

The Challenges and Triumphs of Educating Girls in Rural Maharashtra

By Chetna Gala Sinha, president of Mann Deshi Mahila Bank and Mann Vikas Samajik Sanstha and Michelle Rosenthal, senior at Yale University in the US

Savitra's Story

The salary 16-year-old Savitra Mane receives for a week of backbreaking field labor is less than the cost of the 10th standard examination fee. As a member of the Kaykadi nomadic caste, she is the first in her family to reach even this far in her education, yet she faces no choice now but to drop out of school in order to support her aging and ill family. Born to uneducated and illiterate parents, Savitra was always a bright and eager student, whose parents nurtured her desire to learn and insisted that she never miss school for fieldwork. Also a dedicated daughter, Savitra soon took it upon herself to assume more and more of the housework, in order to relieve her mother's burden as a basket-weaver and homemaker.

Her father became ill when Savitra was in the 10th standard, and she found it increasingly difficult to remain awake long enough to study, after rising early and working late in her home. As a result, she failed her 10th standard state examinations this March and has become a full-time field laborer, in addition to taking on all of the housework. She still nurtures hope of returning to school, but fears that even if she is able to carve out precious study time from her packed schedule, she will not be able to afford the 150 Rs monthly fee for vocational school training.

Remarkably, her parents have offered to make do without her meager, but necessary, field salary so that Savitra could return to school, but she would be determined to balance her studies with field and housework so that she could continue supporting her family. For Savitra, education has enabled her to gain more confidence, and while she insists she is not proud of herself, she is clearly a source of pride for her parents.

Savitra is not alone in her dilemma. Thousands of rural girls across the country are forced to drop out of school due to financial constraints and educational fees. While Savitra's specific circumstances may be unique, her desire to be educated and the simultaneous self-imposed guilt she feels for the additional sacrifices her family must make on her behalf are shared by thousands of other rural girls. Contrary to the opinion of many, school drop out does not result from a lack of desire on the part of the girls or a lack of support from their families. Rather, girls drop out of school due to a lack of resources, and the financial constraints, in actual and opportunity costs, of education.

Girls' Education Competition

This difficulty is common knowledge to rural families, but that does not mean it need remain an immutable fact. The Mann Vikas Samajik Sanstha NGO, in coordination with the Mann Deshi Mahila Sahakari Bank, has proposed and successfully executed an innovative model to combat this issue. The main objective of the Bank and its partner

Sanstha is to empower poor rural women, and they have coordinated many programs designed to improve the lives of women by promoting education and economic independence. The Savitribai Phule Gram Puraskar, or “Education for All Girls: Rural Girls Education Campaign” is one such program, intended to encourage 100% school attendance for girls in rural Maharashtra by offering villages a large cash reward, courtesy of the Bank of India, if they achieve the goal.

The idea for the competition came from the women of the Bank’s Self Help Group Federation, during the Bank and Sanstha’s 2002 annual meeting. These women articulated the need to make education for rural children, particularly girls, a priority, and so the competition was designed with the involvement of Self Help Groups, gram panchayat members, teachers, and village citizens in the block.

Ten villages immediately expressed interest in supporting girls’ education through the competition, and two villages committed to achieving 100% enrollment this year. Over the next few years, the Sanstha will steadily expand the scale of the competition until all of Mann Taluka is included. Part of the inspiration for this type of competition is the government’s Sant Gadge Maharaj Swachata Abhiyan Cleanliness Competition, which has so effectively cleaned up rural villages by providing the incentive and the infrastructure to achieve cleaner and healthier communities. The government has expressed strong interest in implementing the Girls’ Education Competition on the state level, because it has already had the remarkable effect of uniting citizens to cooperate and take responsibility for supporting girls’ education in their villages, as well as strengthening village pride, unity, and excitement.

Case Study: Waghmodewadi’s Commitment

The village of Waghmodewadi, in rural Maharashtra, is a case in point. This village, comprised of 175 families and 1,500 people, has been an exemplary model for girls’ education, and will receive the 50,000 Rs reward for winning this year’s competition. Virtually 100% of all girls in the village attend school, and their parents have shown strong support for their daughters. In a comprehensive survey of the village, we found that with very few exceptions, girls do not miss school to do fieldwork or attend to their family’s animals. While most girls assist with cooking, cleaning, and fetching water (a time consuming and arduous task in a village with a single water tank that is often empty as a result of ongoing drought) they still make time to study. Younger children are fortunate enough to have an easily accessible primary school within the village, but virtually all children continue past the 4th standard and must travel to school. Thus, each day begins with a ritual of morning chores for the older girls, before they embark on the long and dusty walk into the neighboring village of Gondavle for school. Children are forced to carry their own food and water to school, as the school’s supply of water is undrinkable.

