1

Letting Girls Learn

I come to school to learn, so that my life gets better!

—Laxmi, a Prerna alumna

Laxmi, a young Dalit woman, was born in Lucknow in 1992.[1] She lives, along with her father and four younger siblings, in a one-room house, a half-constructed, abandoned dwelling they moved into 15 years ago, when her mother was still alive.[2]

Laxmi is the third child in her family, although the first to survive. Her eldest brother, at 15 months, drowned in a pond at the construction site where her mother was working. A sister died at birth. Though Laxmi's father is a commercial painter, for several years he has worked only intermittently. Her late mother had been a construction worker, carrying bricks up steep scaffoldings on her head as part of her work. She was married at age 12 and gave birth to seven children in 23 years, dying at the age of 35 in 2005. Laxmi's father was 14 when he was married and did not attend school after fifth grade because he was required to graze his family's goats. Laxmi is now the eldest of five siblings, with one younger brother and three younger sisters. She was enrolled in a local school, which she attended irregularly, and dropped out after two to three years because her mother was sick and needed care, as did a baby sister, and because they were poor and had no money to pay her fees.

> My sister, Lalita, was born and then my mother had TB. She used to cough a lot in the night, and there was no one to take care of her. I would

Laxmi

wake up at night, massage her, put oil on her body; still she didn't recover. She was sick for months. I had to take care of her, and Radha was very small, so I stayed at home.

Laxmi had been working as a domestic helper since the age of seven, earning 1000 rupees per month (about $15), which went toward food for the family when her mother was not working. Laxmi's mother had a "uterus surgery" (likely, a hysterectomy) after her seventh child, but was compelled to go back to work at the construction site only three weeks later. The stitches ruptured, and 13-year-old Laxmi took her to the hospital, making several trips back and forth for the next few months.

I used to stay and take care of her, clean her. She vomited a lot and her back used to hurt unbearably. The doctor scolded me for not getting her treatment in time. Father wasn't bothered. He was drunk most of the time. Then we brought her home, but she started to get worse. Her breathing became very difficult. I got very scared and called all the neighbors. Mother's sister came and gave some leaves, saying she might get better. But nothing like that happened; she was taking her last breaths. I didn't know what to do, but I got an auto rickshaw and put

> her in it. I wanted to take her back to the hospital. But she died right there in my arms in the auto. I couldn't do anything. Then we were alone. There was no one who could take care of us. So I started working in more homes [seven in all]. Neighbors helped with food and milk for the baby. Lalita [eight-year-old sister] also started working in three homes. Father did nothing. In fact, he sold off the gas cylinder and everything we had for his drinks. He drank all the time and couldn't take care of us.

One year before her mother's death, Laxmi found out about Prerna from a friend who was enrolled there.

> It had just opened, just one month before I heard about it. My friend told me about it. She told me that the fee is only 10 rupees per month and it is in the afternoon. So I thought, I can pay the fee and if it is in the afternoon, then I can finish my work in the morning, and go to study in the afternoon. It would get over by 5:30, so then I could go back to work in the evening again. So it was perfect. So I joined the school and then my education started again.

She described her day:

> In the morning, I made breakfast at home and then left for work at 6. I would go at 6 and come back around noon. Then after bathing, would come to school at 1 o'clock. Then I would study and after that would go to work again from there at 6. It would be 9 to 9:30 by the time I would finish work there. And then I would cook. It would be 11 by the time I would sleep.

She and her younger sister Lalita, nine years old at the time, both enrolled in Prerna, while Radha, the five-year-old, cooked the afternoon meal and took care of the baby at home.

Laxmi is an alumna of Prerna, a school I founded in 2003 for girls with lives like hers, prompted by the belief that all girls should be given access to education. Today, Laxmi has finished her bachelor's degree.[3] She is working at a call center providing services to banks, where she has been recently promoted to head sales manager. She is currently earning 25,000 rupees ($374) per month. Her employers have also offered to pay for her MBA, and she has enrolled.

