

TRENDING
TODAYBowled over by street
cricket

Lessons from the past

Forging an unbreakable
bond

Theirs but to listen and follow

AKHILA NAGAR

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Adolescents in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have limited control over their lives, says a cross-sectional study

Every fifth adolescent in the world is an Indian. And these young 10 to 19-year-olds make up one-fifth of our population. This means, going forward, they will constitute the backbone of a new generation.

But opportunities for this category are few and far between, especially in the hinterland. Given their critical importance, it is imperative to meet their development requirements, including educational, sexual and reproductive healthcare. However, in order to promote these needs, adequate data on their current status is required, and this data is, unfortunately, filled with major gaps.

Seeking to fill this gap, the Population Council conducted an extensive research programme in 2015-2016, titled 'Understanding the lives of adolescents and young adults (UDAYA)' in the States of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (which constitute 29 per cent of the country's adolescent population). The study aimed to find the factors that determine the successful transition from childhood to adolescence, and from adolescence to adulthood, ultimately suggesting policy recommendations to improve their conditions.

The study covered interviews with 10,433 adolescents in Bihar and 10,161 adolescents in Uttar Pradesh, sampling across caste and religious lines, using data from both urban and rural areas, from individuals both married and unmarried, across both sexes. The adolescents varied from unmarried boys in ages 10-14 and 15-19, unmarried girls aged 10-14 and 15-19, and married girls from the ages 15 to 19.

Gender plays a role

One of the most pertinent features of the reports, with similar results from both the adolescents of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, is the necessary emphasis on questions of gender (in)equality, and the role that they play in determining the way these adolescents understand their own lives.

While the decision-making abilities, and subsequent control over their own lives, of both male and female adolescents was found to be limited, there exists a major gender divide in terms of this agency, placing girls at a disadvantage. This was found to be pervasive across all sectors of decision-making, be it their ability to work or study, or be it their movements and their choice of friends. The lack of emphasis given to the education of young women majorly contributes to this.

Abhiruchi Chatterjee, who has worked in the development sector in Jharkhand, further says that “even if (the youth) is getting education, the infrastructure in the schools is not conducive to the continuation of their studies. For example, if women are menstruating, they effectively have to skip school because of the lack of decent toilets.”

It is clear that the most disadvantaged group among all is that of married adolescent girls. The report not only points to the prevalence of child marriage amongst girls, but also the presence of violence within marriage, out of which the most common was sexual in nature. This indicates the need to strengthen and invest in violence-prevention activities.

Identifying underlying factors that promote child marriage, such as social norms and economic constraints, the report recommends the sensitisation of parents to resist social pressures to marry their child,





and further educate them on the need to involve their daughters in marriage-related decisions.

As Ipsa James, a Delhi-based psychologist, states, “Simply put, it’s patriarchy. If females start to get education and have the power to take

decisions for themselves, they would deviate from the existing norms and that would lead to a lot of unrest, specially amongst males”. She further feels that “mothers also play a major role in the loss of agency by being agents of patriarchy. By abiding by the gender roles, they are reinforcing it for their children and it turns into a never-ending vicious cycle.”

Law enforcement needed

Commenting on the legal framework, the report suggests the strengthening of law enforcement to prevent child marriage, and the provision of viable alternatives to marriage for girls. This would mean that girls be given access to quality schooling and development of livelihood skills. James suggests that “legal awareness-raising, good educational opportunities, and sexual awareness-raising are some of the few initial projects that need to be taken up by the government” in order to ensure that young women are no longer disadvantaged.

In order for adolescents to cope with the pressures of their everyday lives, as well as questions of long-term ambitions and aspirations, it is necessary to first understand what factors determine their lives in the first place. While gender equality is one aspect, the study comprehensively covers other factors like health, opportunity, media and technology. Crucially, it examines how these can be improved upon to create for youth — particularly those who live in the remote hinterland — the chance to realise their own aspirations.

The study conducted in 2015-2016 has been made public and can be accessed from the website of the Population Council.

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