were posed on specific behaviour of girls which were not interacting with boys, laughing and speaking loudly, fighting and going outside alone. (Table 1)

A study done by Dave (1993) revealed that girls have restrictions on laughing loudly, going out alone and talking to members of opposite sex. It also said about certain common characteristics of good girls as being respectful, obedient, disciplined and being honest.

Household responsibilities of girls

- The average time spent on household activities was 201 minutes per day of which washing clothes consumed most of their time followed by cooking, cleaning vessels and bringing water.
- The daily schedule of girls involved activities like sweeping, mopping, dusting, washing utensils, cooking food, washing clothes, doing fieldwork and bringing water with very less time devoted to studies. It also came through the discussions that as compared to the work load of girls, the boys in the families did not share the work at the domestic front. Helping their mothers to carry out domestic chores is perceived as preparation of girls for their future role as caregivers and domestic workers and as a kind of education which is not expected for boys. According to an U.N. report (1995) girls are more encouraged to carry out household work than boys. Also boys participation in tasks like collecting and bringing water, sweeping and cooking is quite low (Dave, 1993).
- The average age at which girls started farm work was found to be 8 to 9 years. They did all types of fieldwork including sowing, harvesting, cutting and bringing grass, irrigating the fields, weeding and manuring. The average time spent on farm work was found to be 127 minutes per day. (Table 2)

Table 2. Household responsibilities and upbringing practices of girls

S. No.	Aspects	% (N = 253)
I	**Household responsibilities**	
1.	Average time spent on household activities (minutes)	201
2	No. of minutes spent in field work (Average)	127
3.	Daily schedule of girls	
	- Sweeping, mopping	100
	- Washing utensils	90
	- Cooking food	92
	- Washing clothes	92
	- Bringing water	80
4.	Type of farm work done by girls	
	- Sowing	100
	- Cutting and bringing grass	92
	- Harvesting	92
	- Weeding	66
	- Irrigating fields	46
II	**Upbringing practices**	
1.	Discrimination in clothing expenditure	92
2.	Foods denied to girls	
	- Chillies, pickle, spicy food Fried things	58
	- Sour food, tamarind, curd	59
	- Sweets, chocolates, sugar, jaggery	45
	- Non vegetarian foods like eggs, fish, meat,Chicken	29
3.	Problems faced by girls with boys	
	- Teases	48
	- Follows / stops on the road	33
	- Whistling	28
	- Gives comments	28
	- Sings songs	24

Upbringing practices

- The girls were discriminated regarding the expenditure towards their clothing as their brothers got more clothes frequently. A study by Vig and Nanda (2003) revealed that discrimination between male and female child was being practiced in rural areas of Punjab.
- Different types of foods like chillies, pickles and spicy foods, sour foods, tamarind, curd, sweets, chocolates, tea and non vegetarian foods were denied to the girls by their families. The girls did not know any specific reason for this avoidance but in general thought that some foods were not good for their health and teeth including the assumption that their blood

would become water if some foods were consumed.

- Girls in all the villages faced some or the other problems with boys/men in their villages. These included teasing, following or stopping on the road, whistling, giving comments, singing songs, etc. (Table 2).

Marriage

- The ideal age at marriage as perceived by girls was 20 years for girls and 24 years for boys with most of them agreeing that the age gap between the two at the time of marriage should be less than one year.
- Girls did not have a choice in mate selection as it was the area of their parents. Although they knew that child marriage and dowry is a crime but still held the view that compared to boys expenditure for girls in marriage was more due to dowry.
- All the girls agreed that their parents especially mothers prepared them for the marriage life but only guiding them about doing housework and not to laugh and speak loudly. However, no knowledge was given to them on other aspects of marriage. This is supported by the results of Dave (1993), which said that imparting of information on sex, pregnancy, childbirth and family planning before marriage is negatively viewed by the families in rural and tribal areas of Gujarat.
    - Varied responses were seen when asked for the desirable factors for happy marriage that included love, trust and understanding between husband and wife and living happily.
    - Having a good family, husband, in-laws, helping and sharing each others' problems were among the different qualities of good marriage as perceived by the girls (Table 3).