Her three sisters are enrolled in Prerna. Through all these years, she has never given up on her father, despite his neglect and abuse. With her encouragement, he has had some success in overcoming his drinking habit.

Laxmi feels strong. She says:

> My life is different from my mother's. I have controlled my life a lot, taken care of myself, wasn't married off. Now I might even go to Chennai for a job.

She attributes this change in her life to her education at Prerna, which she says enabled her "to make my life better." This book tells the story of Prerna, describing how it provided a safe and supportive environment so girls like Laxmi could stay, learn, grow, and become empowered to make their lives better.

Being a Girl

Laxmi's story, and those of her friends, presents a stark yet vivid picture of what it means to be poor and a girl in India. It also lends a face, flesh and blood, to the statistics about the condition of the lives of millions of girls globally, and particularly in India. According to a survey conducted in 2007, when Indian girls from all castes and social classes were asked if they liked being girls, 48.4 percent said they didn't want to be girls.[4] As we look at Laxmi and her mother's lives, it is not difficult to see why. India's daughters, like millions of girls around the world, rich or poor, Dalit or Savarna, are unwanted, unequal, and unsafe at home and on the street.[5] According to some estimates, approximately 25 million girls worldwide and one million girls in India are killed before birth as a result of sex selective abortions.[6] Furthermore in India girls between one and five years of age are more likely to die than boys the same age because of poor nutrition, female infanticide, and sheer neglect.[7] Plan International's urban program found that, in Delhi, 96 percent of adolescent girls do not feel safe in the city.[8] Crime reports say that, nationally, 848 women are sexually harassed, raped, or killed every day.[9]

Laxmi and her mother's story corroborate the shameful statistics reported in every account on the status of girls and women around the world. Unvalued, uncared for, victims of neglect and violence, girls and their mothers have lives that are precarious, circumscribed, unfree, and hard. Fathers and husbands exercise enormous, almost absolute, control over the minds and bodies

of these girls and women. Laxmi's mother had no control over the number of children she produced. Despite the fact that her husband defaulted on his responsibility as provider for the family, his traditional role in a patriarchal family which meant she and seven-year-old Laxmi had to take on that responsibility, she continued to suffer his abusive, drunken behavior. According to her world view, she belonged to her husband and he had every right to do what he wished with her. This is a story many of our students tell of their families and homes.

Whereas the intention is not to demonize male figures, fathers, and husbands in Indian society, I do not attempt to hide the truth as told by the girls. The statistics relating to gender-based violence—both domestic and street violence in India—support the girls' testimony. This book takes a clear look at gender relations and reveals the shameful legacies of patriarchy.

Barriers to Education

Girls in India and everywhere, especially when they are poor, face several societal and school-specific barriers to education just because they are girls.

Child Marriage, Girl Slavery

Early marriage contributes significantly to the curtailment of Indian girls' lives. Laxmi's mother was married at 12; her friend Preeti's mother was married at 13, Sunita's mother at 13, and Kunti's at 15. Laxmi's father and family were ready to marry her off at 14, when she was in grade 8.

> He had started from grade 8 only, forcing me because I was growing up, so people who live around [were pressuring him]. Basically it's society only which forces us to get married [by commenting that] the girl is getting mature, she should be married, she might go wrong. So he would listen to others and tell me to stop studying and get married. That's what people would say at home; don't study and get married.

Of the 15 million child brides in the world, more than one-third are in India.[10] Child marriage rates in India are the second highest in the world, with Bangladesh topping the list. Of Indian women aged 20 to 24, 47.5 percent were married by age 18, and of these 16 percent start bearing children soon after marriage.[11] Given that child marriages are arranged by parents without the consent of the children—in effect, girls are given into physical, economic,

psychological, and sexual bondage—it would be more appropriate to describe child brides as *girl slaves* and child marriage as *girl slavery* rather than dignifying their status with the term *brides*. Statistics report that child brides (that is, girl slaves) are more likely to be abused sexually and physically than unmarried girls. For most girls the world over, child marriage means the end of education and the beginning of childbearing. "There is no more abrupt end to childhood than marriage or becoming a mother."[12]

