

## LINKING SEXUALITY AND GENDER - AN AUDIT OF A HIGHER EDUCATION SCHOOL PROGRAMME IN INDIA

### Introduction

How do sexual and gender norms impact school education in India? How do schools themselves construct these norms? Are State policies and programmes addressing the linkages between sexuality, gender and school education? These are some of the questions that Nirantar, a Centre for Gender and Education, has been engaging with as part of its larger mandate of seeking to ensure that education is empowering for those marginalized because of gender, caste, sexuality and other dimensions of power. Since 1993, we have been working towards this mandate through trainings, development of teaching learning materials, research, advocacy and community based work. Our work in the area of sexuality gathered momentum in 2007, when we began working with community based organizations to help deepen their understanding of sexuality and its linkages with their work such as that related to Gender based Violence. Nirantar has also undertaken rigorous reviews of curricula and programmes aimed at Adolescence and Life Skills Education as well as training teachers and NGOs working with young people on issues of sexuality and gender.

This report seeks to share the findings of a sexuality and gender audit of a National level<sup>1</sup> government programme to strengthen secondary school education in India (i.e. the last four years of schooling). The programme is titled the *Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan* (RMSA) a scheme for universalization of access to and improvement of quality at the secondary stage<sup>2</sup>. Since universalization of elementary education has become a Constitutional mandate,<sup>3</sup> the goal of the RMSA scheme is to achieve universalization of secondary education as well. The vision for secondary education as defined within this scheme is to make quality education available and affordable to all young persons in the age group of 14-18 years. It is aimed at enhancing access, quality and equity as they relate to secondary education, with a focus on marginalized young people such as girls, Dalits<sup>4</sup>, Muslims and those who have disabilities.

---

<sup>1</sup> Education in India is a 'concurrent subject', which translates to both Central Government and State Governments, both being empowered by the constitutional to develop programmes and schemes in education. State Governments typically develop their own schemes in consonance with their needs and context and also implement more centrally visioned and financed schemes and policies. This secondary Education Scheme is a scheme initiated by the Central Government.

<sup>2</sup> Classes IX and X constitute the secondary stage, whereas classes XI and XII are designated as the higher secondary stage. The normal age group of the children in secondary classes is 14-16 and the age group in higher secondary classes is 17-18. There is however much variation with respect to age, particularly in rural contexts.

<sup>3</sup> India has guaranteed elementary education to all by passing Right to Free and Compulsory Education for All Act 2009. The universalization of elementary education was planned to be achieved by a scheme called Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), the RMSA seeks to build upon this scheme.

<sup>4</sup> The term Dalit refers to those who were considered by Hindu belief to fall outside of India's caste based hierarchical system. Dalits are recognized by the State as a marginalized community but continue to face

Our objective is to highlight the gaps as well as opportunities presented by the RMSA programme. We also hope the report will highlight certain critical linkages between education and sexuality that have not thus far been made either in the discourse in India on education or on sexuality. These are linkages which even feminist researchers and practitioners have not thus far engaged with. We hope that the evidence unearthed by the audit will show clearly that unless sexuality is addressed, goals such as making equitable, quality education accessible to the marginalized, can never be achieved. For example, the data indicates that the fears related to that girls' sexuality, both that they might express their desires or that they might experience sexual violence, as a result of the mobility required to attend school is a significant reason for pulling girls out of school. This is important in a context where girls' access to higher levels of school education are seen primarily as a gender issue. In the absence of evidence and an acknowledgement of the key role of sexuality as a determinant of girl's access to schooling, we are left with an incomplete understanding of a critical issue facing girls and the education sector in the country today.

With respect to gender, the audit does not address all dimensions of gender. It looks at gender issues in two ways. One is gender as it relates to sexuality and the second is gender as it relates to transgender issues. In the larger realm of development too, most players today have an understanding of gender that is limited to the binary categories of men and women. Nirantar recognises that there are many lives and identities and that fall outside this binary and get invisibilised at the level of both policy and intervention. When policies talk about marginalisation based on gender, they primarily mean women and girls. Transgender people, their lives and struggles are constantly left out because anyone that falls outside of the gender binary is neither seen nor recognised. This audit seeks to bring centre stage an issue that has thus far being invisible. By providing evidence related to transgender students the report seeks to show that the implications of reducing 'gender' to 'girls' and 'women', has had dire implications for transgender students. The significance of addressing transgender issues is therefore two fold. One is at the level of the inclusion of a gender identity that has thus far been completely excluded from the discourse of education. It shows how the gender policing that permeates the institution of the school can harm transgender students and even drive them out altogether. The second is that transgender experiences offer compelling evidence and a powerful reminder of the need to truly understand and address gender as a social construct and not as 'natural' or 'normal'. There is no such thing. The evidence related to transgender students' experiences in schools that form part of this audit make visible how the school system perpetuates and enforces gender norms. It illuminates the school as a site of gendering, as a space where one learns not just science, language and maths, but also about teaching social norms and disciplining the learner to adopt given gender identities.

---

discrimination at almost every level including education, health and livelihoods. Within the Dalit community, there are many divisions into sub-castes.

And finally the report, it is hoped will contribute to a new and emerging area of knowledge - how development policy and programme audits from the lens of sexuality and gender can be undertaken. This is an important and challenging area since often, as we see in the case of RMSA, development policies and programmes tend not to even mention the word sexuality while being replete with constructions of sexuality, with inherent or explicit messages about the need to be disciplined and to control one's desires. Most times, the understanding conflicts with ground level realities and has grave implications for the lives of those who are seen to break sexual and gender norms.

The report is structured follows: Section 1 explains the way in which we have used key concepts in the audit. The second section provides the context within which the audit is located including the ways in which sexuality and gender are currently being addressed by school education in India both by the State as well as by feminist scholars and practitioners. The section also provides information about the RMSA programme, its goals as well as critical gaps. Section 3 is on the methodology used by the audit, followed by a section on the findings of the audit, presented in a way that they can be read in relation to the three major goals of the programme - access, quality and equity. Fifth is the concluding section which includes key findings of the audit and well as reflections on the methodology.

## **SECTION I**

### **1. KEY TERMS AND THE LENS**

There is no one definition of sexuality and perhaps there should not be one fixed, definition, because our understanding of what is sexuality should be one which is growing and evolving. It is however necessary to indicate when we use the term what we include in it and what we consider its key dimensions to be. As of now, and in the context of this report, the term sexuality includes erotic desires, acted upon or fantasized about, which are experienced at the individual level, but also have larger social dimensions, including those related to gender, age, dis/ability etc. Sexuality can occupy realms that are biological, psychological, emotional or spiritual. However, sexuality is not only limited to desires, but also to social constructs such as shame, honour and well- being. So for example, we consider, in the Indian context at least, shame related to the body to be a key dimension of sexuality. It is not only 'related to' sexuality, 'it is' a sexuality issue.

The term gender, at least in the Indian context, is often equated with the biological category of women. When we use the term gender in this report we are referring to the norms which seek to define masculinity and femininity. These norms are rooted in a patriarchal ideology and material structures of power. Nirantar understands gender as a continuum in which there are different degrees to which one transgresses or breaks the social norms related to the 'ideal' woman and man. According to our understanding of gender, everyone is assigned a gender (either male or female) at birth. Society creates strict norms that are meant to be followed by the two genders. These norms are upheld by a system of punishment and privileges that one receives on breaking or following norms respectively. The norms are not only policed, they are also internalized. The

processes through which gender norms are assigned and maintained is referred to as gendering. The key sites in which gendering takes place are the family, school, law, medicine, media etc.

Given the focus of this audit, it is worthwhile to dwell for a moment on the school as a site of gendering, in order to illustrate what we mean by the term. The school, simply by virtue of how much time a young person spends there, is one of the most important sites of gendering. From textbooks, pedagogy, dynamics between students and teachers, friendships to uniforms, bathrooms and seating arrangements - all aspects of school are informed by and further strengthen the gender binary. When students break the rules of this binary, they could be ridiculed, rebuked and sometimes, severely punished with physical violence.

Despite this strong system, we all break some gender norms. No one is fully masculine or fully feminine. There is therefore a continuum of gender transgression. However, there are some people who do not identify at all with the sex assigned to them at birth. These are the people who we are referring to as transgender. The category of transgender provides compelling evidence that gender norms are indeed not natural or normal but socially constructed. We also understand gender not only in terms of norms and identities, but also as a critical lens with which to understand social relations of power.

The lens used for this audit is that of heteronormativity. The term, despite its length, we feel is a valuable one. Heteronormativity could be interpreted in different ways. In this report when we use the term heteronormativity, we mean the system of sexual and gender norms, rooted in material realities, which together with norms related to race, caste, class, dis/ability, religion, age etc. maintains existing power relations in society. The reason why heteronormativity is a valuable lens to use, rather than one of sexuality for example, is that it enables us to capture and analyze sexuality and gender in a framework of intersectionality. This is significant since we know sexuality and gender cannot be understood or addressed in isolation, and that they need to be related to other social dimensions such as class, race, caste etc.

The lens of heteronormativity is also conducive to undertaking a political analysis with a focus on underlying structural and ideological factors. This lens reduces the danger of a neo liberal approach to sexuality which would assume that sexuality operates only at the level of individual choice, making invisible the many powerful factors that are at play. Since heteronormativity is based on an understanding of sexuality, gender and other dimensions as being socially constructed, it also helps reduce the danger of making essentialist assumptions. The lens of heteronormativity is also valuable because it lends itself to an analysis of the privileges and punishments that accrue when sexual and gender norms are seen to be adhered to or challenged. It is critical here to underline that sexual and gender norms impact everyone, not only those who are perceived as breaking sexual and gender norms. Even the fear that someone might break sexual norms might have implications, sometimes severe, for the lives of individuals and communities. We will see the significance of this dimension of heteronormativity with respect

to girls being pulled out<sup>5</sup> of school for the fear that they might act upon their sexual desires and the opportunity for this that the mobility needed to go to school might accord them. Whether the girls break the sexual norm of ‘no sex before marriage’ is not relevant here. What matters is the fear that they might break this norm.

An important social dimension that the paper engages with is that of caste. The terms Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) which will be used frequently throughout the paper refer to the castes and tribes which have been notified in the Constitution of India. In recognition of the historical and continuing marginalization faced by Scheduled Castes and Schedule Tribes, the State provides for special provisions or reservations at certain levels in key sectors such as education and employment. In contrast to the term Dalit (explained earlier) which is used in a variety of contexts, the term SC is one which is used by the State and also used particularly in contexts related to the law and entitlements.

## **SECTION II**

### **2. CONTEXT**

In this section we seek to provide the context in which the audit of RMSA can be located. We begin by looking, in broad strokes, at how gender and then sexuality have been engaged with in the Indian school system. Gender and sexuality have been dealt with separately, but the overlaps between the two have also been highlighted. We then move on to sharing about the RMSA programme, its goals and well as critical gaps.

#### **2.1 School education and gender**

It is true that there have been shifts in social attitudes towards girls’ education, with a greater recognition and acceptance of the need for it. This does not mean however the education is seen as a right, or as a means of empowerment. In fact, education is often seen as a factor that will enhance girls’ marriage prospects in a context in which education is equated with upward mobility and modernity.

With respect to the State, school education and gender, the context is one in which over the past decade, universalization of Elementary Education has been the focal point of attention. Working in a mission mode at the national level, the key aims of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the scheme for the achievement of this goal included "bridging gender and social category gaps, universal retention and education of satisfactory quality". Building on the achievements and vision of the Mission for elementary education, RMSA as a scheme draws on some of the core components of

---

<sup>5</sup> The report used the term of girls’ being ‘pulled out’ of school rather than ‘drop out’. The term ‘drop out’ seems to suggest that those who cannot continue education chose to leave the system as an exercise of their choice and agency.

elementary education and pushes them into secondary education. The discourse in secondary education is now moving beyond access to issues of quality and equity.

Clearly gender is a core area of concern for the State and achieving gender parity in enrolment, retention and completion rates has been a part of the objectives. Diverse strategies and schemes across states have been operationalized to get girls to school. Some of these include provision of free uniform, textbooks, hostel facilities, development of bridge courses, building of toilets for girls, increase in appointment of women teachers and community awareness campaigns.

While statistically the gender parity index has improved and reduced unequal participation in schooling, gender issues still dog policy makers and the school system. There are wide disparities with respect to region (including rural/urban), caste, religion, dis/ability and class. Children from Scheduled Tribes form 10.93%, Scheduled Castes form 19.81% and Educationally Backward Minority Community form 13.48% of enrolment out of total enrollment in schools for the elementary stage. Out of this total enrolment for each category, the percentage of girls is 48.62, 48.36 and 48.96 for ST, SC and Muslim girls respectively.

