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EMPOWERING YOUNG GIRLS: EFFECTIVE PATHWAYS AND WAY FORWARD

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Abstract:
India is a nation with the fastest growing youth population (22.8%). The steady rise and sheer increase in number of young people calls attention and focus on this group as they serve as a critical demographic indicator for the nation's progress. Young women constitute half of this proportion and play a significant contributory role towards nation building. In reality, the socio-cultural practices bound by rigid patriarchal ideologies have consistently deprived women their access to become empowered. While acknowledging the efforts of State and other stakeholders in working with and for young women, however in reality they remain an invisible and vulnerable lot who largely get misfocussed in all developmental initiatives. A paradigm shift in designing initiatives amalgamated with a gendered lens to promote equity and inclusion as a systemic approach is the need of the hour. Years of negligence and passiveness have led to large scale socio-cultural and economic disparities that have denied young women their access to the forefront. This has to be addressed with compensatory efforts that focus and attend to their overall development. When young women of today embark the future of tomorrow, it becomes pivotal to enable them to become strong and confident to develop 'agency' that could positively shape oneself and the world around them. This article brings out the key barriers that impede the progress of women especially those in the fringes of the society and spells out the effective pathways that would facilitate the empowerment of young women as a way forward to emancipate themselves and their societies.

KEYWORDS: *Young Women, Empowerment, Gender Equity, Inclusion, Nation Building, Effective Pathways.*

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Introduction:

India is a country with the fastest growing youth population, estimated at 22.8% of its total population. The census of India report (2011) states that the youth (15-24 years) in India constitute one-fifth of the total population (19.1%) and by the year 2020 it is likely expected to go up to 34.33 per cent. Young girls make up a recognizable proportion of India's population and play a significant contributory role for the overall progress indicators. The progress and development of a nation cannot happen without rendering due attention and consideration to young women of our nation. As the growing proportion of young India is on the steady rise their sheer increase in numbers calls attention for investment in their overall development as they are a critical demographic factor for social change and global development (ICRW, 2012). Embarking on today's youth being tomorrow's future of a country; focusing on them now is the need of the hour for our nation building.

Sen, A. (1992) identified the invisible nature and the steady decreasing number of women in the country as against his calculated estimations and coined the phrase '*missing women*', which explains the cumulative neglect enforced on the women folk over generations and the consequent anomalies that coexist along with it. With stereo-typical family norms, young girls frequently become the last one in the family to draw attention, and often get treated as secondary citizens. Girls themselves imbibe a lot of these values and engrave it in their personal make-up affecting their self- esteem and personal life-skill development. Early sexual maturation of girls curbs their childhood, increasing the risk for early marriage and early childbearing. Insufficient or incomplete awareness towards reproductive and sexual health often pushes them to become passive victims of circumstances. In many developing countries, the leading cause of death among girls aged 15-19 has reportedly been due to pregnancy (UNICEF, 2011). Unmarried young girls often face the burden of bearing the domestic responsibilities of having to care for siblings, parents and extended family members, or spending significant amounts of their time on domestic chores (ICRW, 2010).

Any attempt to achieve emancipation of young girls must take into account their personal and social situations and the various determinants that influence the process of empowerment. With this consideration, the creation of a promising and conducive environment for young girls would be the best way to foster the nurturing of positive qualities and potentials required to face the adversities of life in the future. Generations of negligence towards young girls should be replaced with increased attention so as to ensure their development and well-being.

Situation of Young Girls in India

Globally, young girls remain a disempowered and vulnerable group which impacts their general health and well-being. Though the situations of young girls are diverse, yet in aspects

relating to their vulnerability it is found to be uniform (PAHO, 2010). Young girls have been a marginalized group across the globe and the scenario is the same in our country also. The life of young girls in India remind of kaleidoscopic images of dreams for a rosy future, of dreams that died before they took shape, of privileges and deprivations, of leisure and toil, of hope and despair (Verma S., & Saraswathi T.S. 2005). The plight of young girls in India portray a grim picture and is more or less uniform in all parts of the country; with some regions being drastically backward and few groping for progress.

Majority of our young girls are out of schools and are deprived of all safety benefits ensured through the school-based programmes related to health and personality development (Raka Roy, 2011). This places them at a disadvantageous position and deters acquiring the required skill sets for future living, thus resulting in weakened personal development. This deprivation extends even in the families, where they do not receive adequate health care, education, nutrition and less opportunities for employment compared to their counter-parts. With hardly any choice or opportunities to choose, young girls often get trapped in the vicious cycle of being burdened with household responsibilities & chores, lack of autonomy & mobility, victims of violence, early marriage, repeated pregnancy, child bearing and reproductive health complications, gross negligence of health care.