Poverty and Gender

Laxmi's story illustrates how education for daughters is low on the value scale for poor families. Her mother, like 60 percent of the mothers in our school, was illiterate. As with Laxmi, many of the girls enrolled in primary schools are pulled out as soon as a need arises, for all the reasons that research tells us girls in poverty are pulled out: family health issues, burden of domestic work, sibling care, and working outside the home to supplement the family income. Laxmi and her friends Preeti and Khushboo were pulled out to take care of younger siblings because their mothers needed help and were themselves suffering ill health due to repeated pregnancies and overwork at home and outside. The burden of housework and childcare is firmly and squarely laid on the shoulders of girls as young as five years of age, like Laxmi's younger sister Radha, and girls begin to work outside the home to help their mothers sustain their families as early as seven years of age, as did Laxmi and her sister Lalita. No money could be spared for their education, nor could the family find the time, or perceive the need, to send them to school. Laxmi was enrolled in school, but it does not seem her previous school did anything to stop her from being pulled out. It is likely that, in Laxmi's case, the school pushed her out because she could not pay the tuition fee. So though Laxmi was enrolled and would count as "enrolled" in a survey meant to determine girls' enrollment in primary school, the fact that she was pulled out before she completed grade 3 would negate the enrollment, lending weight to the Plan International argument that "enrollment is an inherently flawed measure of access."[13]

The stories of Laxmi and her friends in the pages to follow give a closer look at their lives and clearly show the barriers to education for girls from poor families in India and elsewhere. Girls live their lives in a grim, complex context where gender, poverty, and caste intersect.[14] The consequences of patriarchy are evident. The girls and their mothers regularly face violence at home. Girls are prey to forced marriages at very young ages because families can see

no other way to secure their livelihoods; also, marriage presents a means to maintain girls' chastity and caste purity. Many of the girls are inducted into child labor in their family's struggle against poverty.

Drop Out or Push Out

Laxmi and several of her friends tell us that until they came to Prerna, their previous schools did nothing to keep them in. The schools not only took no measures to stop them from being pulled out, they often actively pushed them out with their insensitivity to the students' circumstances. Schools push girls out when girls experience the school environment as unsafe and unfriendly and when they fail to provide the support that first-generation learners need. Often teachers convey their own low expectations and low value of education for girls, because they, too, believe the destiny of girls, especially poor girls, involves marriage, motherhood, and domestic or physical labor.

Laxmi and her friends illustrate the concern in India and worldwide that even when girls come to school, many of them don't stay very long and, therefore, don't learn very much.[15] They exemplify what global discourse is beginning to realize: providing access to education to girls isn't good enough. As a result of a concerted effort by national governments, international agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGO), and other community and institutional actors, great strides have been made in granting girls access to primary education. The number of girls not attending primary school has been cut almost in half, though even today 62 million girls worldwide do not attend primary and lower-secondary school.[16] The focus has now shifted to retention, completion of secondary education, and quality learning. So, not only should girls come to school; they must stay and complete, and they must learn.

As Gene Sperling, Rebecca Winthrop, and Christina Kwauk write: "The story of girls' education in 2015 . . . is still a story of both immense progress and a still-devastating crisis."[17] They make the important point that though great strides have been made in primary school enrollment of girls, a major challenge in girls' education is "ensuring that they complete school."[18] In the future, these authors say, "the goal for girls' education can be nothing less than a high-quality secondary education."[19]

The Promise of Girls' Education

The discourse around girls' education is especially charged at this moment, globally and in India. The world has finally come to the conclusion that devel-

opmental promise cannot be fulfilled unless gender equality is focused upon seriously. Schooling for girls, especially completion of a high-quality secondary education, is now touted by experts as imperative and central to national development. Girls' education is considered a magic bullet for combating many of the most profound challenges to human development, promising many social and economic benefits.[20] However, the discourse around girls' education is still driven largely by the "efficiency" argument rather than a rights-based one. In other words, success in girls' education is measured in terms of gains for societies, families, and gross domestic product, and its value in training the world's future mothers rather than its intrinsic benefits for the girls themselves.

