

VOICES OF GIRLS

Introduction and Method

What is the experience of girls in schools in Karnataka ? How are they treated vis-à-vis boys? What do they feel?

As part of our work to promote gender equality, we invited girls to share their experiences of discrimination they encountered in schools.

Between January to March 2025, we listened to 100+ girls in Koppal district of Karnataka. This short report presents their voices.

To listen to the girls closely, we conducted 10 Focus Group Discussions. We then analyzed the transcripts of the discussions to identify themes that emerged. Eight thematic clusters emerged – seven on different discriminatory practices girls experienced, and an eighth on what the girls want. This report is organized on those lines. At the end of each section, we note how those discriminatory practices violate the rights of girls and the laws of our country.

Food and Nutrition Disparities

"Lunch is served to boys first and then girls. Even when many girls are already in line, if one boy comes, they'll send us back and bring him forward."

"When we girls are first in line, aunty tells, 'Let the boys come first, they are only a few, they'll get their food quickly, and then you can take yours.'"

"During midday meals, boys are given more importance. If girls ask for eggs, they say 'Let the boys eat first. If it remains, we will give them to you.'"

"If there is a shortage and we ask for eggs, aunty says 'No, there are boys; let them eat the egg. You eat peanut chikki and banana.'"

"When we questioned why boys were given more, aunties said, 'You don't need to eat eggs every day.' Sometimes, this happens twice a week."

"Boys are sent to count the students. Sometimes they make a mistake, and there are not enough eggs. Those days, many girls will get peanut chikki instead of eggs."



The practice of prioritizing boys over girls in midday meals violates the Right to Equality (Article 14) and protection against discrimination on grounds of sex (Article 15) under the Indian Constitution. It also breaches the Right to Food and Nutrition guaranteed under Article 21 (Right to Life) and supported by the National Food Security Act, 2013, which emphasizes equitable access to nutrition for children. Internationally, it contravenes CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) and Article 2 & 3 of the UNCRC (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) ensuring non-discrimination and the best interest of the child.



Sports and Recreational Inequality

"When girls and boys go together and ask for a ball, the boys are given the ball, while the girls are told to play with rings. We feel sad that boys are given more priority."

"We also want to play volleyball, but those games are given to boys. We asked the PT teacher to teach us also volleyball, but he didn't. He focuses on boys he says because they can get first prize."

"During annual sports day, girls' teams are formed for kabaddi, kho-kho, and running. But we are not taught the rules. We have to learn ourselves. They teach boys, they tell us to figure it out ourselves."

"This is our age to play. If we practice right from the beginning, we'll feel we can do it, we'll have the confidence. If Sirs don't focus on our game now, we'll have the mindset that we won't be able to do it."

"All the musical instruments are played by boys, nothing for girls. Boys don't give us a chance. Sirs don't tell the boys to share. They always say, 'Let them do it.'"

Denying girls equal access to sports equipment, training, and opportunities violates Article 14 and 15 of the Indian Constitution (Right to Equality and Non-Discrimination) and undermines their Right to Development under Article 21. It also breaches Article 31 of the UNCRC, which guarantees the child's right to leisure, play, and recreational activities without discrimination, and is contrary to the principles of CEDAW.

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Menstruation, Sanitation, and Gendered Shame

"On the first day of periods, we don't attend school. Sometimes we don't attend school for 4 days."

"When we get periods, we come to school wearing pads and change only after going back home. There is no dustbin in the school."

"During periods, we go to a nearby field, and sometimes if we know someone, we'll go to their house."

"When girls have to pass urine, there is a field; we go there. An old person scolds and beats us, and then complains to the Sirs. Then the Sirs scold us. They don't build us a good toilet and then scold us."

"During our periods, we are sent home. We go home to change pads. We are not comfortable talking to teachers about periods."

"There are two students with disability in our class. Their parents carry them up in the morning. But they can't go to the toilet during the day as there is no toilet upstairs."



Verbal Abuse, and Psychological Impact

"A girl in our class is a little fat. When she came last in a running race, the PT teacher kept on making fun of her. She cried a lot. After that she didn't come to school for a week."

"One teacher uses a lot of bad words when scolding. It hurts a lot. She talks nicely to children from her village, but to others, she scolds in very bad language."

"When my friend couldn't read something, the teacher shouted at her 'you can eat like a cow but can't read.'"

"When a girl asked a doubt once, the teacher replied with a sexual comment 'You don't know how to live with your husband'" (Baalev madakke baralla)

"One teacher insists that we girls must apply kumkum, kajal and wear bangles. One day we didn't apply kumkun. She threatened she will fine us from next time."

"When teaching in class, some teachers just stand near the boys' side and talk. Many times we

The use of derogatory, gendered, and abusive language by teachers violates the Right to Protection from Mental and Emotional Abuse (Article 39(f)) under the Directive Principles of State Policy, and Article 21 (Right to Life and Dignity). It also conflicts with Section 17 of the Right to Education Act, 2009, which prohibits physical and mental harassment, and Article 19 of the UNCRC, ensuring protection from all forms of abuse.