There are new forms of discrimination and new hierarchies of access that have emerged in recent past. Girls, particularly from Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes and Muslim families are enrolled in government schools, while boys are accessing private schools which are considered to provide better quality education. Other than this form of gender discrimination, retention rates for girls is much lower than for boys. The levels of retention keep decreasing with higher level of school education. The attendance rate for girls in the age group of 15-18 years (secondary school level) at the national level is 42.3 % as compared to 52.7% among boys of the same age group<sup>6</sup>. As per the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, the percentage of girls who had to discontinue education before completing Elementary Education (before class 8 in which the average age is 14 years) was 41.34% as compared to the rate till standard 5 which was 24.41%<sup>7</sup>. The percentage of girls who had to discontinue education are even higher in marginalized communities. For example in the Schedule Tribes this was 55.4 percent.

The factors underlying girls being pulled out of school that have thus far been identified relate to the burden of domestic work, include care of siblings, poverty and early marriage. The challenge of retention in secondary education is sharply located in the context of gender roles. Gender roles come into focus with the coming in of adolescence between 14 and 16 years of age boys and girls across communities take on the roles or rather prepare to take on these roles in explicit ways. NSSO (National Sample Survey Organisation)<sup>8</sup> shows that close to 40% of girls in the 15 to 19 years age group among the Scheduled Caste are out of school and engaged in domestic labour supporting their mothers who work outside the home. Approximately 34% are already in the labour force. 57.5 % Scheduled Tribe girls are engaged in agricultural/forest based labour and are therefore self employed. For Schedule Castes 59.5% of the boys in the same age group are self employed and 60.5 % Scheduled Tribe boys in rural areas have joined the work force.

---

<sup>6</sup> NSSO rounds 50, 55 and 61. The attendance rate for an age range is the proportion of children of that age range that report attending school at the time of survey.

<sup>7</sup> Government of India, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Bureau of Planning, Monitoring & Statistics, New Delhi [http://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/SES-School\\_201011\\_0.pdf](http://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/SES-School_201011_0.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> The National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), now known as National Sample Survey Office, is an organization under the Ministry of Statistics of the Government of India.

With respect to the efforts being made by the State to address these challenges it is important to note that while girls' education has been prioritized both in elementary and now in secondary education, the approach has been impacted both by developmental goals and the need to meet international commitments. An important push for ensuring that girls are in school comes from female literacy being an important criterion for the Human Development Index (HDI) on which India's ranking is low. Other than female literacy, female fertility and age of marriage are seen to represent challenges that can be combated by ensuring that girls are in school.

As a result, girls' education has over the last decade has been constructed primarily as 'filling the gap'. Provisioning of resources is the key strategy that the state has adopted to ensure that equality is achieved in terms of numbers and statistics. This discourse has led to a focus on 'girls' more as a biological category. Gender as a concept that is the site for the construction of masculinity and femininity has been excluded from this domain. Transgender as a category has not begun to be recognized.

Within the arena of access, two sets of problems continue. One is that the State has focused on availability of schools and physical infrastructure, rather than social issues related to access. Even within the realm of physical access and infrastructure secondary schools continue to be at a considerable distance. The physical infrastructure in schools remains poor. Toilets either don't exist or are in a complete state of disrepair and are not used. The quality of infrastructure is an important concern especially for girls. Research has shown that the lack of toilets and running water in toilets is an important factor in girls leaving school.

One of the State's responses to the problem of girls' education is the appointment of more 'lady teachers'. This is because parents and communities, tend to be more comfortable with girls being taught by women teachers, especially at the secondary and senior secondary levels. The efforts have thus far been limited because women teachers are mostly urban based. The rural and urban disparity is also reflected in the relative increase in the numbers of secondary schools teachers in rural and urban secondary schools, which is 14.36% and 29.52% respectively. <sup>9</sup> In addition to this, Nirantar's experience of working with school education in the state of Uttar Pradesh has also reflected that majority of teachers coming to rural schools actually belong to urban areas, from lower middle or middle income backgrounds and most often do not want to relocate to rural areas. Media reports, public hearings organized by rights based and Dalit groups in states such as Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra as well as Nirantar's knowledge of the field also suggest that the issue of sexual harassment on the part of male teachers both towards students as well as female colleagues is one that continues to be unaddressed by the State. The law on sexual harassment of women at the workplace includes schools but it is yet to be effectively implemented. (More research is needed on this important issue.)

Other measures that have been attempted by the State to address girls' education have included cash transfer schemes and some incentives like distributing uniforms, bags, cycles and books etc. to parents and girls who come to school. The evidence that is emerging thus far shows that cash transfers and incentives have not yielded the desired results in terms of retention and

---

<sup>9</sup> 7<sup>th</sup> All India School Education Survey, NCERT  
[http://www.ncert.nic.in/programmes/education\\_survey/pdfs/Teachers\\_and\\_Their\\_Qualifications.pdf](http://www.ncert.nic.in/programmes/education_survey/pdfs/Teachers_and_Their_Qualifications.pdf)

completion of secondary education though it has impacted enrolment. Another measure that has sought to be implemented is that of providing hostels, particularly for students who belong to Dalit and Tribal communities. There are studies which have shown that such hostels have enabled girls' access to schooling which they could not have otherwise received, particularly those who live in remote rural areas. The quality of these hostels have for long been an area of concern. There is also a critique of this approach that it removes children/adolescents from their surroundings and places them in an environment dominated by urban middle class culture and values. Therefore there is a growing demand to provide quality education in tribal areas rather than depending on the strategy of residential schools to tackle low levels of education among tribal children.

---

## **2.2 School Education and Sexuality**

With respect to issues of sexuality as they relate to education, we focus here on two key linkages. One is sexuality as a factor determining girls' access to education and the second relates to the manner in which sexuality is engaged with within the school curriculum.

On the issue of access to education, as mentioned above, the phenomenon of girls being pulled out of school is one that has received considerable attention. Several factors have been identified. However, sexuality remains absent from this understanding. The only factor in which sexuality is indirectly being recognized relates to early marriage, which continues to be a significant phenomenon which militates against the continuation of girls' education. Other factors related to sexuality however are absent from the discourse on girls' ability to continue education.

The absence of sexuality as a factor in understanding girls' accessing to schooling can be clearly seen in the questions of the NSSO a national population survey conducted by the State.<sup>10</sup> As can be seen below, other than early marriage, availability of lady teachers and toilets, options related more directly to sexuality are completely absent.

---

<sup>10</sup> The National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), now known as National Sample Survey Office, is an organization under the Ministry of Statistics of the Government of India. It is the largest organisation in India conducting regular socio-economic surveys.

As an organization that has been working in the field of gender and education for two decades and sexuality for the last 7 years, Nirantar is aware that fears related to sexuality, of girls' expressing their desires or of sexual violence, are an important reason for pulling girls out of school once they have finished elementary education. This linkage between sexuality and access to education needs to be researched to understand its multiple dimensions.

The second linkage between sexuality and education is the manner in which sexuality is addressed in school curricula. Before looking at what is available, it is important to consider the need for sexuality education in the Indian context. While growing up, adolescents have many questions, doubts, misconceptions regarding sexuality but there are no sources of accurate, non

**Item 11: reason for never enrolling / discontinuing / dropping out:**

- parent not interested in studies ...01*
- inadequate number of teachers ...02*
- school is far off...03*
- to work for wage/salary ...04*
- for participating in other economic activities ...05*
- to look after younger siblings ...06*
- to attend other domestic chores ...07*
- financial constraints ...08*
- timings of educational institution not suitable ...10*
- for helping in household enterprises ...11*
- Language/medium of instruction used unfamiliar ...12*
- applicable for .never enrolled. cases only**
- No tradition in the community .13*
- education not considered necessary ...14*
- applicable for .ever enrolled. cases only**
- child not interested in studies ...15*
- unable to cope up or failure in studies ...16*
- unfriendly atmosphere at school ...17*
- completed desired level/class ...18*
- applicable for female students only**
- non-availability of lady teacher .20*
- non-availability of ladies toilet .21*
- others...29*

(Source: Participation and expenditure in education based on NSS 64th round survey (July 2007-june 2008) State sample, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi)

judgemental information. The implications for young people are serious. They are not helped to relate to their body in a positive way. The failure to address shame and fear associated with sexuality means that young people are most often not able to speak about violations against their will, including sexual abuse. They are unable to talk about health issues that relate to parts of their bodies that are considered to be 'sexual'. In addition to a culture of silence on such concerns there is also an urgent need for sexuality to be addressed in the curriculum for young people who are seen to transgress norms related to gender and sexuality as they suffer a range of violations.

We now look at the ways in which sexuality is addressed in the curriculum. With respect to the curriculum on the basis of which examinations are conducted, the only section in which a link is made to some extent between education and sexuality is the chapter on human reproduction in science textbooks. This, however, continues to be a part of the curriculum that teachers feel too

inhibited to teach, whether in a rural or an urban context. The other area in which issues of sexuality are meant to be addressed in the education system is that of adolescence education/life skills education. Adolescence education or Life Skills education is also non examinable (giving it a lower status within the overall curriculum and making it more vulnerable to fears of parents, community and teachers). Most often the curriculum is meant to be transacted in a highly insufficient time frame, for example 16 hours.

Adolescence education has gained considerable attention within the education system, particularly in the past ten years in the country. One of the key reasons for this is a strong push from agencies working on HIV and AIDs who see adolescence education as a means to prevent and control the pandemic. This has also had serious implications for the aims and the nature of the curriculum. It necessitated the need to address the issue of unprotected sex in a cultural context where the inclusion of such issues is often seen as being inappropriate and dangerous. It was not surprising therefore that in the year 2007, the curriculum developed by NACO (National Aids Control Agency) was banned across 12 states in the country. The reworked curriculum was more sanitized but replete with messages, direct and indirect, about abstinence. It provides rich ground to study how norms regarding sexuality are constructed without sexuality being consciously addressed or discussed at all. The HIV and AIDs agenda has also meant that curriculum is ‘message’ driven and not one that enables the learners to have access to unbiased information or critical thinking related to sexuality.

There are many ways in which Adolescence Education/Life skills curricula are highly problematic. Nirantar along with other organizations has undertaken reviews of such curricula. These reviews have yielded the following findings.

There is very little positive articulation of sexuality. Many materials suggest different ways to avoid sexual contact. For instance, Life Style Education, West Bengal tells young people to “Avoid sexual intercourse or defer it till marriage. Use other means of expressing love like offering flowers or holding hands. If sex is insisted on, say no firmly.”<sup>11</sup> Apart from abstinence, sexuality is only talked about in the context of disease, sexual harassment, violence and rape. In fact the curriculum constructs the phase of adolescence itself to be a fearful and traumatic one. The Yuva<sup>12</sup> curriculum states that “Poor information and skills, lack of a safe and supportive environment, being sexually active, substance abuse, violence and injury, early and unintended pregnancy and infection with HIV and other sexually transmitted infections threaten the health and lives of adolescents.” (Yuva, 1, xvii)b

In order to drive home the message of abstinence, the curricula propagates more generally the need to control one’s behavior and the value of self discipline. The Yuva curriculum tells adolescents to “Avoid beverages with caffeine such as coffee, soda after 4 p.m.”

Avoid interesting reading and computer games before going to bed.” Yuva, I, 8

---

<sup>12</sup> YUVA is the Life Skills programme of the Department of Education, Government of Delhi, India

With a focus on ‘soft skills’ such as confidence, self expression and negotiation, the curricula fails to address issues of discrimination, equity and justice. While on the one hand there is no effort to promote rights of young people, they are urged to contribute to social causes (those that are safe and do not raise fundamental issues of justice and equity in society). “The developing adolescent can be engaged actively in learning experiences that will enable him/her for example to practice basic hygiene and sanitation practices, listen and communicate effectively in relationships, practice abstinence and safe sex or advocate for a tobacco free school or community.” (YUVA I, xviii) Instrumentalist approaches such as this do not view adolescents as being important in themselves. Their importance lies in the extent to which they can bring about certain changes in society.

Gender has been engaged with in limited ways and issues of discrimination have not received sufficient attention. On the other hand, there are examples of girls being held responsible for protecting themselves from the violence they experience. Girls are urged to deal with the violence by being brave and through self defence. “YUVA acknowledges that Delhi could be a more safer place for girls and women, and that it is up to them to protect themselves, so that they can say a firm no while required.” (p. xiii, Yuva, Vol I) The curricula also do not recognize or address diversity among young people as it relates to gender, sexuality, religion, caste etc.