There are voices—for example, Malala Yousufzai, Graça Machel, and Julia Gillard—that counter the efficiency argument and reinforce the central contention of this book, that educating girls is important for the simple reason that it is a girl's right to be educated. Girls have the right to a fully human experience, and education is an important endowment that helps them achieve that. If educating girls resulted in nothing more than that, it would still be important because it is their right. Girls' rights are human rights! And girls have the right to a fully human life of their own choosing.

To bring this argument down to the case of a single person: Laxmi, of course, will make a better mother if she gets to complete her education. But what is more important is that she should have an education because she has a right to be educated so that *her own* life gets better, so that she achieves the full developmental potential of *her* life. Her life will get better if she is empowered by her education to recognize her rights as an equal person with human dignity, and if she is equipped by her education to fight for her rights when they are thwarted, if her education teaches her to recognize that she has a claim to a life of her own choosing, which includes being able to choose when or if she wants to marry and to choose to become a mother or not.

Education, Empowerment, and Gender Equality

A term used widely in recent international development discourse in close conjunction with girls' education and gender equality is *women's empowerment*. Education and empowerment are equated in the international development discourse as though they are necessarily related, leading to greater agency of women and, with that, an improvement in their own well-being and that of their children and society.[21] The development discourse also suggests that the

promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women will result from the removal of gender disparity in primary and secondary education.[22] In 1986 the "National Policy on Education"—an important policy document for education in India—took a more enlightened view and brought the issue of gender and girls' education center stage.[23] While it linked education of women and girls to their empowerment, it went a step further and defined the goal of education broadly, stating that "education should be a transformative force, build women's self-confidence, improve their position in society and challenge inequalities."[24] This statement can be read as not taking for granted that education is necessarily a transformative force leading to women's empowerment; instead, it recommends that education should be such. This is a welcome and well-intentioned move, but it needs elaboration. It needed to go a step further and describe what such an empowerment-focused education would look like and recommend relevant changes in curricular content, pedagogical practices, institutionalized processes, and organizational structures.[25]

What Is Empowerment?

Empowerment is a much used, overused, misused, theorized, and re-theorized term.[26] In the 1970s the Women in Development movement associated empowerment with getting girls into school and giving them economic independence. From a gender and development perspective in the 1990s, empowerment includes recognizing and challenging gendered structures of inequality.[27] The World Bank defines empowerment in its broadest sense, as the "expansion of freedom of choice and action."[28] Asserting that gender empowerment is a process toward greater equality, or freedom of choice and action, Naila Kabeer defines empowerment as "the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them."[29] The idea of *agency* is an important element of becoming empowered, as people must be significant actors in the process of becoming empowered, not mere beneficiaries. Karen Oppenheim adds that women's empowerment involves knowledge of their rights to exercise choice and capabilities.[30] Arjun Appadurai defines empowerment in terms of developing a voice and a capacity to aspire.[31] Jo Rowlands's definition encompasses all of that, adding two more critical dimensions: a belief in self-worth, self-respect, and self-acceptance, which she calls "power within," and the ability to act with others to challenge discriminatory structures, which she calls "power with."[32] Yogendra B. Shakya and Katharine N. Rankin call this *subversive agency*, which is the capacity of resisting dominant structures and ideologies.[33] In India, the women's

movement helped shape the definition of empowerment, defining it as being essentially about recognizing systemic and structural sexist oppression and then acting to change existing power relations.[34]