Health aspects

- Majority of the girls were aware about various health problems like cold, cough, headache, fever, pain in legs, thighs and other parts of body, backache, stomachache, etc.
- Most of them suffered from health problems related to fieldwork like backache, pain in legs and arms, headache, tiredness, dizziness, etc.
- Few of the girls knew about food related deficiencies like Vitamin A deficiency, anemia and weakness. They also knew about methods to take care of their health and importance of green leafy vegetables, milk, eating nutritious food and being neat and clean. (Table 3).

Table 3. Perception of girls on aspects of marriage and health

S. No.	Aspects	% (N = 253)
I.	Marriage	
1.	Ideal (Average) age at marriage (Years)	
	- For girls	20
	- For boys	24
2	Choice in mate selection / marriage	0
3	More expenditure for girls in marriage	100
4	Parents preparation for marriage life	
	- Guidance about doing housework	42
	- Not to laugh & speak loudly	53
	- Obey and respect parents & elders	45
5	Desirable factor for happy marriage	
	- Loving each other	66
	- Living happily	26
	- Trust and understanding	27
6.	Qualities of good marriage	
	- Good family, good nature, good husband	69
	- Helping each other	31
	sharing, solving problems	31
II.	Health	
1.	Awareness of health problems	
	- Cough, cold, congestion in chest	94
	- Stomach ache	82
	- Headache	64
	- Fever	35
	- Pain in legs, arms, thighs, eyes, ears	43
2.	Health problems related to field	
	- Backache	52
	- Pain in legs and arms	62
	- Head ache	33
	- Tiredness	14
	- Dizziness	14
	Care to maintain health	
	- Eat green leafy vegetables, drink milk	92
	- Eat fresh food, nutritious food	47
	- take bath daily	53

Puberty

- The average age at menarche as perceived by the girls was 14 years. Most of them had prior knowledge regarding menstruation which they got from their friends and mothers.
- Various categories of foods were not eaten by the girls during the days of menstruation. These included spicy and sour foods, sugar and sweets, cold and hot foods like groundnut, jaggery, rice and tea.
- The girls experienced different problems during menstruation like pain in abdomen, backache, dizziness, headache and pain in legs. They did not take any remedial measures for these difficulties.
- There were specific rules set up by their parents during this period. The girls were

generally not allowed to enter temple, kitchen, or touch religious photographs, not allowed to cook and were not allowed to play during those days. (Table 4).

Table 4. Pubertal aspects of girls

S. No.	Aspects	% (N = 253)
1.	Average Age (yrs) at menarche	14
2.	Prior Knowledge regarding menstruation	96
	- Mother	47
	- Friends	79
3.	Food restrictions	
	- spicy, sour, tamarind, curd, Pickle	86
	- sugar / sweets	60
	- Avoid cold foods, hot foods, groundnut, Jaggery, ghee, cucumber	20
	- Avoid tea, chillies	45
4.	Problems faced during menstruation	
	- Pain in stomach	81
	- Back ache	67
	- Dizziness	29
	- Headache	19
	- Pain in legs	14
5.	Specific rules during menstruation	
	- Not entering temple, not worshipping	93
	- Not cooking food, not entering kitchen	70
	- not playing	26

Conclusion

The picture that arises from the results is of girls who are aware of the importance of education and interested in learning something new so that they could help their families in terms of money. Despite having a major share in doing most of the household and farm activities, girls are still denied of different foods, clothing, interaction with boys and many restrictions are still posed on them. Although the girls knew about responsibilities after marriage but were not aware of other aspects of marriage like contraception, childbirth and pregnancy. In view of such an environment it is almost impossible for girls to develop physically, mentally and socially to their fullest potential. There is a need to give equal opportunities to the girls so that they can develop themselves to their maximum capacities which will make them empowered women in future.

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