Lack of adequate sanitation facilities and shaming of girls during menstruation infringes Article 21 (Right to Life with Dignity) and Article 14 and 15 (Equality and Non-Discrimination) of the Constitution. It contravenes Article 24 of the UNCRC (Right to Health) and the Sustainable Development Goal 6 on sanitation and hygiene. The exclusion of girls with disabilities from toilets violates Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016.

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Gender-Based Division of Labor and Responsibilities

"Both inside or outside the school, sweeping is girls' work. We are responsible for sweeping the ground and the classroom, it is always the girls' responsibility."

"During Annual Day, in the evening, girls will draw the Rangoli, and boys will be moving desks and benches."

"Boys are asked to switch on the motor because they think girls don't know about electricity."

"We girls serve food to the teachers. Not boys, only girls are assigned this responsibility. During this time, boys go to play. We don't get time to play after lunch."

"After class, if we go to lock the doors, they tell us we don't know, and the responsibility is given to boys."

"We can also do everything, but in school, they say no because of habit. We can also lift the benches and desks. But our Sir tells us no, it's heavy."



Assigning cleaning, serving, and decorative tasks exclusively to girls reinforces gender stereotypes and violates Article 15 (Prohibition of Sex-Based Discrimination) and Article 21A (Right to Education) where education must be free from discriminatory practices. It contradicts Article 5(a) of CEDAW, which calls for modification of social and cultural patterns of conduct to eliminate gender bias.

Unequal Access to Leadership and Opportunities

"In the classroom, leadership is given more to boys. Whenever there are programs, boys are chosen for leadership roles more than girls."

"When there was an IT exam outside, they took only boys and not girls. Then there was an exam for mobile repair. Again they took only the boys. We were also interested, but they didn't take us."

"No girl has become the Finance Minister in our school. It's always boys"

"On Teachers' Day, which sweets to bring and what gifts to give was supposed to be discussed among all students. But the boys discussed only among themselves, just collected money from us, and bought everything themselves. After the celebration, the boys said the money had fallen short and came to ask us for more money. We refused because they had not discussed anything with us."

"Whatever the situation, boys are given first priority. Girls are always second, never allowed to be in the front."

"We are given different responsibilities because they think girls are not capable. We feel sad that we are not given leadership opportunities. We will have problems progressing."

"We can also do everything, but in school, they say no."



Excluding girls from leadership roles and skill-building opportunities violates their Right to Equality (Article 14) and Right to Education (Article 21A), which includes equitable access to all aspects of schooling. It breaches Article 12 of the UNCRC (respect for the views of the child and participation) and contradicts the National Education Policy 2020's emphasis on gender inclusion.

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Gendered Restrictions and Expectations

"On the roads, boys can move freely, laughing, but girls are expected to bow their heads and walk."

"Girls face many rules and restrictions about clothes. Once, the teacher scolded me: 'you look like a boy, there are no ornaments in your ear, neck, or hand.'"

"Last year, this akka in 10th was talking to a boy like a brother. When they were sitting together, sir came and scolded her, saying, 'Aren't you ashamed to talk like this to boys?' She cried a lot that day. Sir scolded only akka, not the boy."

"They tell us we have to take only a straight middle division of the hair. If we do it in other ways, they scold us for trying to be stylish."

"Sometimes, we wear bangles and sometimes we don't. We do as we feel like, but they scold us. They put rules: 'when you come to school, girls should look good, should wear bangles, should apply kumkum, and should tie their hair neatly.'"

"If the boys talk to anyone, it won't be much of a problem in society. If girls talk to even one person, everyone will doubt."



What Girls Say They Want

"Everyone should be treated equally."

"Both girls and boys should come up — both should have equal opportunity."

"All the responsibilities boys get, let girls also get. How boys will be, we will also be like them."

"Let girls and boys talk to each other as friends. Why should we walk at a distance?"

"To change pads, one room should be there for girls."

"There should be a grievance box where we can write and put our issues. In this way, we can put what we can't tell directly."

"Let boys and girls work together for every function. Let them talk to each other."

"We can also do everything"



Enforcing restrictive dress codes, controlling girls' behavior, and policing their interactions with boys violate Article 14 and 19 (Freedom of Expression and Equality) of the Constitution and undermine the Right to Privacy and Personal Liberty (Article 21). These practices also conflict with CEDAW Article 16 on eliminating discrimination in all matters relating to personal freedoms and UNCRC Article 2 on non-discrimination.

Policy Recommendations

1. Mandate gender-sensitive training for all teaching and non-teaching staff to eliminate discriminatory practices
2. Ensure equitable access to midday meals, sports, leadership roles, and extracurricular activities for girls and boys.
3. Establish gender-inclusive school infrastructure, including functional toilets, menstrual hygiene facilities, and accessibility for children with disabilities.
4. Integrate gender equality modules into the school curriculum to challenge stereotypes and promote mutual respect.
5. Set up grievance redressal mechanisms in schools, such as anonymous complaint boxes or student committees, to address gender-based issues.
6. Enforce strict guidelines against verbal abuse and body shaming, with accountability measures for violations.
7. Promote equal participation of girls and boys in decision-making processes at the school level, including school management committees.