Although none are rich, families make significant sacrifices to keep their girls in school. For virtually everyone, paying for education is a constant difficulty, and parents frequently share fields and finances with their siblings to help support the extended family’s collective children. Those who can buy bikes to ease the commute to school are

a privileged few, and most feel fortunate when they can afford the notebooks and uniforms their children need. Although the government has just started supplying books, it still costs an average of 2000 Rs per child each year, a staggering sum for families who live hand to mouth on the fruits of their drought ridden fields. Given these circumstances, the commitment to education of the village of Waghmodewadi and those like it is truly remarkable. Families say they believe education will help their daughters “stand on her own two feet” and “have a bright future” and for these reasons they have made innumerable sacrifices.

An Insufficient Educational System

Sadly, many of these sacrifices are in vain. Girls are rarely able to continue their education beyond the 10th standard, if they are even able to reach that far. In the rare cases when a girl is able to continue through the 12th standard, her occupational prospects are barely enhanced by the additional years of schooling, so she will most likely be consigned to a life of marriage and housework. The lack of opportunity results in part because of the low quality of education provided by government schools, and in part because most rural girls will not be able to afford to continue their education through the university level. Thus, while a junior college degree has the positive affect of postponing marriage, it rarely provides the professional training necessary to earn an income outside of the fields.

Those girls who are fortunate enough to receive vocational training are far more likely to attain self-sufficiency than those who only complete the 12th standard but ironically, vocational training is primarily made available only to those girls and women who dropped out of school before the 10th standard. Wider access to vocational training for women is an important intermediate step on the road to improving girls’ education. Vocational skills, such as tailoring or salon skills, allow women to become financially independent. Research has shown that these women are more likely to support their own daughters’ education in the future because as income increases, opportunity and commitment to education do as well.

Essential Ingredients for Successful Schools

Despite the dim prospects that often face girls after their schooling, the quality of the education they do receive and the support given to them by their schools can have a profound effect on a girl’s future. The Navachaitanya High School and Junior College in Gondavle BK has made great strides in working with parents and students to improve the quality of their education, and the girls of Waghmodewadi and neighboring villages have benefited as a result, but there is only so much a single school can do without sufficient resources from the government.

Drawing primarily from four villages in the Satara district of rural Maharashtra, the female enrollment of the Gondavle High School almost equals the male enrollment. The percentage of girls who pass the 12th standard examinations exceeds that of boys, although fewer girls reach this level. For example, there are only 26 girls compared to the 47 boys enrolled in the 12th standard, but 76% of those girls passed the state examinations, compared to 69% of the whole class that passed. Interestingly, this year

there are 56 girls in the 10th standard and only 35 boys, a prominent contrast from last year, when there were 49 male and 49 female students enrolled. Whether this is indicative of an increased commitment to girls' education in the region or is merely a statistical anomaly remains up for debate, but evidence suggests that families are truly beginning to understand the importance of educating all their children.

The Gondavle school in particular boasts a strong working relationship with parents, and a dedicated administration that works hard to implement their suggestions. For example, at their most recent teacher-parent assembly, parents suggested increased teacher accountability and homework regularity, while teachers recommended parents take a more active role in ensuring that their children complete assignments thoroughly and on time. Both sides agreed to begin implementing the others' suggestions, making the school a true model for the type of cooperation that is necessary for students and schools to succeed.

According to Gondavle's teachers, there are two primary difficulties they face when trying to educate rural children. The first is parental illiteracy. Despite supporting their children's education, rural parents who have not been educated themselves cannot adequately assist their children with homework or ensure that they spend sufficient time studying. Because the education of parents directly impacts the ability of their children to succeed in school, it is an urgent necessity that this generation of Indian youth is properly educated. The second pressing issue is the need to make education more employment oriented. Students and their families are loath to sacrifice for the sake of an education that cannot supply them with a job and additional income in the future. These issues must be addressed on a broad scale if education in India is to improve.

The Government's Obligation

Thus, the burden no longer rests with the rural families of India, or even with individual village schools. They have shown a commitment to educating their girls and have sacrificed immensely on their behalf. It is now time for the educational system to reform its half of the deal. Girls deserve an education that will benefit them in the future, and a government that is committed to supporting their future with viable and honest policies and officials.

The current government scheme to encourage education is called "Education for All" and it has been all but useless. The crux of the program revolves around village education committees, comprised of gram panchayat members, the school principal, and parents. Ideally, these are the people best equipped to evaluate their local schools and teachers, and make recommendations for their improvement. In reality however, these committees have little power to make changes in their village schools, and even less opportunity to sway policy.