Whether married or unmarried, girls are most likely to be excluded from educational, social and economic opportunities and suffer from violence within the home and in communities (Hallman, K. & Roca, E. 2007). Added to this, nutritional deprivation, ill-informed sexual and reproductive health education, social beliefs, discriminations and restrictions, enforced domestic responsibilities and gender stereotypes, render them with low self-esteem and self-worth. Thus, resulting in poor physical, cognitive and social development.

In India, young girls, especially those who live in sub-standard urban conditions are often exposed to various factors that create a ripple effect in their lives. The very nature of such dwelling, the environmental hazards, socio-cultural context, family situations, child care methods, exposure to hard realities of life, the effect of such experiences on the personality of the individual have a long-lasting impact on their lives. The manifestations of these are seen as violations ranging from child labour, child trafficking, sexual exploitation and many other forms of violence and abuse. The psychological frame of mind of young girls also add to their vulnerability. Severe emotional deprivation is often at the root of an over-investment in love affairs and may predispose them to emotional dependence. Moreover, low self-esteem, resulting in a tendency to attach no value to one's own person or life, not only forces them to neglect themselves but also to land up in risk related behaviours (Lake A. 2012).

Bringing up a female child in an Indian family that dwells in patriarchal ideologies carry with it the implications of inferior status and lesser privileges when compared to the male child. The picture of gender discrimination that favours the male child cuts across the entire life span from conception to old age. Females are encouraged from childhood to develop an interdependent and even sacrificial self to be prepared for their roles as good wives & mothers. The state of affairs seems to be no less different even among career oriented young women, who clearly prioritize family obligations (Saraswathi,T.S. 1999).

Young girls living in sub-standard Indian settlements are at a greater vulnerability due to the poor infrastructure, breakdown of traditional family structures, increased risk of violence and low access to sexual and reproductive health services. Urban settings, though may correspond to more income generation prospects, yet freedom and opportunity for girls remain bleak and is often found to be in relation to the dominant mindset about the societal perception of girls that is prevalent across India. Non-availability of safe spaces such as schools is also an increasing concern. In many instances in-spite of availability of schools, parents force their children to leave school so as to support food, rent and transport of the family. Adolescent girls who are not in school are greatly disadvantaged as the school acts as a safety net and ensures their well-being and empowerment.

The facets of personal life situation and social environment in which an individual is located plays an important role in their development and progress. Especially for young girls, their personal traits, family situation and support, peer influence, societal norms and beliefs influence their upbringing and inculcation of behaviour patterns.

Effective Pathways of Interventions

Investments in young girls have the potential to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty (Levine, R., Lloyd, C., et al. 2008). The potentialities and capabilities of young girls need to be nurtured to enable them to fight effectively the odds arising out of the vulnerabilities they face. For young girls to wade through these quandaries in life, it is essential that they are infused and built with essential knowledge, skills and capabilities that can enable them to protect themselves from all adversities and create their own individual identities in the society. The early phase in life is the most ideal stage where one masticates past learning, redesigns new strategies and carries forward the consolidations into the future. Understanding the actualities of life of young girls would throw more light on the various influences in their personal and social sphere. Young girls need special focus and attention, as investing in them would give better pay offs to the individual girls, who in turn could contribute significantly towards a better future for their families, communities and the world at large.

An overall improvement in the status of the young girls could be achieved by adopting an empowerment approach (Miley & DuBois, 1999). Empowerment is

not only pertinent for the young girls, but also fundamental for human development. In the recent years, there is an increased focus on drafting programmes and policies that aim at the empowerment of young girls. The International and National commitments towards a better society with gender equity would be possible only with such efforts concerted on empowering the young girls.

Empowerment of young girls ensures social justice and recognises their rights. It serves as an entry point for promoting civic participation and also enables them to take control over their own life, by reshaping and restoring themselves. Empowered adolescents are in a better position to direct themselves in all domains of life (PAHO, 2012).

Empowerment as a process and goal is multilayered and occurs as a result of convergence of various determining factors. The process of empowerment among young girls is a complex one and happens at the individual, interpersonal, social, legal and political levels. Empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps a person to gain control over one's own life. Empowerment involves *'a sense of competence, mastery, strength, and ability to effect change'* (Miley, O'Melia & DuBois, 2004). Empowerment may be also understood as seeking positive individual change that capacitates an individual to make better choices and decisions that positively impacts one's life. Thus, the focal thrust of empowerment is to enable the exercise of power, control over resources and decision making that determines the

quality of life of individuals, groups or communities and help them to take concrete action to change their circumstances. Empowerment of young girls is essential for achievement of gender equity, since it is through empowerment that young girls gain the capacity to consider options, make decisions, and put their decisions into practice.

