

## Girls with Visual Disabilities: Views about their Education

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### Abstract

Girls with disabilities are considered as one of the most marginalized groups in society and multiply disadvantaged through their status as women & girls and as persons with disabilities. For them education is regarded as the key to advancement. It provides them access to information, enables them to communicate their needs, interest and experiences, brings them into contact with other students, increases their confidence and encourages them to assert their rights. It also helps in creating awareness about legal provisions, government schemes, and legislative actions and rehabilitates services available to them. The present paper will discuss the role of education in the lives of girls with visual disabilities from their views and perspectives.

**Key Words:** Education, Girls with disabilities, Qualitative Research

### Introduction

Role of education as an agent of social change is well-known and recognised. In reference to girls' education Gandhiji has stated long back that educating a man is educating an individual while educating a woman is educating a family. Also education is one of the sub themes of UN World Bodies on Women Paragraph 163 of Forward Looking Strategies which states that "Education is the basis for the full promotion and improvement of the status of women".

It is indisputable that education enables girls and women to gain more knowledge about the world outside of her hearth and home, increases her skills and helps her to get status giving employment-all of which will develop her personality, positive self-image and self-confidence. In a paper titled '*Curbing Social Evils through Empowerment of Women*', Lakshmi Narayan and Rajesh (as cited in Sharma, 2008) comment that "One of the strategies

for empowerment of women is education that builds a positive self-image and boosts self-confidence among them and develops ability to think critically." The National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1986 stated that the entire education system should be geared to play a positive, interventionist role in the empowerment of women and to take following steps in this regard: 1.Enhance women's self-confidence, 2.developing their ability to think critically 3. Enable them to make decisions 4.Ensure equal participation in developmental processes 5. Provide knowledge and skill to women so that they become economically independent and 6.Provide access to legal literacy (Zainab, 2005). Education not only helps women to gain knowledge but also provides the necessary courage and inner strength to face the challenges of life. It enables them to procure a job.

Education is considered as the key to advancement of women and girls with

disabilities (one of the most marginalized groups in society and multiply disadvantaged through their status as women & girls and as persons with disabilities) particularly as it provides access to information, enables them to communicate their needs, interest and experiences, brings them into contact with other students, increases their confidence and encourages them to assert their rights (Rao, 2002). It also helps in creating awareness about legal provisions, government schemes, and legislative actions and rehabilitates services available to them.

Education provides them the opportunity to make meaningful choices, understanding of rights and responsibilities, a sense of hope, raised self-esteem and self-confidence and control over the direction of one's life. It involves girls with disabilities understanding their rights to be citizens — provided they are given the tools for equality and participation. It means breaking away from an identity of great passivity and finding the will and power to change one's own circumstances.

Here the role of school education becomes vital. Children's life at school must be linked to their life outside the school. Education imparted in schools directly or indirectly plays a significant role in making children believe in their own capabilities, talents, and self-worth or self-value, capacity to handle tasks, and ultimately making them self-confident (NCF, 2005). This role of school education is very much significant for the girls with disabilities so that they can face the life outside the school with full confidence - having faith in their self-esteem and self-efficacy. Schools also develop the ability

to take decisions by themselves and to think critically before taking decisions. Various capacities are built by school so as to whet their inherent talent and make them believe in their own potentials. Thus, school education plays a vital role in the life of girls with visual disabilities.

The present paper is an attempt to elicit the role of education in the life of girls with visual disabilities from their point of view.

### **Research approach and Methodology**

To study the views of girls with visual disabilities in detail qualitative research approach was adopted as it emphasizes on fully describing and comprehending the subjective meanings of events to individuals and group caught up in them. Within the qualitative approach, phenomenological research was chosen as it seeks the individual perception and meaning of a phenomena or experience. It helped the researcher to understand the meaning of education in detail from the point of view of these girls.

Semi-structured interview schedule was used as this enabled a full and in-depth understanding of views expressed by GWVDs in their own terms. Interviews were used because they have proved effective in a number of previous studies designed to elicit students' views and preferences (Padeliadu, 1995; Padeliadu & Zigmond, 1996; Vlachou, 1997).