For example, these committees are responsible for evaluating teachers, and requesting transfers for those teachers who are continually absent, abusive, illiterate, or simply lazy. These requests are not made lightly and the situation is often quite serious before an impassioned plea is issued to the government. However, transfers are almost never

issued, despite glaring abuse and incompetence. This is because teachers receive virtually the largest salary in any village community, and are thus able to bribe politicians to cancel their transfer. This not only secures their jobs against the will of the local community, but also allows them to remain in their home villages and exert more energy on their fields than on their students.

Accommodating Local Conditions

Work in the fields plays a central role in the lives of teachers, parents, and students in this area, and educational reform cannot be effective unless it takes this reality into account. Maharashtra is a primarily rural state, and children often help their families in the fields from an early age. For the last three years, the state has suffered from severe droughts, stymieing an already stagnant agricultural economy. This scenario negatively affects both education and literacy rates, making rural Maharashtra's literacy rate of 58% fairly impressive, when compared to the 54% national average. In the district of Satara, home to the village of Waghmodewadi, total literacy rates are at 66.67%. For rural males the level is at 79.27%, staggeringly high compared to the 50.75% rate for rural females. Literacy has a clear correlation with education, and the drop out rate among girls remains high, averaging 54.59% to boys' 44.87%. Despite increasing familial support for girls' education, the fact remains that more help in the house and fields is demanded of girls, who also face greater challenges finding time and resources to attend schools outside of their villages.

The presence of a nearby school substantially increases the likelihood that girls will continue with their education. While most villages boast a primary school with high enrollment, dropout increases dramatically as girls in rural areas are forced to travel long distances, often by foot, to attend their secondary schools. If the school cannot be reached by foot (or by bicycle in the rare instances where families can afford to buy them for their girls), there is little likelihood that families will allow their daughters travel alone to school, leaving girls with no choice but to drop out altogether.

Bikes for Boys, Guilt for Girls?

Although families in Waghmodewadi provide educational resources to their male and female children with more equity than in many villages, the fact remains that boys' education is considered an undisputed right, while for girls it is a hard earned privilege. In addition to the fact that girls are expected to help with house and fieldwork far more than their brothers, they also frequently feel guilty for imposing on their families for the sake of their education. As a result, they either drop out earlier or study harder and appreciate their education more than their brothers. In contrast, most boys take their education for granted, and unlike girls, they don't consider familial burden a reason to drop out, but rather cite academic failure or boredom as the reason for not attending school. In addition, boys who attend school through the 12th standard are unwilling to return to the fields, yet possess no greater vocational skills than their female counterparts, who are more likely to swallow their pride and bow to the necessity of earning an agricultural income despite their school degree.

Practical Educational Reforms

Rural families must make immense sacrifices in order to educate both their sons and their daughters, and it is unfair to reward their efforts with futile government programs that provide low quality teachers, minimal resources, and few vocational skills. What families and villages need in support of their efforts are the assets necessary to provide a viable education for their girls, and the government has the power to rethink its policies, priorities, and resource allocation in that pursuit.

- Rather than issuing bus passes to girls in villages whose roads have never touched the wheels of a bus, the government should implement the Mann Vikas Samajik Sanstha's Saraswati Yojana Freedom Ride Bicycle program on a wide scale. This program lends families the money to buy bicycles interest free, and it has allowed scores of young girls to attend schools who otherwise would have been stymied by the distance.
- The government should provide uniforms to families, rather than wasting money preparing inedible rice for primary school students.
- The government should also make sure that the educational facilities are equipped to actually educate students. Schools should have sanitary water for their students. They should also own computers and provide classes that teach students how to use them with proficiency.
- Schools should also offer professional and vocational training for students, especially those girls who will otherwise drop out to work in the fields.
- Teachers should be held accountable to parents and students, and censured or removed if they prove inadequate.

These are not the ideas of an outsider, critiquing a system only briefly examined. These are the words of the parents and girls themselves, eager to avail themselves of an education they can use. The passion for education exists in abundance in rural India – it is now a matter of harnessing that energy with an effective system, designed to maximize the benefit of educating girls.