Way Forward: Empowering Young Girls

An understanding of contextual life situation of young girls brings to light the various impinging factors within the micro-messo and macro levels of the personal, inter-personal and social spheres of their life. These factors support or facilitate the acquisition of enabling capabilities for young girls. Therefore, creating such environments within and for young girls would aid the process of empowerment. Professional social work emerged as a response to the growing needs and concerns of human beings (Louise C. Johnson & Stephen J. Yanca, 2011) to help society work better for people and help people function better within society (Bartlett, 1970). Social Work provides the appropriate scope for evolving meaningful interventions that focus on purposeful engagement with young girls. The empowerment-based life-cycle approach (Rani. M.J., &Samuel R., 2014) is a best suited intervention model to work with young girls. Empowerment is a progressive and cumulative process that happens at different levels and over a phase in life. This integrative model adopts the eco-systems theory of

understanding the person in their environment and the empowerment process model of Miley, O'Melia and DuBois.

The person-in-environment perspective underpins an understanding of various impinging factors operating at the micro, messo and macro levels in the life of young girls. These factors at different levels of combination within or among them influence the process of empowerment. There is no doubt that taking account of these factors and focusing on strengthening the positive impact of the personal, inter-personal and social factors at the micro, messo and macro levels would facilitate the process of empowerment among young girls.

Integrated Model to Facilitate Empowerment among Adolescent Girls

Levels	Focus	Key Elements of Engagement	Process
Micro-Practice (Personal Level)	Young girls	Building Personal self Continuing Education Improving Skill sets Developing Agency Positive Health related Behaviour and Practices	Development Discovery Dialogue
Messo Practice (Inter-Personal Level)	Family	Supportive Family Gender-Sensitive Care and Concern. Trust and Powers for decision-making.	
	Associations	Trustful Associations Positive Relationships	

Macro Practice (Social Level)	Communities	Supportive Engagements Enabling Environments Safe Spaces Supportive Networks	
	Society	Progressive Cultural Beliefs and Norms Protective Policy and Legal Frameworks	

The Empowerment Model of Miley, O'Melia and DuBois (1998) also provides a pragmatic approach to work with adolescent girls. The focus of the model is a three-step process of Discovery-Dialogue & Development.

- Discovery- Young girls are engaged in a process to discover themselves and their potentials, to instill a sense of realisation of oneself in relation to their environmental context is made.
- Dialogue- Is a process of engaging in a discourse or interchange of ideas by and within close connected networks.
- Development- Young girls see themselves in relation to the other systems around them and constantly get connected to them through appropriate means. The cumulative influences of such interactions lead young girls to progressive development.

This model of intervention incorporates working at different levels and with various groups to create an enabling environment for the empowerment of young girls.

At the micro level, the core areas of the focus are to work with young girls to help them continue their education, implement hands-on training programmes for skill building, agency building within them, delay of early marriage and child bearing and strengthening their knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and practices related to reproductive and sexual health needs. Enabling young girls with supportive family environment and positively influential peer linkages are an essential component of inter-personal factors to be built at the micro level. Helpful relationships infuse strong abilities of social confidence within young girls.

At the messo level, helping young girls, construct supportive associations and trustful relationships are very significant for their progress. Meaningful interactions help construct social assets for young girls around them. Increased social assets builds their social capital and serves as a protective framework that guides the progress of young girls.

At the macro level, the focus is to work with larger communities and societies for the upliftment of young girls. Interventions are aimed to create positive networks, safe spaces for meaningful engagement, forming trustful associations with expertise, enabling positive discrimination of girl children, establishing pro-woman policies and legal frameworks, ensuring amicable cultural beliefs and norms. These tasks should be taken up as a collective effort by coordinating and collaborating with like-minded local networks and organisations.

The successful realization of this model relies on its efficient translation into action the intricacies mentioned. This requires specific skill sets such as organisation, team building, coordination and communication are required at the entry level. Advanced skills such as facilitation, leadership, building groups, creative engagement, advocacy, lobbying, skills for management and social action to complete the process of fruitful engagement with young girls to infuse them with ability to shape their future.

Conclusion

The present youth population is seen as the ray of hope for an empowered future generation. There is no doubt that the young girls of today hold a high probability to decide the destiny of tomorrow. With such onus of expectation on them, it is also crucial that appropriate ambiences are set to enable them achieve the goal. This calls in for a collective and collaborative efforts to be pooled in by various stakeholders at different levels and in different platforms. Such unified actions will see the dawn of an empowered society which values human rights and social justice. Infusing young girls with capabilities would ensure their active participation in the main stream society. Though working with young girls to empower them requires enormous time and patience, it is an essential task worth undertaking.

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