### **Girls with visual disabilities' views about their education**

The information obtained from interview provided a greater scope for discussion and learning about the views of these girls about their education. During the conduction of interviews these girls freely

expressed their experiences about the education they received in school.

Responses received from these girls showed importance of education in their lives as it empowered them by providing knowledge, creating awareness regarding rights, enhancing personality, enriching self-expression skills, showing the way for self-reliance and goal setting for life. Theme-wise descriptions of the responses obtained are now presented below.

With regard to theme of knowledge, responses from girls showed that education provided in school enhanced their knowledge about living in society and that meeting people of same age group in the school helped them in learning many things. It has been well recognized that social living skills have significant influences on all aspects of individuals' lives: educational, social and work place (Michelson and Wood, 1980). Social skill deficiencies are reported to be the most critical restraint to social acceptance (Schloss, Schloss, Wood and Kiehl, 1986). According to these girls, school played a major role in developing these skills in them. For instance, they came to regular school and met different people like teachers, school staff and most importantly non-disabled students. They had interaction with them which gave them a picture of society for which they were being prepared to integrate. It is relevant here to have observation of Mulderij (1996). According to him, interaction with non-disabled peers is thought essential during school years if disabled children are to develop the skills to function productively in post-school community environments.

Regarding awareness, they expressed their views that education imparted to them in school made them aware about rights and they could demand and fight for their rights, if needed.

Another important aspect for which these girls considered education important in their life was development of personality. Responses received gave a picture that education helped in building the personality of girls with visual disabilities. The girls said that school education created awareness about self and helped in gaining self-identity. It also created positive propensity in them of not feeling inferior in front of others. They also affirmed that education built self-confidence in them and if they have confidence, they could be successful wherever they go and this is possible through education. An evidence of this assertion of girls with visual disabilities is the study conducted by Kef (1994). It was found in Kef's study that blind and visually impaired adolescents, whether studying in special school or regular school, had a positive view of their capacities and possibilities and had a high self-esteem. Similarly, in another study on segregated schooling, disabled students interviewed by Willnot and Saul (1998) talked about their increased self-esteem and self-confidence they gained by attending segregated school. These girls also assert that school education also helped them in taking decisions with confidence and developed a feeling that whatever decision they are taking and whatever work they want to do, they could do it. They acknowledge that they had become courageous to speak in front of others and have overcome the feeling of hesitation.

School also built confidence in them by motivating and encouraging them to take part in programmes like debate, speech or any other programme organized by the school. One of them told that when they did not take part in any programme, teachers motivated and encouraged them to participate.

Responses of the girls with visual disabilities provided information that participants had become proficient in expressing their thoughts and views in front of others and before society. They said that school taught them of where, when and how to express oneself and one's thoughts. One of the girls told that school was the place where one could exchange one's ideas with people. Effective communication and self-expression skills hold more importance for students with visual disabilities as they are not able to observe objects and interactions. Mittal, A.K. and Aneja, Anil (2008) in 'Handbook for Women with Visual Impairment' mention that effective and workable communication skills hold the key to empowerment and hence the art of good communication has the crucial significance for visually impaired girls and women.

It is indicated through responses that education provided in school helped them

to know how to be self-reliant. School provided economic empowerment by giving information and knowledge about how girls could become self-reliant through education. One of these participants told that if they want to become a teacher, school provided information about the qualifications needed for becoming a teacher.

It was also expressed by these girls that school helped them in setting goals for their better future. They affirmed that school motivated them to set goals and make plans for achieving them. Considering the role of school in building a good future, response from these girls articulated that it developed a positive thinking towards good and bright future. It also gave a new direction and hope for a good life. They felt that they could do something in life.

Therefore it is evident from the responses of the girls with visual disabilities that education had a positive influence on them. Education gave them the ability to think, acquire knowledge, gain understanding and apply to practical life and to improve life. Education received by them in school had a great impact on their personality and they felt a positive change in themselves due to education.

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