Hope for the Future

A system of this sort would benefit an eager and enthusiastic young girl like Savitra immensely. Savitra is from Waghmodewadi, and despite all the obstacles in her path, when she and her family heard about the Girls' Education Competition, it served as the final catalyst necessary to encourage her to go back to school. With a loan from the Mann Deshi Mahila Sahakari Bank, she has now enrolled in a vocational school in Gondavle and will earn her tailoring degree in a few months. Eager to support their daughter's education, but also intent on helping their village improve its school by winning the award, her family serves as an example of how this program can truly have an impact on individual girls, village pride, and the rural educational system. As Savitra has demonstrated, educating girls in rural India is not a hopeless task – rather, it requires the dedication of families, teachers, and villages, and a commitment from the government to follow the lead of its citizens.

Photograph Captions:

1. Girls in rural Maharashtra are enthusiastic students, who manage to balance studying, housework, and fieldwork.

2/3/4. The Kanya Vidyalaya Mohi school for girls offers a unique and innovative athletic training program that has successfully sent girls to district, state, and national competitions.

5/6. The Mann Vikas Samajik Sanstha's Saraswati Yojana Freedom Ride Bicycle program lends families the money to buy bicycles interest free, and it has allowed scores of young girls to attend schools who otherwise would have been stymied by the distance.

7. Girls' enrollment in school in rural Maharashtra is steadily rising, but the support of schools, parents, and the government is necessary to support and sustain this trend.

8. Literacy is a necessary skill for girls to succeed in school and gain access to a brighter future.

9. From a young age, girls are expected to help their mothers look after animals, work in the fields, and help in the homes. This puts an additional burden on girls that many boys do not face when trying to find the time and energy to study for school.

10/11. Sixteen-year-old Savitra Mane was forced to drop out of the 10th standard this year to support her family through field labor, yet she continued to nurture hope of completing her education. With help from the Mann Deshi Mahila Bank, she has recently enrolled in a vocational training school for tailoring.

12. The Waghmodewadi primary school receives strong support from the village community and has made a genuine commitment to educating rural girls.

Special Interest Box:

Innovative Education: Using Girls' Athletics to Inspire Education

A girl wearing shorts in a rural Maharashtra village is about as rare as rainfall in this drought-ridden area. Yet that is precisely what you would see if you were to visit the Kanya Vidyalaya Mohi School at 7am any day of the week. For three hours before school, and for another hour afterwards, about 50 talented and highly dedicated girls practice running, jumping, and throwing in preparation for district, state, and national competitions. Last year, in a landmark victory, 14-year-old Hamlata Bhagat ranked third in the nation for graitklon, a competition that requires excellence in the long jump, the 100-meter sprint, and the 800-meter sprint.

This was truly a remarkable feat for a girl whose parents are unable to afford proper athletic shoes for her, and who was trained by a sports teacher who does not receive a salary. The Mohi School is located in a remote village in an area where it was traditionally more common for girls to be married at 14 than in school. The school was founded to give girls the opportunity for an education that included the rigors and challenges of athletics, in order to inspire confidence in their abilities and to bring fame and pride to the village.

This is precisely what the school has succeeded in doing. Serving 210 girls from 6 rural villages, the school boasts a 0% dropout rate, offers a free hostel for girls who travel from a distance, and receives strong support from the community. So strong in fact, that the community has been financially supporting the school since its founding in 1999, as the school awaits its 5 year anniversary and the government grant it hopes will accompany that milestone. In the meantime, private donors and community leaders have donated their funds, while teachers have donated their time and dedication to make this innovative and inspirational project a success.

While the school has already overcome many challenges, from raising start-up capital to convincing community members to let the girls wear athletic clothing, there are many more obstacles the school does not have the resources to overcome. While the school's academic performance is on par with other schools in the district, it has no funds to supply students with the facilities necessary for a productive learning environment, such as sanitary drinking water, bathrooms, and computers. Even in athletics, where the school has achieved so much, it does not have the resources to give girls the nutritious, energy providing snacks that they need for intensive training and competitions. Parents are supportive, but have no money, and the community is running short on resources. This school is a prime example of an institution that not only requires and deserves government support and resources, but should be recognized and used as a model throughout the country.

Michelle Rosenthal is a senior at Yale University in the US. She spent the summer researching and implementing the Girls' Education Competition, while interning at the Mann Deshi Mahila Bank in Mhaswad, Maharashtra. She will be earning her Bachelor's Degree from Yale in Ethics, Politics, and Economics in May of 2005. She is writing her senior thesis on the social, economic, and political challenges of educating girls in rural Maharashtra.

Chetna Gala Sinha is president of Mann Deshi Mahila Bank and Mann Vikas Samajik Sanstha. Chetna was active in Jayprakash Narayan Movement and she is a 2002 Yale World Fellow, as well as an Ashoka Fellow. Chetna is forming women's cooperatives in the Western Maharashtra region.