Although the State tends not to recognize such issues, an important exception was made by the Working Group Report on Empowerment of Women, Ministry of Women and Child Development.<sup>13</sup> The report notes that ‘It is either related to population or reproductive health or seen as a problem associated with promiscuity and shame. While there are a number of programs producing sexuality education materials, not all of them are informed by a holistic, rights based perspective on sexuality. As a result, the content of these programs reinforces values, stereotypes and negative assumptions that do little to really inform or support youth.’’

## **2.5 The RMSA programme**

RMSA, Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan is a scheme of the government of India<sup>14</sup> to universalize secondary education whose stated vision is “to make good quality education available, accessible and affordable to all young persons in the age group of 14-18 years.” The programme has a strong focus on the “economically weaker sections of the society, the educationally backward, the girls and the disabled children residing in rural areas and other marginalized categories like SC (Scheduled Castes refer to Dalits), ST (Scheduled Tribes), OBC (Other Backward Castes) and Educationally Backward Minorities (EBM). There is a special focus on girls’ education. The programme document states that “Education of girls is the primary focus in Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan.” RMSA also locates the significance of secondary education in that it “enables Indian students to compete successfully for education and for jobs globally.” It also places emphasis on vocational skills.

---

<sup>13</sup> The working group was constituted as part of the XIth Five Year Planning process (2007-2012)

<sup>14</sup> RMSA is a centrally designed and funded programme. However in India, education is concurrent subject; that is both the central and state governments have powers to legislate. Thus in certain ways, the scheme can be implemented differently in different states.

The goals of RMSA include the following.

- To provide a secondary school within a reasonable distance of any habitation
- Ensure universal access of secondary education (Gender Equity Ratio of 100%) and
- Universal retention
- To provide access to secondary education with special reference to economically weaker sections of the society, the educationally backward, the and the disabled children residing in rural areas and other marginalized categories like SC,ST,OBC and educationally backward minorities

To fulfill these goals, the scheme has three key objectives and strategies which are detailed below.

#### 1) Access

With respect to access, the programme has a special focus on girls. The programme lists the following as barriers to girls' access to higher school education - "poverty, domestic /sibling responsibilities, girl child labor, low preference to girls' education, preference to marriage over education, etc." With key provisions to enhance girls' access to education are that schools should not be too far from home. (5 kms for secondary - classes 9th and 10th and 7-10 kms for higher secondary - classes 11th and 12th). Another provision is providing free cycles to girls as well as public transport and to ensuring "safety and security of girl child while commuting to the school" although the programme does not detail how it would achieve that. There is also a provision of bridge courses to enable girls who have been pulled out of school to re-enter the school system. A higher number of 'lady teachers', involvement of women from the community in the School Development and Management Committee, cash incentives, and hostels are the other key measure. There are also provisions to enhance the access of students from SC/ST/OBC communities, including significant ones such as addressing the issue of language, creation of a conducive ethos.

#### 2) Quality

The RMSA document has an excellent articulation of the scope of quality in education. It states "Quality is not merely a measure of efficiency; it also has value dimension. The attempt to improve the quality of education will succeed only if it goes hand in hand with steps to promote equality and social justice." But the document does not go further to define quality. The document lists the following as its strategy to improve quality of education:

- Providing required infrastructure like, Black Board, furniture, Libraries, Science & Mathematics laboratories, computer labs, toilet cluster.
- Appointment of additional teachers and in-service training of teachers.
- Bridge course for enhancing learning ability for students passing out of class VIII.
- Reviewing curriculum to meet the NCF, 2005 norms. (Pg 6, RMSA)

RMSA provides for Adolescence Education with respect to whose content the programme states: "It is suggested that health related education of Adolescents, including awareness about AIDS,

should be treated in the larger context of life skill education and holistic development which covers health, physical education and sports.”

The programme also has a provision for counseling of students. It states, “This stage of education coincides with adolescence, a period in an individual’s life that is marked by personal, social and emotional crises created due to the demands of adjustment required in family, peer group and school situations. Counselors, especially trained in theory and practice of counseling, can guide the students and help them develop the right attitudes and competencies to cope with educational, personal, social and career related problems and issues. The provision of these services in schools particularly at this stage would help students cope with increasing academic and social pressures. A multi-pronged strategy is needed to make available guidance services at school stage across the country.”

Since quality of education is linked to capacity building of teachers, it is worth noting that with respect to capacity building of teachers, RMSA says the focus should be on leadership building including Educational Leadership which will address “the art of teaching and learning”, Personal Leadership which includes “integrity and commitment to the professional” as well as “moral and ethical behavior” and the “capacity to model ... capabilities to others, Relational Leadership such as “interpersonal skills” and Intellectual Leadership like “clever thinking...and wise decision-making.” As well as Organizational Leadership such as that needed for the “management of human, financial and physical resources.”

### 3) Equity

The focus on equity is reflected in the document when it states that one of the scheme's objective's is “To ensure that no child is deprived of secondary education of satisfactory quality due to gender, socio-economic, disability and other barriers.” The provisions related to the equity objectives are given below.

RMSA states that certain provisions need to be provided to marginalized groups and girls to ensure that everyone benefits from the provisions. These provisions are

1. Free lodging/ boarding facilities for students belonging to SC,ST,OBC and minority communities
2. Hostels/ residential schools, cash incentive, uniform, books, separate toilets for girls.
3. Providing scholarships to meritorious/ needy students at secondary level.
4. Inclusive education will be the hallmark of all the activities. Efforts will be made to provide all necessary facilities for the children living with disabilities in all the schools.
5. Expansion of Open and Distance Learning needs to be undertaken, especially for those who cannot pursue full time secondary education, and for supplementation / enrichment of face-to-face instruction. This system will also play a crucial role for education of out of school children.

## Key gaps in the RMSA programme

Universal access, quality with a focus on equality and social justice, and equity are highly commendable objectives of the programme. The focus on girls and students who are SC/ST/OBC/minority/disabled is highly significant. It is important to note that the programme addresses the dimensions of capacity building of teachers and principals as well as the need for changes in the curriculum. It also talks about the much needed provision of counseling.

However, there are several gaps and areas of vagueness in the scheme that need to be highlighted, and which the audit will explore. The identification of these gaps is based on Nirantar's understanding and experience of working on education. The audit will look at these gaps and see how they relate to ground level realities and also whether there are other gaps that exist in the programme.

Before the identification of gaps, it is necessary to comment on how the programme document constructs sexuality and gender. With respect to sexuality, there are no references made – neither positive references nor even references to critical areas like sexual harassment and abuse, including in the school. Needless to say sexual diversity is not mentioned. The false assumption made then is that all young people are opposite sex desiring. Even in the section on Adolescence Education, the programme chooses to focus on health and is silent on sexuality. With respect to gender, the term is equated with girls and women. The category of transgender is completely missing and the constructs of masculinity and femininity are not recognized or addressed. The term gender is used in the context of gender as a barrier to girls' access to education and in terms of the need to mainstream gender in all aspects of the programme. There is however a striking absence of the discourse of gender based discrimination.

Returning to the key gaps in the programme, these are as follows.

1. Provision of infrastructure is an important and essential part of creating access to secondary education to all children especially girls as the location and the distance to the school plays an important role in deciding whether they can go to school or not. The distance of 3-5 Km in rural areas is not an easy distance to cover given the fears and anxieties of parents in particular and community in general about sexuality, whether it is an incident that happens with consent or one that is forced on their way to school.
2. The secondary school age population is a significant size in India. The population of children in the age group (14-18 years) is estimated at 121.11 million in 2011 whereas current enrolment in secondary and senior secondary education is only 37 million<sup>15</sup>. The scale and nature of infrastructure required to achieve universal access to secondary education thus is huge and need herculean efforts to make it possible across communities and genders. This looks all the more difficult in the face of the fact that no state or centre rounding up for all states do not spend more than 3% of their GDP on education. RMSA does not spell out any special effort or strategy to fill the infrastructural gap to accommodate the increasing number of students accessing the institution.

---

<sup>15</sup> This data draws upon the Education chapter in the XIth Five Year Plan (2007-2012) [www.aicre-india.org.in](http://www.aicre-india.org.in) as well as a paper entitled Secondary Education for Girls in India, Vimala Ramchandran and Kameshwari Jandhyala, , Unpublished paper for Macarthur Foundation May 2010

3. Although the achievements of all the objectives of the programme demand attitudinal change, RMSA is silent on this critical educational dimension. This begs the questions of whether universal access, quality, equality, social justice and equity can be achieved if attitudes in the community, among students, teachers, principals and those involved in designing and implementing the programme remain unchanged. This means that important provisions like capacity building of teachers and principals do not include the objective of building an understanding of gender, caste etc.
4. The programme is silent on discrimination. There are repeated references to marginalized section and the need to enhance their access to education. However the programme does not recognize issues of discrimination either in terms of an analysis of problems or how they should be addressed.
5. The programme document begins with a focus on globalization and the opportunities that it has created and the need for education to enable young people to find jobs. This is the closest to a vision of education that the document gets. In the rest of the programme document there is no articulation of a vision as to why education or what kind of education should be provided. This is remarkable in a programme which has the objectives that it does.
6. The programme document undertakes almost no analysis of why and in what ways the present system is lacking in terms of quality or equity.
7. The one section of the programme that does undertake an analysis of areas that needs attention is barriers to girls' education. However the analysis does not take into account issues related to sexuality.
6. The most substantive and detailed sections of the document focus on infrastructure (such as the availability and facilities in schools) and management. While these are very important, the lack of visioning and detailing related to other dimensions of access, quality and equity is a source of concern.

## **SECTION III**

### **3.METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1The following tools have been used for this audit**

- 1.Content analysis of the RMSA programme
- 2.FGD with members of Nirantar who were involved with the audit
3. FGD with Dalit and Tribal rural young women, studying in a bridge course to join or re-enter the school system. <sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Since the RMSA is still at an early stage of implementation we did not include learners from schools covered by the scheme.

4. Rapid survey with parents of 20 rural girls who were pulled out of school.

5. In-depth interviews with three transgender people about their experiences when they were in school.

Further details about the tools are shared later in the report as part of the findings. Challenges related to the methodology will be shared in the concluding section. Here we would like to share why we designed the tools in the manner that we did and how this relates to the larger methodological issues involved in undertaking a heteronormativity audit of any development policy or programme. We will frame our sharing according to the larger methodological issues that we consider to be important.

### **3.2 Rationale underlying the tools**

3.2.1 How do we undertake a heteronormativity audit of a policy or a programme, which does not explicitly address sexuality or even many aspects of gender?

Development policies and programmes often do not mention the word sexuality and are yet replete with assumptions about sexuality as well as about gender. These assumptions actively inform the nature of the interventions, with serious implications for the lives of those they are aimed at. This is true in case of RMSA. The ways in which we sought to work with this reality is as follows.

a) Deconstruction of content of policy/programme documents

This involves a close reading of the programme document, and spelling out the hidden assumptions being made about sexuality, gender etc.

b) Beginning with one self

The FGD with members of Nirantar involved with the audit was designed as an experiment with a tool which might be of value to all those engaged in research, planning or implementation of development policies or programmes. One of the challenges in such processes is that the individuals/agencies involved tend to experience themselves at a distance from the issue or target population of the intervention. In the context of gender for example, in the Indian context, efforts by the State to mainstream gender has meant that gender has become a buzz word often devoid of any real meaning to those in the development industry. It is therefore important to have a tool which connects people in direct, personal and meaningful ways with their own experiences of gender. With respect to sexuality there are strong fears, inhibitions and moralistic attitudes, often deep rooted. In the context of young people for instance, rarely will those involved in educational planning recall their own experiences related to sexuality when they were growing up.

Even though we are an organization that has been working on issues of education for two decades, and we have facilitated participants in trainings we conduct to reflect on their experiences in school, we had never created that opportunity for ourselves! Dr. Akshay Khanna,

from the Institute of Development Studies in the UK, designed the FGD in a manner that allowed us to re-visit our own experiences in school and explore in ways that were personal and at the same time collective. The FGD provide an opportunity to reflect together on personal experiences that ran deep and that many of us had not had much chance to process, even in our adult lives.

c) Identifying the gaps as they relate to sexuality and gender and seeking evidence

When undertaking the content analysis of the RMSA document, we began to identify the gaps as they relate to sexuality and gender. One of the major gaps related to the absence of the category of transgender. The second gap related to the absence of the dimension of sexuality in the analysis as to why young are pulled out of school. As stated above, in our experience as an organization working in the area of gender and education, we knew that the fears related to the daughter's sexuality, consensual and non consensual, on the way to school are common, even though there has been no recognition of this factor and no research related to it. We therefore decided to undertake the rapid survey of parents of girls who had been pulled out of school to understand the reasons and whether sexuality was a factor or not, and if so then to what extent.