These definitions of empowerment all refer to adult women and their lived worlds, and have been criticized as distorting "girls' needs, circumstances and capabilities."[35] However, these concepts can be used along with the work of the few scholars and programs that have studied girls as subjects specifically and developed into a framework that addresses girls as well as adults.[36] Focusing specifically on schools' potential for enabling the empowerment of girls, I define empowerment as a process of developing a feminist consciousness, which involves gaining a critical understanding of one's social and political reality.[37] That means:

- Recognizing one's subordination and the underlying structural causes of it
- Recognizing oneself as an equal person deserving respect, with choice and agency
- Perceiving oneself as having the right to access the capabilities or skills needed to exercise choice and agency and act to overcome one's subordination and marginalization

If Laxmi and her friends are to have better lives, and if they are counting on an education, then it must empower them in these ways.

Empowerment and Education: Necessary Correlation?

I lend my voice to scholars who have questioned a necessary correlation between women's empowerment and education.[38] They point out that there is insufficient empirical analysis, particularly qualitative in nature, that supports this view. The *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development* cites evidence from around the world and reports that, despite narrowing of gender gaps in physical assets and human capital, when it comes to access to education, there still remain significant differences in the agency of boys and girls—and men and women—which results in differing life outcomes for men and women.[39]

Plan International cites the cases of both Latin America and the Middle East, where increased levels in female education have not led to corresponding equality in the workplace or at home. Girls and young women emerge from school still struggling with the idea that they are second-class citizens. The organization's 2012 *Because I Am a Girl* report states:

> If girls are to play an equal part in society, once they finish their education, that education must be truly empowering and equip them with the capacity and determination to challenge the discrimination they will inevitably face.[40]

Thus, education does not necessarily lead to empowerment or gender equity—unless there is a focus on process, content, and curricula that critically addresses inequitable social norms and structures. In 2010 the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative, meeting in Dakar, emphasized the urgency of putting a "rights-based empowerment framework" at the center of all educational effort and making gender equity the "centre of transformative, quality education, supported by gender-responsive curricula and teacher training."[41]

An Empowering Education: Transforming Girls' Lives

Laxmi speaks of how education transformed her life:

> And then I found Prerna; my first stage of change came from Prerna only. Because if Prerna wasn't there, I would not have been like this. Probably, I might also have got married early; just raised kids, like Mother, three to four kids and with a husband who drinks and beats me, gives no money. I don't know if I would have been alive or not.

Laxmi and her friends—Sunita, Aarti, Preeti, Khushboo, and Kunti—found Prerna. They returned to school because they discovered a school that was so inexpensive they could afford it and also because it was possible to fit it into the extremely demanding schedules of their difficult daily lives. The school welcomed them, even though they had been out of school for some years, or had never been schooled, and helped them make up for the time they had lost. Not just that; the school looked at their lives closely, tried to understand the many challenges they faced every day, and fought hard for them and alongside them to resist pressures to pull them out of school. As Laxmi said:

> Like in Prerna, they don't focus on studies first; first they focus on children. Like, where have they come from, who are they, what kind of children are they, so what kind of education should they be given. It's not about just coming to school, studying, and going home like in other

> schools. But here, apart from studying . . . they ask what are our problems; they understand.

Everything about their education in Prerna—their teachers, the curriculum, the culture of the school, and the way it was organized and structured—was focused on helping them construct a sense of themselves as equal persons worthy of being respected by themselves, their communities, and others. Education enabled the girls to build a capacity to aspire, to take charge of their lives, and to flourish. Today, they are strong, empowered women, with a fair degree of control over their lives. They have been able to resist early marriage, are earning a living and supporting themselves and their families, hoping and planning to buy homes for themselves, and charting a path for their lives. Their school fought to keep them in and made sure they stayed and learned to read, write, and recognize themselves as equal persons with a right to determine the course of their own lives.

It seems that not only must girls come to school, stay, and complete educational studies, school must also help empower them with the knowledge that they have the right to use this education for their own purposes, that they are equal persons with choice and agency, aspirations, and a voice to speak up against discriminatory practices and social structures. This is the key lesson I learned from my ongoing work with Prerna and is the central argument I make in this book.