This raises a critical methodological issue. In a context in which development policies and programmes tend to be silent about sexuality, it is often in the gaps and silences that the critique needs to be made. And when such gaps are being studied, it can well be that the exercise being undertaken is not an open ended one. As with this audit, practitioners' experience in the area could point towards certain gaps, which then need to be studied. In this case, when we undertook the rapid survey with parents, it was with the stated objective of seeking to understand whether and to what extent sexuality was a factor in parents pulling girls out of school. The hypothesis, based on our experience, was that sexuality is a significant factor.

In the area of sexuality, in particular, there will be other contexts in which identification of gaps will be a crucial aspect of heteronormativity audits. This identification of gaps can stem from evidence that already exists. However, in the case of sexuality, with so little research being done, especially as it relates to development, it is highly likely that the evidence will not exist. What might exist is the knowledge of practitioners. This knowledge can be the basis on which gaps can be identified, and then evidence purposively sought.

d) Identifying the sites in which heteronormativity is being constructed in the arena that the policy/programme is working

We know that heteronormativity is constructed in ways that are often not visible. There is a need therefore to identify those sites where norms related to sexuality and gender are being constructed, beyond the ones that are more obvious in nature. In the context of school education, the sites of construction of sexuality and gender that are usually identified are the curriculum and pedagogy (if sexuality is addressed at all). The FGD with staff members of Nirantar as well as the FGD with the young women who are enrolled in the bridge course were designed in a manner that allowed for the identification and exploration of other sites in which sexuality and gender norms are constructed. This included the sites of friendship, teacher-student dynamics

beyond class room teaching and formal and informal leadership roles. Exploring these sites enables examining more fully the school as an institution that seeks to engineer moral development and the ideological functions the school plays, for example with respect to constructing notions of the disciplined, 'good' student and the implications for sexuality and gender.

- e) Illuminating the implications of the sexuality and gender constructs on the lives of those who are impacted by the policies and programmes

As mentioned above, one of the gaps identified in the content of the RMSA programme is that there is an absence of transgender as a category. We therefore gathered evidence, in the form of interviews with transgendered individuals about their experiences in school in order to demonstrate the implications of the gap in the programme on the lives of transgender people. It was very important we felt to hear from transgender people themselves about their experiences and their views on gender in education to counter their being invisibilization in the scheme and infact in the larger discourse of education. In terms of methodology we considered this to be of value, perhaps for any context in which an identity is being invisibilized or marginalized, is to bring them centre stage and hear from them and be educated by them.

When studying the implications of a development policy or programme for the lives of those who are highly stigmatized on the basis of gender or sexuality, tools such as surveys and FGDs are not always possible. In a survey or FGD it is highly unlikely that they will share their issues either for the fear of being identified, the fear of others' responses etc. Trust between the subjects and researchers become critical. In such a context it is not the scale of the data that matters, but whether the tool was able to evoke the experiences and reflections of those stigmatized because they are seen as challenging heteronormativity. Intensive, qualitative tools are likely to be most appropriate. In this audit, with transgender people we decided to undertake indepth interviews which created a safe space for them to be able to share with us their experiences and reflections about their school related experiences. Three transgender people were interviewed.

The audit involved eliciting not only the experiences and views of those who were transgender but also of gender transgression by women i.e. cis-gendered women who identify with the gender assigned to them at birth, such as most of the participants in the Nirantar FGD. This was in keeping with our understanding of gender transgression as a continuum as well as the recognition of the importance of the category of transgender as an identity. Our understanding of gender identity as being fluid also ensured the inclusion of experiences of shifting gender expressions during the course of lives of participants in the Nirantar FGD.

## **SECTION IV**

### **4. FINDINGS OF THE AUDIT**

#### **Introduction**

We would now like to share the findings of the audit. The way in which we are presenting the findings is as follows: We have taken the three core objectives of RMSA - enhancing access, quality and equity - and the strategies related to them. We have then shared the relevant findings from the tools that we used as they relate to that particular objective. Based on these findings, we return to the RMSA and analyse to what extent the strategies proposed by RMSA will be able to meet the objectives. We also indicate some areas that the RMSA should consider if it is to meet its stated objectives.

#### **4.1 ACCESS**

A key objective of RMSA is to increase girls' access to higher school education. The programme also seeks to enhance the access of those who are Scheduled Caste (SC/Dalit), Scheduled Tribal (ST), Muslim and disabled. It seeks to enable 'universal' access to education. A category of young people left out of the objective of enabling 'universal' access is that of transgender young people. In this section of the audit, we will focus on the programme's objective of enhancing girls' access to education. Central to the issue of access to secondary education, of course, is an analysis of why young women are pulled out of school at this stage. The RMSA programme document does offer an analysis. (We are mentioning this because this is one part of the document which does offer an analysis regarding the situation as it exists with respect to the stated objectives of the programme. The rest of the programme document is marked by an absence of such analysis and moves directly into strategies.) The factors identified by the programme document include low preference to girls' education, preference to marriage and domestic responsibilities over education.

The programme proposes several strategies to address the phenomenon of girls being pulled out of school. One of the main provisions is that schools should not be too far from home (5 kms for secondary - classes 9th and 10th and 7-10 kms for higher secondary - classes 11th and 12th). The programme also aims to provide transport facilities for girls "in order to avoid covering distance through walking". Another provision is that of bridge course - a course that is meant to enable girls who have dropped out of school to re-enter the school system. There is also the provision of hostels mentioned in the RMSA programme. We would like to draw your attention here to the fact that the proposed strategies do not address the factors identified by the programme as to why girls' are being pulled out of school. Such disjuncture will be discussed in the concluding section of the report. In order to investigate the gaps that exist in the analysis related to girls' access to education, a survey was conducted.

#### **The survey – Profile and method**

The rapid survey was conducted with 20 people who were the parents of 20 girls who had been pulled out of school. 4 were men and 16 were women. (The number of women interviewed was

higher because the rapport with them was greater.) Those interviewed were from village in Lalitpur District of Uttar Pradesh, a state in North India, where Nirantar is involved in a community based programme. The interview team consisted of members of the Nirantar office in Delhi and SahjaniShiksha Kendra - the community based programme for women's empowerment through literacy and education started by Nirantar.

3 out of the 4 fathers had been to school. The highest level of education among the 3 respondents was till the 8th standard (the class in which higher school education now begins). The primary reason for leaving school studies related to poverty and the need to earn money. Only one of the mothers interviewed had been to school.

In the families of the 20 girls who were pulled out of school, the total number of boys was 35 and the percentage who stopped attending school was 45.7%. The average class till which they studied was the 7th. Only one of them had never gone to school. The total number of girls in these families was 50. The percentage of girls who dropped out was 52%. The average class till which girls had studied was till the 6th. 6 of them had never gone to school. The average age of girls from Dalit families at marriage was around 15 and girls from the middle caste families even lower, younger, around 8 years of age. The age when a girl would enter higher education, class 9, would be around 14 or 15.

The interviews were conducted mostly in the interviewee's home. We sought to interview people without others in the family and community being present, but this was never possible, given that there is no concept of privacy in the rural context. The positive aspect of this was the daughters were also often around during the interview, and although we had not planned to interview them, when some of them accompanied us from one house to another they provided us valuable information and insights, often contradicting the narrative of the parents as it related to their motivation to study.

The interviews were brief, lasting on from half an hour to one hour. The interviews covered all the questions on the check list but during the course of the interviews, the teams conducting the interview had to innovate substantially on the probes. This was because there was a high degree of inhibition in talking about their fears related to sexuality. For example in a majority of interviews, the parents said that they cannot send the daughter to school because '*ab vo sayani ho gayi hai*' (now she is has reached maturity). We then asked so if she is now '*sayani*' (mature) surely there is less reason to worry, not more. What is it that you are worried about? And then gradually, with some initial awkwardness, they would start talking about the fears. It is important to note that when parents spoke about their fears, they did not use words like sex. Such a direct use of language related to sex would have been too uncomfortable. (Even in the context of adult consensual sex, the public use of language can often be 'indirect' other than when being used in humour or in an aggressive manner.) The indirectness of the language did not pose a problem since, when used, it was clear from the words they were using, that they were referring to sexuality. For example the term '*unch-nee ch*' came up often during the interviews. *Unch-nee ch* is a reference to sex. It is a reference, moreover, to sex that would disrupt

heteronormativity. *Unch-nee* translates literally into 'upside down' with also a sense of disarray and disorder.

- The flow of the interviews was as follows. We began by asking the parent about their own education. This was considered to be important to mitigate parents feeling under pressure as to why they were pulling girls out of school and also to locate the issue more broadly. We then moved to talking about the children's (boys and girls) schooling and then focused our questions on the daughter who had been pulled out of school most recently and the factors underlying that.

#### **4.1.1 Why girls were pulled out of school?**

When asked about the reasons why they had pulled their daughter out of school, 17 out of 20 respondents spoke about sexuality related fears, either ones that involve the potential of girls acting on their desires or something happening against her will. (The other three were among those who spoke about marriage as a factor in ways that linked closely to sexuality).

- 7 respondents spoke about the fear of girls willingly getting into a sexual relationship on the way to school. Although they also mentioned sexual harassment, in our reading of their interviews they placed greater emphasis on the former.
- 7 respondents spoke only of the fear that the daughter might experience sexual harassment (not that she might of her own free will engage in sexual activity) or someone might kidnap her to take revenge on the family (*'dushmani nikalne ke liye'*).
- 3 respondents spoke about one of the disadvantages of education being that they will lose control over their daughters' mobility. They were clearly alluding to loss of control over her sexuality here. (As detailed in the concluding section on learnings and challenges related to methodology, the more general question about any perceived disadvantages of education provided the space to talk about sexuality related fears to parents who were unable to articulate them more directly in the context of their daughters.)
- 14 out of 20 mentioned marriage as a reason for discontinuing the daughter's education. The need to get girls married at an early age is also closely linked to the fear of girls' breaking the norm of no sex before marriage.

Other than the reasons related to sexuality and marriage, the other reasons for pulling girls out of school were as follows:

- 3 respondents mentioned poverty as a reason
- 2 respondents said that the teacher does not teach well, one of them said that the government school teacher was not good and they can't afford private school education.
- 1 respondent said because there was no lady teacher
- 2 respondents said because there was no cycle or the daughter can't ride a cycle
- 1 respondent said because there is no value of education - even if she studies she will have to do what she is doing now.

The data from the survey clearly shows the high level of significance of sexuality as a factor in pulling girls out of school.

#### 4.1.1.1 Fears related to sexuality

As shared above, the fear is two fold – that the girl might be sexually violated on the way to school or that she might willingly enter into a sexual relationship with a boy. It was easier for the respondents to talk about sexual violations as a factor than consensual sex, although even sexual violations were not easy to talk about and required facilitation and probing. Seven of the parents interviewed mentioned cases of sexual violations/affairs in other villages, which were clearly easier to talk about than their own fears. Given below is an excerpt from one of the interviews.

Mother, caste Dalit, village Muriya:

*“Cycle nahi chhalapati. Akele nahi bheje.. Girti-padti rehti hai.. Hum padhai ki baat karat hai, toh kehti hai hum nahi jaa rahe... Dar bhi lagta tha. Koi bolve raaste mein. Hum bhejenge kissi ke saath, saheli ke sang bhejenge. Chinta rehti hai, mann mein darr lagta hai- sayani ladki jaati hai toh.”*

(She is not able to ride a cycle. We won't send her alone. She keeps falling here and there... When we tell her about studying, she says that she doesn't want to go... I'm scared. What if someone approaches her on the way? Who will we send her with...? We will send her with a friend. We are worried, afraid in our heart, if a girl who has now become mature goes...)

I: *Mann mein kaisa darr?*  
(What does your heart fear?)

R: *Aise darr ki kahin koi bole nahi, ladki ka mann hoga, ladke ka bhi hoga. Balatkar ka bhi dar hai.*

(The fear that someone might approach her, the girl will also want, the boy will also want. There is also the fear of rape.)

#### 4.1.1.2 Marriage as a factor in pulling girls out of school

The fear of what might happen on the way to school is very closely linked to the desire to get the daughter married off since an important motivation for the latter is also that she is safely 'sent away' lest she gets pregnant before marriage.<sup>17</sup>

I: Why do you want to get her married now?

R: *Zamana kharaab hai. Shaadi-shuda hogi toh izzat rahegi.* (The times are bad. If she is married then the honour can be preserved.)

As shared earlier, early marriage was the norm here, as in most of rural North India. And marriage did mean the end of girls' education. Parents who had married off their daughters said that they tried to negotiate with the in-laws but the in-laws were not interested in sending the girls to school.

A mother, caste Kushwaha (middle level caste), village Jakhora: *Sasural mein kaha gaya – jitna padhna tha, padh liya.* (In her marital home they said – however much she has studied. It's enough).

There were reasons other than sexuality too, which links marriage and education. These included the difficulty in finding a match if the daughter is 'too' educated and a greater amount of dowry will be demanded since the boy will be more educated.

At the same time, with the onset of modernity, education for girls, upto a certain level, became desirable as educated as boys needed educated girls, related to the idea of the companionate wife.

Tanmay, gender queer, caste Brahmin, member of Nirantar, New Delhi, "I had a group of Tambrahm (slang for Brahmins from the southern state of Tamil Nadu, stereotyped as being educated, seemingly modern but actually conservative) friends... The girls would top but in entrance exams, it was always the boys who would top...and the girls said that they didn't want to top because they wanted to marry the topper boys, who would not marry them if they topped."

Archana, woman, caste Brahmin, member of Nirantar, New Delhi: "It's like what Uma Chakravathy, the feminist historian says... in the previous century, men wanted educated women because they wanted good companions, one who can make conversations with them, who is presentable, but not one who will challenge them."

---

<sup>17</sup> At the time of the survey, it was a festive season and so many of the married daughters had come to their natal homes. It was utterly depressing for some of us to see the young women with babies in their arms.

### 4.1.1.3 The corrupting desire for education

There is another link between sexuality and education that was discerned in the interviews. Both education and sexuality are seen as threatening because for once the girl is thinking about what she wants, her own desires, whether it is the desire to study or the desire to express her sexuality. In our analysis what seems to be at work here is that a 'good girl' being socialized to become a 'good woman' must only think about others and not herself. She must not be at the centre of her world.

A grandmother, Kushwaha – a middle caste, village Jakhora: *“Badh jaye padhai karke. Lekin zyada padhi toh ghar se gayi.”*

(Education can take her ahead in life. But if she gets more educated, then she's out of our hands). The literal translation would be 'out of the house' which indicates the connection being made between education and the fear of no longer being able to contain her within the boundaries of the home and its rules.

I: *“Ladki zidd nahi karti padhne ke liye?”* (Doesn't she insist that she wants to study?)

R: says proudly- *“Humare yahan nahi karti zidd.”* (In our family/community, girls do not insist on anything.)

Education can be seen as enabling a girl to think and act independently and to go against social norms. The view that education corrupts girls is not just a rural notion.

Archana (introduced above): *“I had an inter-caste marriage. My father reluctantly went to meet my boyfriend's mother to discuss our marriage. He said to my boyfriend's mother, 'If I had not allowed her to study beyond the 10<sup>th</sup> standard, I would not have had to see this day today'.”*

When parents were asked during the survey about the advantages and disadvantages of education they spoke about the following advantages. Almost all the parents said the value of education is that the daughters might be able to find jobs. Very few said that it will help them develop their minds. A few said it will help them find husbands. Some said if the daughter is educated, when she has children they will be educated. We return to these responses at the end of this section of the report.

### How appropriate are the proposed strategies?

The strategies proposed by the RMSA programme to enhance girls' access to higher school education include ensuring that schools are not too far, provision of cycles, transport facilities, bridge courses, hostels and lady teachers. The data from the survey shows that a major reason for girls being pulled out of school is the sexuality related fear that the girl might act on her desires or be sexually harassed on the way to or in school. This factor is not recognized by the programme in its analysis of the problem. The critical question that arises is that if this key, deep rooted attitude is not addressed, to what extent will the programme's proposed strategies be effective in enhancing girls' access to higher school education? We focus here on the provision

of cycles to girls and relate it to the findings of the survey, in order to assess whether this provision has chances of being effective.

In the survey, when the parents were asked about whether they would be willing to send their daughter to school on a cycle, the response tended to be that she did not know how to ride a cycle, she might fall etc. However as we probed further, other concerns soon emerged. These were concerns related to where the girl might go if she had a cycle and also to her safety more generally with respect to sexuality. In some cases the daughters were present during the interviews and said clearly that they wanted to use the cycle. An important piece of evidence that challenged the idea that girls' would be able to use the cycle to go to school was the cycle lying in the courtyard during the interview.

*(Backdrop: Cycle lying against the wall in the open courtyard.)*

I: "Can't she ride that and go to school?"

R (Father, Dalit): "She does not know how to ride. She herself doesn't go alone anywhere, without her friends."

Daughter replied immediately, her eyes lit up: "I want to learn to ride. When I have work I go alone anyway."

The fear of what might happen on the way was so acute that only a door to door service seemed to be the option. Clearly a cycle will not be the solution when fears are such that the desired solution is complete surveillance/physical protection. The fear is that the girl will be alone and where she might choose to go. A cycle will not address the anxiety related to sexual agency, in fact it might even enhance it.

Mother, Kushwaha – middle level caste, village Jakhora

"The younger ones go to school easily. No problem. But the older ones... god knows where they will go. If there's a vehicle which drops her to school, then it's fine. But not cycle, because she doesn't know how to cycle. There is always the fear that she has still not come back from studying."

During another interview, we thought that the daughter, from the way she dressed and from her body language, might be transgender. We felt it might be good if we could talk to her in private to understand if there was any support that she needed, so we asked her mother.

I: "Can Bharti come tomorrow to our office for a discussion?"

R: (Kushwaha – middle level caste, village Muriya) – "*Haan, agar ghar se le jaye, ghar ko chod jaye. Tumhare ange pohocha denge. Akele pohochane mein hume darr lagat kaha gayi. Dil ki baat kaise bata de.*" (Yes, if you can pick her up from home and drop her back home. She can go with you. If she goes alone we will feel scared. Where did she go? How do I tell you what's in my heart?).

The mother's expression seemed to be telling us that she was feeling insecure about her daughter. Later, Bharti herself refused to come with us.

The provision related to the bicycle is a highly positive one since it creates the opportunity for girls' mobility in a manner that can be highly empowering. The RMSA must retain this provision. It is also to be appreciated that the document says that the girls can continue using the cycle after school. There is a need to recognize, however, without attitudinal change the mere provisioning of a cycle will not alter the situation. If people have sexuality related fears about their daughters, then that fear will remain whether a cycle is provided or not.

With respect to the other provisions too, there is a need to think through the underlying issues related to sexuality. With provisions such as hostels, although this issue was not addressed in the survey, from Nirantar's knowledge of community responses to residential educational centres these tend to be perceived by parents as a space where their daughters once admitted will be safe, both in terms of no sexual harm coming to them, and they not being able to exercise sexual autonomy. However other than the serious improvements in the functioning of hostels that are needed, students and parents need to have a real choice as to whether they want to exercise the option of a hostel, and it ought not to be primarily a way of ensuring sexual restraint on daughters, almost like a chastity belt.

Another provision relates to ensuring that there are more 'lady teachers' in schools. It is true that this provision would be reassuring for parents. However such a provision would leave unaddressed this very serious issue of sexual harassment by male teachers.

One of the girls said "*Teacher kehtehain, kissi ladke ka intezaar toh nahi kar rahi. Kehte hain ki itrati kyun ho, ladka aankh mare tumhe. Kahani mein agar pati-patni hote hain teacher dekhta rehta hai. Bol-chaal galat hai...kachariya bolta hai master.*"

(The teachers say, are you waiting for a boy? They say why are you being so coy... so that boys wink at you. If the story has a husband and wife, the teacher keeps staring... What the teachers say, how they behave... is bad... The teacher uses words of abuse like whore.")

Stepping back from specific provisions and how the survey findings relate to them, we would like to take stock of what the survey showed about the linkages between education and sexuality and the implications of these linkages for education programmes such as RMSA.

The linkages between education and sexuality evidenced by the survey are:

- Fear of sex on the way
- Desire to get girls married early
- Sexual harassment by male teachers
- Fear that education will corrupt, including loss of control over girls' sexuality.

Given these ground level realities the gaps in the strategies proposed by RMSA are as follows:

- Provisions aimed at the manifestation and not the underlying attitudes are not likely to succeed (for eg. giving cycles is not going to do anything if fears related to sexuality remain)
- Provisions don't address attitudes underlying early marriage (which also relate to gender and sexuality), even though the State is concerned about the phenomenon of early marriage.
- Provision of lady teachers will leave sexual harassment by male teachers, unaddressed
- Provisions don't address attitudes to education including fears and non-recognition of the empowering potential of education.

### **Provisions that RMSA should include**

One of the strengths of RMSA is that it identifies that need for community mobilization, the participation of the community, including women, in the SDMCs (School Development and Management Committees) and capacity building of principals and teachers. It does not however address why these areas of interventions are necessary or what the substantive content should be. These spaces need to be used to enable perspective building related to sexuality, gender and education, as well as the linkages between the three. A space for this also needs to be created for all those involved in the designing and implementation of RMSA.

Discussions, in particular those related to sexuality, will prove to be challenging. There is a real danger of highlighting in a direct manner the factor of sexuality related fears, not only at the level of the community but also at the level of policy makers. The sexual norms related to young women not having sex before marriage run so deep and strong, that highlighting this factor in the public realm might actually lead to undesired consequences such as heightening fears and promoting provisions which increase levels of dependence with respect to mobility, which are 'protectionist' and increase the control over and surveillance of girls,

The strategy of engagement with this factor of sexuality related fears will need to be thought through. What is clear however is atleast progressive civil society actors such as feminist educationists, practitioners and researchers need to be aware of this significant linkage between sexuality and education. It needs to form an important part of the discourse on gender and education.

Some possible strategic elements in the highlighting of factors related to sexuality in the more public realm could include the following:

- A broader engagement with sexuality and gender, which will reduce the fears around sexuality and which will help adults see the implications of sexuality and gender in their own lives.
- Working with women's collectives - The strategy of perspective building with women's collectives should be adopted.
- Collaborations with large scale government women and girls' empowerment programmes such as the Mahila Samakhya (MS) could be forged. MS has formed girls' forums in which

they come and discuss their issues and collectively take action. These forums are supported by the women's collectives which have been formed by MS. The girls' forums have allowed girls agency to negotiate with both family and community. Nirantar's experience of working with such programmes as well as smaller community based NGOs shows that it is possible to build perspectives and to begin to bring about attitudinal changes related to sexuality and gender when working with women's collectives. Dialoguing with rural women about sexuality, in Nirantar's experience, was easier than with more urban, educated women, because of the internalization of ideas of middle class respectability.

- Capacity building should not be limited to teachers. It is only when the capacities of members of the school committees are strengthened, will they be able to effectively engage in community mobilization.
- Working on both the push and pull sides of the attitudinal scenario as it relates to education and enhancing an understanding of the 'pull', the desirability of education.

The content of capacity building of teachers and members of SDMCs must include understanding as well as developing the skills to further build an understanding at the community level about the empowering potential of education itself. While dialogues about sexuality and gender are needed, we know that these are areas in which there will be a high level of resistance. We will in the foreseeable future not have a situation where parents are 'alright' about the possibility of their daughters exercising their sexual agency. The hope is that dialogues on sexuality and gender will reduce the general levels of anxiety and perhaps the awareness about how sexuality and gender norms seek to constrain adults in their lives too. Returning to the question of the value of education, it is critical to build an understanding about this at the community level. The survey shows that at present the perceived value of education is related to enhancing the marriage prospects of daughters and to the role of education in procuring jobs for the young women, the possibility of which is highly limited in rural North India. There is a need to build an understanding about the role that education can play in empowerment, in terms of being in a greater position of strength to negotiate the challenges and vulnerabilities of life, have access to information, including knowledge regarding entitlements and a greater belief and confidence in being able to bring about change in one's existing situation, including at a collective level.

The attitudinal scenario might look somewhat like this. On one hand are the fears related to sexuality that are likely to continue. On the other hand, is the perceived value of education. A possible strategy would be to strategically address issues of sexuality and gender to address the former, and to help the parents and community to see greater value in education and to hope that the decision making will tip in favour of the latter.

Concluding the programme analysis and evidence from the audit as it relates to access of girls' to higher school education, it is important to highlight that although RMSA recognizes existing barriers to access such early marriage, domestic work and low preference to girls education, it's assessment of the barriers is grossly incomplete because it does not take into account the factors related to sexuality which contribute significantly to girls' being pulled out of school. The most direct are the fears related to sexuality, consensual or non consensual, on the way to schools. The

other factors related to sexuality are the fear of sexual relations before marriage contributing to the phenomenon of early marriage as well as the fear that education will mean loss of control over girls, including their sexuality.

Linkages between sexuality, gender and access to education need to be recognized for provisions such as those related to cycles to be more effective. Provisions like hostels and transport facilities are important provisions but if the impetus behind them continues to be fears related to sexuality and gender, education will be playing a role as a pillar to sustain heteronormativity structure rather than to enable empowerment.

Deep rooted attitudes to sexuality and gender will have to be addressed and engaged with if the objective of enhancing girls' access to higher education is to be achieved.

#### **4.2 QUALITY AS DEFINED IN RMSA**

The RMSA document says quality is not just about efficiency. It is about equality and social justice. While this is commendable, the document does not go further to define quality. In terms of strategies, the document lists the following to improve quality of education:

- Providing required infrastructure like, Black Board, furniture, Libraries, Science & Mathematics laboratories, computer labs, toilet cluster.
- Appointment of additional teachers and in-service training of teachers.
- Bridge course for enhancing learning ability for students passing out of class VIII.
- Reviewing curriculum to meet the NCF, 2005 norms. (Pg. 6, RMSA)

The document does not state what the content of the in-service training of teachers should be, or what the curriculum or pedagogy of the bridge course should be. It is positive however that the RMSA states the school curriculum should be reviewed to meet the NCF, 2005 norms which does address many key gender dimensions, although transgender and sexuality issues find space primarily only in the Gender Focus Paper of NCF.

With respect to Life Skills education, one space where there was potential to address issues of sexuality, the RMSA document only speaks about health, HIV and AIDS and yoga.

The RMSA document lists guidance and counselling as an important strategy to promote universalization of secondary education.

“Guidance and Counselling services can help in promoting students’ retention and better scholastic performance in curricular areas, facilitating adjustment and career development of students, developing right attitudes towards studies, self, work and others. This stage of education coincides with adolescence, a period in an individual’s life that is marked by personal, social and emotional crises created due to the demands of adjustment required in family, peer group and school situations. Counselors, especially trained in theory and practice of counselling, can guide the students and help them develop the right attitudes and competencies to cope with educational, personal, social and career related problems and issues. The provision of these services in schools particularly at this stage would help students cope with increasing academic and social pressures.” (Pg. 35, RMSA)

While this step is promising, it needs to be stated here, even before sharing the findings of the audit, that ‘guidance and counselling’ can be used as a powerful way of perpetuating heteronormativity, towards seeking to ensure that young people make the ‘right’ choices. At this point, it is important to question what the document means by ‘right attitudes and competencies’. This notion of right and wrong when used along with the language of ‘crises’, in the context of describing adolescence is worrying. The language of ‘adjustment’ and ‘coping’ is also symptomatic of a status quoist, not transformatory approach to education.

RMSA does not define what it means by quality and the provisions it enumerates appear, at an initial reading itself, to be highly limited, vague and potentially detrimental. It is important here to state that from the lens of heteronormativity, the quality of education would need to be assessed in terms of to what extent are schools promoting or countering heteronormativity, and the implications of this for the lives of students. Since heteronormativity is a system that seeks to maintain existing power relations, education that promotes heteronormativity would clearly be violating principles of equality and social justice, which RMSA considers to be key dimensions of quality in education.

The tools and findings that are shared below explore sites of construction of sexuality and gender norms and their implications for young people who are part of the school system. After sharing the findings we will return to the question of how good quality education needs to be defined.

#### **4.2.1 The tools – FGDs with Nirantar staff and Young women enrolled in a bridge course**

The tools used to explore heteronormativity in schools were an FGD conducted with Nirantar staff and another FGD with young women enrolled in a bridge course.

As mentioned earlier that FGD with member of Nirantar was an experiment in evoking personal experiences and collective reflections of those involved in an audit process, related to theme of policy/programme being audited, in this case school education. The FGD lasted a whole day. The themes included desire, discipline, shame, performance, leadership and intimacy. We were asked to share in small groups a remarkable incident from our school days and then to share them with others as role plays. After discussions evoked by the role plays, we discussed areas that had not been addressed by the role plays. 8 members of Nirantar who were involved in the

audit participated in the discussion. The participants were urban, almost all 'upper' and 'middle' caste. All had university degrees, most till the post graduate level. The FGD was exploratory in nature and therefore fairly open ended.

The second FGD was conducted with Dalit and Adivasi rural young women who had been pulled out of school and were attending a bridge course to be able to re-enter schools. The course was run by Sahjani Shiksha Kendra, a community based programme for women and girls' education and empowerment run by Nirantar. Participants also included some young women who had attended Janishala, an 8 month residential program for Dalit and Adivasi young women which used to be run by Nirantar. Out of 20 girls, only one had never been to school, the rest had studied from the 4th to the 11th standard.

We had anticipated that it would be a challenge to engage the young women in discussions on gender and sexuality. In order to help the participants feel more relaxed we showed them films. One film was a Bollywood version of Bend it like Beckham, and then a romantic film which also had a theme of gender transgression of the heroine (not transgender as an identity). Despite these and other strategies adopted during the FGD, it was extremely challenging to get the girls to talk. Often it was the girls who had studied at Janishala who were able to feel comfortable and confident enough to take part in the discussions. This is also something that we had anticipated.

The areas for the FGD that were identified were similar to the ones included in the FGD with members of Nirantar, although we anticipated that the discussions would be different, particularly given that the girls were still in the process of going through the experiences, which the Nirantar team had been looking back and reflecting upon.

### **Findings from the FGDs**

We share below the findings, drawing upon both the FGDs, related to the manner in which heteronormativity was being constructed or challenged by the schools the participants had been to and the implications for their lives. We begin with the sites in which heteronormativity is constructed in schools. Typically, in the discourse on gender and education, the sites explored are the curriculum and pedagogy. The FGDs moved beyond these to explore other sites, since norms related to sexuality and gender are often constructed in ways that are not so visible or direct.

#### **a) Curriculum**

Participants in the FGDs spoke about how the only section of the curriculum that addressed issues of sexuality was the chapter on reproduction in the biology text books. This was and continues to be a chapter that the teacher tells the students to read on their own because they are too embarrassed to teach it. One chapter which addresses only one act of sex of the very many and does not even begin to address the larger construct of sexuality, is clearly grossly insufficient. The participants in the FGDs had not received Life Skills education, which is a more recent phenomenon.

"We are taught (the chapter) only after 9<sup>th</sup> standard and it is usually avoided or we are asked to read it on our own." (FGD with young women)

"There is only tokenism (in the textbooks). Eid (the festival) is given a one chapter and one chapter on Christianity, but it never became part of our lives and consciousness. And the children don't take it seriously. (Similarly) one chapter on reproduction did not explain sexuality." (FGD with Nirantar members)

**b) Construction of heteronormativity in out-of-classroom interactions with teachers – the 'good student'**

In the FGD with young women, instances were shared of how teachers try to enforce sexual norms. "We had a teacher who was terrible. She had a small mouth, but was always shouting at us. If we didn't come dressed to her liking, she would yell saying, "Is this a fashion show? How have you worn your dupatta<sup>18</sup> ."

Other than the direct messages of heteronormativity, there were indirect but powerful messages given by teachers that constructed the idea of the 'good student'. The construct of the good student is not limited to sexuality but abiding by sexual norms is a key dimension. Abiding by sexual norms is not merely about controlling sexual desires, it spills over many ways, for example in expecting the student to be disciplined, simple, obedient etc. Such a student is much less likely to break sexual norms. The larger construct of the good student has its pleasures, positive reinforcements, being the teachers' favourite etc. as well as its pains, including emotional rejection by the teacher, which are powerful tools to keep the student in good student mode. In the Nirantar FGD several experiences were shared which have led to this articulation of the 'good student'.

"I was dating two boys, one of whom was my good friend's ex-boyfriend. This was when I was in the 9th or 10th (15 or 16 years old). One of my teachers... I used to be the teachers' favourite and the good girl... she said to me... she was very dominating, scary... what have you become... that haunted me for a long time."

"Till about class 8<sup>th</sup> (age 14) I was labelled as a good girl, because I was a good student and scored well...in the march past, I had to walk with the flag. I developed a personality. I was asexual, strict...limited friends, simple clothes. Teachers had expectations from me which I couldn't break."

It is not only in terms of admonishing, or rewards, there is a way in which students can also try to emulate teachers.

"(In my convent school we had) strict nuns... used to be punished... I used to want to be sister. They were so powerful. They liked me even though I was Hindu. I used to think they could do nothing wrong. I was good at studies."

In the Nirantar FGD it also emerged that it is also the good student who is chosen as the leader by school authorities. However even if the student did not abide by the sexuality and gender norms too well, exceptions were made if the student was good in studies. There were the informal leaders who tended to be the norm breakers, and often more powerful than the official leaders!

Heteronormativity also operated through the construct of the 'good school' and its reputation of the school, not dissimilar to the way that families, communities and nations have reputations to keep.

"If a scandal happens in a school, then the 'izzat' (honour) goes away. There was a senior of mine, who got pregnant and then people always talked about it...and then we talked of another school which was also 'like that'..." (Nirantar FGD)

### **c) Heteronormativity and Teacher's sexuality**

Even in the emerging discourse on young people's sexuality, there is no mention of teachers' own sexuality. In the FGDs there was the beginning of such a dialogue. We began to see how heteronormativity operates not only in constructing the good student but the good, respectable teacher. Although the dynamic between the teacher and student is not meant to be a sexual one, in our experience, some of us had felt attraction towards certain teachers. There are also assumptions that students make about teachers and judgments that they pass about teachers with respect to their gender and sexuality.

"There was a teacher, who was very strict and hit with the duster, and she was not married, and people used to say she is not married and that's why she is like this...and then (when she got married) we expected she would change, (when she still got angry) we used to think she is frustrated or had a fight with husband..."

"If there was a sari which touched us...we would feel so happy. I had a favourite teacher, who I used to always take a rose for...I used to find her pretty and she talked nicely..."

### **d) Gender and Sexuality in school as a physical space**

Having moved beyond the curriculum to exploring out of class interactions with teachers as a site for the construction of heteronormativity, we now move to sites in physical spaces in the school. Participants in both FGDs talked about playgrounds and toilets. Many talked about how there would be separate lines for boys and girls to stand in and separate rows for boys and girls to sit. This may seem fairly innocuous, but it is an important way to enforce both gendered and sexual norms. By separating boys and girls, not only is the gender binary being constantly policed, but boys and girls are also being reminded constantly of the heterosexist notion of the 'opposite sex' being the forbidden fruit to keep away from.

In the FGDs with young women, we asked the participants who was present in the school ground - boys and girls, or both. We expected them to say that there were many more boys claiming that space. However it was interesting that they said that the school playground had as many girls as

boys. It took us a while to figure out that this is because the boys could go out of school premises during lunch! Some of the girls started laughing. One of them said, "No way can girls leave the school premises. Boys can of course leave and they do go roam about at lunch time." It seemed to be not only external rules but also a self-restriction in mobility which is strongly linked to sexuality as girls are socialised to fence themselves into spaces more than boys are, in order to prevent both sexual mishaps or adventures.

From an exploration of sites of the construction of heteronormativity in schools we now move to sharing what emerged from the FGDs regarding the implications of heteronormativity for the lives of students.

#### **e) Heteronormativity hurts - Friendships/Relationship with Peers**

In the discourse on Adolescence Education/Life Skills education, peers are always seen as potential threats to heteronormativity – the ones who will encourage the breaking of sexuality and gender norms, through peer pressure. While one needs to engage with the phenomenon of peer pressure for other reasons, there is an urgent need to look at other dimensions of relationship with peers and friendships, in particular the positive dimensions. The FGDs also indicated a very important area that needs to be looked at – that of how heteronormativity has the power to disrupt friendships and cause deep emotional stress to students. During the FGD with Nirantar, almost everyone had a story to share about a strong friendship that had soured because of reasons related to sexual and gender norms. Such stories in fact dominated much of the FGD and were told with deep feelings, some of which remain unresolved till date, many years down the line, despite years of work on issues of gender and sexuality. It was also felt that if only the school was a space which countered myths and negative constructs of sexuality propagated by heteronormativity, students would not have had to suffer in the way that they did.

Jaya shared about how once on a school trip, her best friend F and B (who was butch looking) were harassed by their class mates because they thought that the two of them were having a lesbian relationship. Jaya went as part of a 'delegation' of class students to tell F's cousin what F was doing with B and whether she could do something about it. Fortunately F's cousin (two batches senior) was sensible and told the delegation that this happens in every class and there is no big deal and they should forget about it. However this incident brought Jaya and F's friendship to an end. Jaya carries her guilt about this till date.

Sadia broke her friendship with a girl after the friend started dating a man. Initially, she thought it was because she didn't want to be friends with a 'bad' girl, but it was only years later, after she joined Nirantar did she realize, that it was probably because S was jealous of the man as she had feelings for her friend.

During the discussion we also talked about why is it that the school and the family might find friendships to be threatening. One is the perceived threat of friends who are considered to be bad influence and the concomitant encouragement of friends who are considered to be good influence in the hope that they will further the agenda of creation of the good girl. However it is

also perhaps the case, some of us felt, that the school and family as institutions are threatened by friendships because they view friendships as competing for loyalty and resources which might flow in the direction of the family and the school as an institution.

#### **f) Heteronormativity Harms - Shame**

Shame was an important theme in both FGDs. The shame related to menstruation, certain parts of the body, changes in the body and sexual abuse. Clearly shame is a highly significant impediment to bodily integrity. There was nothing in school education that helped students counter shame. The implications for the lives of students that were shared were serious. These ranged from not being able to attend school during days of menstruation, the emotional stress related to growing breasts and pubic hair, the inability to tell anyone about discomfort and diseases related to parts of the body that are considered to be sexual (even if the problem was not sexual in nature) and finally the inability to report sexual harassment and abuse by teachers in school

#### **Shame related to menstruation**

When the young women were asked whether they go to school when they get their period, at first there was silence and then many of the participants began saying that they don't go to school because of the pain. Also, fear of spotting their uniform was a big reason to not go to the school. Lack of a place to dispose menstrual cloth was also an issue. Several of them also spoke about how scary it was when their period first started because they did not know about it. Some said they found out from friends.

During the Nirantar FGD we spoke about how the embarrassment of being seen to be carrying sanitary napkins still continues. Mridu said "It also depends on where we are. If you are a trainer conducting a literacy training then how can you take it out? I find it odd." This touched upon an important point about how we feel the need to be de-sexualized (in a context in which the sanitary napkin is constructed as being sexual) when we are in a role that is seen as being powerful and respectable.

#### **Shame related to the body**

We asked the young women to write anonymously on cards which changes that might take place during adolescence they were ashamed of and which they were proud of. The most frequently mentioned dimension that was a source of pride was about growing taller, the most frequently mentioned dimension related to shame was about pubic hair. Many more said that they were proud of feelings of attraction than those who said they felt shame related to this.

T, a member of Nirantar, who is transgender said, "I was one of the last people to develop breasts, and my friends would stare at my chest and measure it, and this was very shameful for me. I used to take the bandage and wear it, but there was a lot of pain."

In the FGD with young women, they were asked to make a list of diseases/illnesses/aches that they can tell their family about and a list of those which they would hesitate to or not be able to

talk to their family about. The ones that they said that they could talk about included headache, jaundice, acidity etc. A few girls also wrote TB and pregnancy. In terms of what they can't talk about, the most common answers included periods, pregnancy, itching (although they did not specify it can be safely assumed that they meant vaginal itching), white discharge, vaginal burning (referred to as *peshabki jagah par jalna* - burning in the place where urine comes out from), boils on the breast and under arm, any 'internal' problem, stomach ache and chest pain.

### **Shame related to abuse**

In the FGD with young women, when asked if they should be able to tell another teacher, if one of their teachers is being abusive, most girls were silent. Some girls said they don't have the space to talk to their teachers about such incidents.

In one of the role plays done by the young women, when the teacher is distributing the midday meal (a provision to address enrolment/retention and nutritional needs as part of which students are given free cooked meals in schools), he speaks rudely to the students, ordering them around. During the discussion the girls added that the "upper caste" students were always seated in front and served first, while the Dalit and backward castes were seated in the back and served last. They also said that although this wasn't shown in the role play, this teacher was also abusive to female students. He would wink at them and harass them. When we asked the girl whose school this was meant to be in the play, she seemed reluctant and we did not push it. It was clear that caste related violations were easier to talk about than sexual violations in school.

A somewhat related discussion as part of the Nirantar FGD related to violence in schools. A participant spoke about how she felt that violence in schools is not only physical in nature. To her the character assassination she experienced, also felt like violence. Taking forward the conversation about violence in schools, we discussed whether all corporal punishment was violence. One point of view offered was that not all corporal punishment was violence, but more a means to enforce a certain culture of manliness and discipline. Corporal punishment is more likely to be experienced as violence when the teacher hits you or is mean to you because he or she does not like you.

From discussing the findings of the FGDs as they related to sites of heteronormativity and the implications for the lives of students we would now like to highlight two dimensions related to approach as related to quality.

#### **4.2.2 The need for intersectionality as an approach – Sexuality and caste**

The RMSA speaks of marginalized identities of gender, caste, religion, dis/ability in separate and distinct ways. There is no recognition in the programme document of the intersectionality between these different axes of marginalization. The FGD with the young women in particular, pointed to the need to recognize and address intersectionality. This is critical if the programme is to address equality and social justice in pursuit of its objective of providing quality education to all.

In the discussions with the young women about what their idea of a 'good woman' or a 'good girl', they themselves brought up caste, early in the discussion.

One participant said, "A girl is called bad by upper castes if she is lower caste. Poor people are called bad people. No matter how good someone from a lower caste is, they will be still be called bad by upper castes...If an upper caste girl runs away with an upper caste boy, she won't be called bad." Another said, "If '*uunch-nee*ch'(explained in details in Section IV on Pg.16) happens with upper caste girls, the upper caste communities try to sweep it under the carpet. But if a Dalit girl happens to do something bad, that is talked about all the time and into big news. On the other hand, the Dalit community itself says that our girls have loose morals. We call our own girls bad."

The passionate, insightful and political responses of the girls made clear that it is not possible to talk about the categories of 'good' and 'bad' women and girls without bringing the context where those from 'lower' castes are in case perceived as being 'bad'. They also raised the issue of public and private realms, and how these relate to caste and sexuality. The implications of breaking sexual norms, according to them, were different and more severe, for them as girls belonging to 'lower' castes. While the girls from the Dalit community spoke of how they have to deal with all manner of comments on their character; it points to the way in which Dalit women's sexuality is constructed. As women who labour and as a result are mobile in contrast with 'upper caste' women – they are also stereotyped as being sexually 'loose', 'immoral' and 'available'.

The young women also spoke about inter-caste relationships. According to one young woman, "If something like this happens, the blame still falls on the girl. But if the boy is from an upper caste, then nothing can be said to him. No one ever blames the boy." Clearly if the couple consists of an upper-caste boy and a lower-caste girl, there is less danger to caste identity and lineage, as the name of the upper-caste family will still pass on through the boy. On the other hand, if the couple consists of a lower-caste boy and an upper caste girl, the girl will have to take the boy's name and the boy's caste, which means the child born, will also be of a lower caste. This is seen as a lowering of caste status, which is also associated with a loss of power and control over material resources. It also is an affront to upper caste male sexuality because it shows a failure to keep control over their women.

#### **4.2.3 The need for a non victim approach**

The RMSA document describes adolescence as a time of crises. We feel it is important to recognize this also as a phase of life which has positive dimensions. There is also a need in the audit processes to ensure that we don't go into victim mode. For example, in the Nirantar FGD, school as a space that can also be liberating is a dimension that Akshay as the facilitator had to evoke, to avoid us going into victim mode. We also spoke about how it can be empowering to challenge norms.

"For me to leave home and go to school was the best, when I came to hostel it was the best thing otherwise I would have died. There was pressure but we also broke rules....We play out gender and sexual norms and also challenge them...there is a backlash...but I am

a victor and a challenger at the same time...I thought of strategies, in my daily life...”  
Purnima spoke about how she felt safer in school than she did at home.

Some of the Nirantar members recalled their transgender friends who were female bodied but masculine (who would not then perhaps have thought of themselves or even known of this as an identity) and very popular, not only with other girls but also sometimes with teachers.

T, who is transgender, said, “At home....I was very conflicted...in school there was a lot of space, my senior whose name was P negotiated... and he (also female bodied) was two years older to me and would wear pants...when he was in 3<sup>rd</sup> standard and I was in 1<sup>st</sup> standard, we were friends... People thought the two of us as boys and thought that I was a younger version of ‘P’.

## **Conclusion**

In the RMSA document, making infrastructural changes, conducting teacher’s trainings, reforming curriculum and providing counselling support for students are listed as strategies to improve quality of education. However, if quality is to be understood within the context of social justice and equity, each of these objectives needs to be re-examined with a gender and sexuality lens. Further, there is a need to look at other sites – friendships, out of class interactions with teachers (the larger relationship between teacher and student beyond formal teaching learning) where gender and sexuality are constructed. In the current discourse, holistic education has become something of a buzzword. A holistic approach to education should then also include looking at all dimensions of school life, not only text books and class room interactions, but the entire range of relations between student teachers, teachers and other teachers and between students. There is also a need to look at all the spaces, not just the class room, including the playground, toilets, assemblies etc.

The construct of the ‘good student’ needs to be examined. If the good student continues to be one who obeys existing rules norms, how can she or he be expected to be part of the move towards equality and social justice, given that most existing norms seek to uphold inequality and injustice whether in terms of gender, caste or sexuality?

The programme needs to recognize and address the ways in which heteronormativity can harm. The findings of the FGD indicate how shame is a major barrier to bodily integrity, including being able to seek help in the case of illness and sexual abuse.

The reality that sexual abuse happens in schools and the difficulties girl faced in being able to speak about it, point to the need for the school system to create an environment where it becomes more possible for students to talk about issues of sexual harassment and abuse. This would mean addressing issues of bodily integrity and helping students understand and counter feelings of shame and fear. A space where students feel safe to express their fears and experiences is quintessential to building an environment conducive to learning.

An approach of intersectionality which recognizes and addresses the linkages between different forms of marginalization also must be adopted by the programme. A victim approach should also be re looked and a positive approach to adolescence adopted.

In conclusion, a good quality education must ensure the girls don't feel shame about their bodies. It must promote bodily integrity and safety. This requires countering shame related to the body, which is fundamentally a sexuality issue. A good quality education must recognize and engage with all the sites in which sexuality and gender is constructed, including and beyond curriculum and class room. A holistic approach to quality education means that there is a need to consider the entire experience of going to school. A good quality education needs to recognize that heteronormativity hurts, including causing extremely painful ruptures in relationships with peers. A good quality education also means that teachers must also be recognized as individuals who need to understand issues of sexuality, for themselves too. A good quality education must have a positive and intersectionality approach.

### **4.3 EQUITY in RMSA**

Equity is the third major objective of the RMSA programme. It includes several provisions that aimed at ensuring that marginalized groups and girls have access to education. These provisions include

1. Free lodging/ boarding facilities for students belonging to SC, ST, OBC and Minority communities
2. Hostels/ residential schools, cash incentive, uniform, books, separate toilets for girls.
3. Providing scholarships to meritorious/ needy students at secondary level.
4. Inclusive education will be the hallmark of all the activities. Efforts will be made to provide all necessary facilities for the differently abled children in all the schools.
5. Expansion of Open and Distance Learning needs to be undertaken, especially for those who cannot pursue full time secondary education, and for supplementation / enrichment of face-to-face instruction. This system will also play a crucial role for education of out of school children.

Other than the inclusion of marginalized groups, the RMSA document repeatedly states that gender is a strong focus and that it will be mainstreamed into every aspect of the programme. However, as shared earlier, the programme equates gender with girls. This means that gender transgression and the violations associated with it are completely made invisible by the programme.

At Nirantar we understand gender as a continuum. At either extreme are the ideal girl/woman and ideal boy/man who are meant to subscribe perfectly to all gender norms, which perhaps none of us can do. During the FGD with members of Nirantar many of us shared experiences of how we transgressed gender norms in school and got into trouble because of it. This include hair

being ‘too short’, or in the case of Akshay, the facilitator, who is male assigned at birth, ‘too long’. Mridu, who does not identify as transgender, but used to be perceived as masculine in school, shared her experience which was shown in a role play, about how on her birthday, her class mates gifted her with a shaving kit, and how taken aback she was by this.

Returning to the idea of the continuum, as we move along it, there are people who do not identify at all with the sex assigned to them at birth, i.e. transgender people. RMSA completely invisibilizes transgender as an identity, despite equity being an important objective of the programme.

As part of the audit, we draw upon interviews with three transgender persons, one biologically female and the other two biologically male. The transgender people interviewed spoke about a range of violations faced by them. These include bullying from peers and classmates for not conforming to gender norms, pressure from teachers to dress, talk and act a certain way and being punished for wearing the uniform of their choice (that usually doesn’t ‘match’ the sex assigned to them at birth). Sakshi, a gender queer female assigned at birth who works as an interior designer and lives in Delhi said "In school we had to wear skirts, but I liked wearing jeans or trousers. I used to feel ashamed to wear *salwar kameez* (traditional Indian female clothing in parts of North India) in front of people even at home, if I was ever made to wear them forcefully. In Meerut where we used to live, I only wore pants, but when we moved to Dalhousie in school I had to wear skirts. Even small kids there wore skirts. I cried a lot and told my mother. My mother felt that it was her fault and that she had encouraged such behaviour to wear these (‘boys’) clothes. My father wrote an application (asking for permission for wearing pants) because I had stopped going to school... When I wore pants and reached school I felt people were staring at me. A girl came and asked me if I am a girl or a boy and I didn’t know how to respond to such a question. They would all tease me, and take my lunch... and I ran after them..."

In textbooks transgender youth never see themselves being represented. A male to female trans person who was interviewed said, “We read about kings, there were stories of girls and boys... We never saw anyone like us, even in science and biology there was nothing...there is no place for us, like girls and boys have... there was no one like us around.” Maria, a male to female trans person expressed her desire thus... "In biology class, in addition to ‘man’ and ‘woman’ there should be ‘transsexual’ and ‘transgender’ as well. This should be the case in other textbooks too..."

The interviews made clear that use of toilets is not an issue only for girls. Sakshi said, “I had short hair and behaved like a boy, so when I used to go to toilet, the senior girls or teachers would say that I should go to boys toilet, as I will not feel comfortable in the girl’s toilet and in the boys toilet they would say that I should just stand outside and do it. I used to feel angry with myself... not with others.”

The experience of transgender students shows that with respect to this dimension, teachers are no better than students in terms of the gender discrimination they face. In a context in which

teachers ought to be countering the gender discrimination being meted out by peers and creating a supportive environment for trans students, teachers themselves become part of the discriminatory system. This is not to blame teachers, since they have not had the opportunity to unlearn their own biases. Gender is at best addressed superficially in teachers' training courses, and transgender issues are not part of the curriculum. Maria's hope for the future is that "Teachers' and students' attitude should become LGBT friendly... gay friendly, lesbian friendly, transgender friendly and bisexual friendly."

Along with the memories of all the problems faced, happy times were also remembered. Sakshi who is gender queer, female assigned at birth shared the following incident. "There was a 26<sup>th</sup> January (Independence day) celebration in school, and a *bhangra* dance was organized and one guy was less in the group. My teacher asked me if I could join as a guy. I was so happy. She became my favourite teacher after that. She took pictures and told me I looked cute, and made me wear a *sehera* (decorative tassels that are meant to cover the bride grooms face). My mother was also very happy! During the dance, I felt happy with the girls coming close to me...I realised that I am interested in girls."

Bodily changes during adolescence can be stressful for many young people. These changes can be particularly difficult for adolescence who don't identify with their sex assigned at birth. Sakshi spoke about her experiences.

"It was torture. My parents didn't tell me and I was disgusted. When I found out for the first time that something like this happens, I felt very bad. There was a lot of shame around it. I didn't know whether I should wear tight clothes or not, and would wear clothes which could hide my identity. I used to walk with my chest out like guys, even though it was uncomfortable...I still don't like it...why does it happen only to girls...I like to call myself a guy, and I could never ask this question about period to any other girl, because there was shame. I felt like it was a dual life. Those 5 days I have to stay in control, and they are really bad days mentally and physically... can't wear certain clothes, the other days I would walk like boys and sit with my legs apart." The experiences of trans young people as they relate to bodily changes and menstruation, night fall etc. will need to be addressed by any Life Skills Education curricula that claims to be inclusive.

For trans people the emotional stress of the hostility experienced by them because of their gender, can also affect their performance in school, which has implications for them in later life too. Maria, a male to female trans person said, "I hated the school... it was the best school for boys in the country. I only got a 55% in my 12<sup>th</sup> exam, with that I could not get admission anywhere." Maria is currently unemployed despite knowing several foreign languages fluently. She feels that she is in this situation because of the discrimination against her as a transgender person. Given RMSA's concern with livelihoods, this is an aspect of transgender people's lived realities that it must engage with when it hopes that education will lead to job opportunities.

As a result of a sense of alienation, ridicule and harassment, many transgender youth are pushed out of the education system. Bunny, biologically male, transgender person who works with an NGO that works with MSM and Male to Female Transgender People in Delhi shared his

experience. "My teacher used to complain about my hair, asked to cut my hair, he would say that I should be kept separately, I always sat with girls ...People in my neighbourhood also started saying that I am different....They complained to my mother. I could not adjust to all this. My teacher used to torture me. He asked me to change myself... and I stopped going to school altogether. Some said I was ill and needed to see a doctor....One has to feel for studies, and have dreams. My heart was broken. I no longer felt for studies. I thought if I have problems with my teachers and peers now, the same thing will happen later. New friends will also torture me. They will make fun of me and so I could not complete class 10. Then my mother said that we could try in a private institution. But when I joined it (it was night school and a boys' school) everyone started laughing, and then I just didn't feel like studying...."

If RMSA is to achieve its objective of equity, it is critical that it moves beyond equating gender with 'girls' and addresses gender transgression and the severe violations faced by transgender young people.

## **SECTION V**

### **OVERALL CONCLUSION**

In this concluding section of the report we share the key findings of the audit and recommendations as they relate to the RMSA programme. We also share here the key learnings and recommendations related to the methodology.

#### **5.1 Key findings of the audit**

1. RMSA cannot achieve its stated objectives of universal access, quality defined as equality and social justice and equity, if it does not address attitudinal changes. The programme will need to move from its present focus on infrastructure and management concerns. It will have to use community mobilization, capacity building of school committee members from the community, capacity building of teachers and principals, curricula, pedagogy as well as other sites, in ways that will build an understanding of sexuality, gender, caste, adolescence, discrimination, agency and of the transformatory potential of education itself. For example, as indicated below, if RMSA does not recognize the attitudinal factors related to sexuality, provisions such as cycles will never help. Also with a stated commitment to focusing on girls and young people from marginalized communities, how can gender, sexuality, caste, religion, dis/ability etc. not form part of the capacity building of teachers and principals. If appropriate processes of unlearning and learning are not ensured, measures such as counseling of students can be dangerous. Counselors, without the required understanding of sexuality, gender, etc. might seek to mould young people as per the existing construct of the 'good student' in ways that are highly status quoist rather than promotive of social justice, equality and equity.

2. Significant barriers to girls' access to higher school education are related to sexuality. A primary reason is the fear that the young woman will act upon her desire on her way to school, either willingly or that she will be raped or sexually assaulted. The desire to get the girl married early is also closely linked to sexuality since one of the main fears is once again that of pre marital sex. Proposed measures such as providing cycles will not work as long as these attitudes are not recognized and addressed. The existing provisions will not be able to achieve the objective of enhancing girls' access to education. A major challenge however is in what manner this finding will be shared with the State and the community. We can't directly articulate it, or raise it as a point of challenge to parents, the community, teachers or even policy makers. If we did there would be the danger of even greater restrictions of mobility and access to schooling, or of even greater protectionism
3. Key to achieving the objective of quality in education with respect to equality and social justice is recognizing and addressing heteronormativity, a system which seeks to perpetuate existing, unjust power relations in society. This engagement with heteronormativity entails identifying sites of construction of heteronormativity and the implications for the lives of students.
4. The sites in which heteronormativity is constructed in schools includes not only the curriculum and pedagogy but also out of class interactions with teachers and physical sites such as playgrounds. A holistic approach to education must encompass the experience of the school as whole. In analyzing and addressing sexuality and gender norms these sites must also be considered. Constructs such as 'the good student' which are strongly but not so visibly related to sexuality are also important ways in which heteronormativity is sustained, not through external policing but through trying to ensure that there is an internalization of sexual and gender norms.
5. Heteronormativity hurts because it has the potential to disrupt relations between peers and friendships.
6. Heteronormativity harms because it inculcates shame related to the body both with respect to teachers and students. Teachers are unable to give information related to sex, sexuality or even menstruation. For students shame also means emotional stress related to bodily changes experienced during adolescence, inhibitions in reporting many health related issues and sexual abuse. Unless heteronormativity is addressed, students' right to well-being and bodily integrity can't be ensured.
7. The objective of equity cannot be met unless the experiences of students who are transgender are recognized and addressed. One of the dangers of equating gender with girls is that transgender young people are invisibilized, even though the violations they face are based on gender. The violations experienced by transgender students need to be included in the scope of gender based discrimination in schools.
8. Young people's school experiences are replete with discrimination, be it on the basis of gender, sexuality, caste etc. RMSA needs to identify areas of discrimination related to access

as well as experiences within the school system and to address those if it is to meet its objectives.

9. The nature of ground level realities are such that the RMSA will need to adopt an approach of intersectionality and recognize the ways in which axes of marginalization such as gender, sexuality and caste are intertwined.
10. The audit shows that despite the strength of the norms, young people are often aware of their needs and desire and do also challenge them, and that the school can provide them the space to be themselves in a way that sometimes the home cannot. This necessitates a positive and not a victim and ‘crises’ ridden view of young people and their lives.
11. Other than the findings as they relate to RMSA, the audit was extremely important that it has enabled for the first time evidence related to sexuality as a barrier to girls’ education and it contributed to the very recent but highly significant efforts at raising the issue of transgender young people within the discourse of education.

## **5.2 Reflections related to Methodology**

Here we would like to share the learning from the method used in the audit – the strengths as well as the challenges we faced.

Evoking responses related to sexuality at the community level as well as with the young women was highly challenging. We used strategies, both planned and spontaneous which we would like to share here. We would like to share other strategies that we now, upon reflection, feel should also have been used. We begin with the survey with parents and then move to the FGD with young women.

With the parents what worked was and what could have been done differently is as follows:

- Probes that built on what they were being able to articulate. For example, when some of them said that they could not send their daughter to school because they were now ‘*sayani*’, mature, we challenged them and asked if the girls are mature now, that would be more reason and not less, to ‘allow’ them to travel to school on their own. This created the space for them to speak about their sexuality related fears.
- Generalized questions which allowed them to speak in broader ways and not in relation to their own daughters’ sexuality.
- We should have interviewed the daughters separately since they had important counter facts and arguments to make, to what their parents shared during the interviews. We should also have spoken in greater depth about the factors underlying boys continuing or discontinuing education.

With respect to the young women with whom an FGD was conducted, the learnings were as follows

- The efforts to create a more relaxed atmosphere to be able to talk about issues of sexuality before the FGD by showing films were useful.
- Individual interviews might have been better in a context in which the participants did not have reason to trust the facilitators.
- In both the survey and the FGD, we drew upon our skills related to communicating and evoking responses on sexuality, gender, caste etc. as trainers and practitioners. For researchers undertaking heteronormativity audits, capacity building related to understanding concepts of sexuality, gender etc. , the local context (in particular sexuality and gender norms that will impact the research) as well as skills of evoking responses on issues of sexuality in particular are critical.
- The FGD with members of Nirantar about their experiences of school is one that we would highly recommend for other heteronormativity audits. This tool provides a space for researchers to feel a sense of connection with the issue they are investigating. With issues like gender which have been sought to be mainstreamed in ways that can often mean a sense of disconnect on the part of the researcher, of the issues being slotted in the mind as those affecting those being studied, and not ourselves. This can lead to mechanical ways of engaging with the issue that are also unlikely to yield indepth insights through the research. This is particularly important to counter entering into a judgmental, moralistic, or victim narrative since when one recalls one’s own experience, the importance of desires, the joys and travails of challenging and subscribing to sexual and gender norms are foregrounded in way that makes us better listeners to others experiences as researchers. The style of facilitation in such a tool needs to be ‘light’ in order to evoke in depth personal sharing. One needs to be cognizant also of the danger of assuming that other’s experiences are like ours. For example, we could not directly transpose the themes of the Nirantar FGD into the FGD with young women, although both FGDs were about one’s experiences in schools, or force generalizations between both sets of discussions.
- In a context in which realities related to those stigmatized on the basis of their sexuality and gender need to be captured as a part of the audit, individual interviews worked well, as was the case with transgender people.
- A more general and significant reflection was shared at the beginning of the report. Several gaps were identified on a reading of the RMSA document, based on the knowledge of Nirantar, the organization undertaking the research. Since these were dimensions related to sexuality and gender transgression, there was little in terms of existing research that could be drawn upon. The audit then proceeded to study ground level realities as they related to these gaps. This was a process of an informed hypothesis that was then being studied. This methodological issue is likely to arise in other

heteronormativity audits, where too, the process might be different from an open ended inquiry. The fact that sexuality was a barrier to girls' access to education was not 'discovered' through this audit, but it was a possible factor identified as practitioners in the field of education which was then studied through research.

- The methodology used also demonstrated that it is possible to undertake a heteronormativity audit of a development policy or programme which does not even mention the word sexuality. There are assumptions made about sexuality that are inherent, which need to be decoded. Also the silences and gaps need to be, and can be highlighted by evidence related to ground level realities.

