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From Learning Outcomes to Life Outcomes: What Can You Do and Who Can You Be? A Case Study in Girls' Education in India

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Urvashi Sahni is a guest scholar of the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution.

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From Learning Outcomes to Life Outcomes:

What Can You Do and Who Can You Be?

A Case Study in Girls' Education in India

Urvashi Sahni

For more than 200 years a strong moral argument has been made for education for girls, grounded in human rights and equality. Any argument in support of more and better education for girls needs to recognize the intrinsic importance of education for girls' empowerment, not just its value as a training ground for the world's future workers and mothers. . . . It is a view of education closely associated with human dignity, not simply as a means to a wider end.

—Plan International (2012, 26)

INTRODUCTION

This paper provides an important reflection on the direction of the global education discourse by examining in-depth a case of girls' education in India. I argue that while in the last year, there has been much progress in moving the global education discourse from inputs (enrollment and parity) to outcomes (learning), this welcome movement does not go far enough. In order to seriously meet the goal of gender equality the global discourse must go beyond numbers and embrace a life-outcomes approach. I first provide a theoretical framework for understanding glob-

al education, reviewing the status of global education policy and discourse with special reference to its connection to gender equality. I argue that simply providing access does not lead to empowerment. Gender equality is a goal in its own right. Mere access to schools will not lead to gender equality, nor will an education that does not make empowerment of girls and gender equality its central focus. I then provide an in-depth case study of empowerment education in India that uses critical feminist pedagogy in order to help girls examine gendered power structures and serves girls' needs by shifting the focus

from learning outcomes to life outcomes. I conclude with key recommendations for girls' education globally and in India.

GIRLS' EDUCATION: A DEVELOPMENT IMPERATIVE

The last decade has seen girls' education become a central focus of the development discourse. There emerged an international consensus that schooling for girls is imperative and central to national development. Girls' education is identified as the most effective means of combating many of the most profound challenges to human development, promising many social and economic benefits. Until very recently, the discourse around girls' education has largely been driven by the efficiency argument with the success in girls' education being measured in terms of gains for societies, families and gross domestic product, rather than its intrinsic benefits for girls themselves. Promoting gender equality, has finally become a goal in its own right as evident from the main message in the World Bank's *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development*: "Gender equality is a core development objective in its own right. It is also smart economics. Greater gender equality can enhance productivity, improve development outcomes for the next generation and make institutions more representative." Educationally, this goal has been translated as achieving gender parity in primary and secondary education, which I argue is only a first-stage measure of progress toward achieving gender equality.¹

The movement for girls' education is more than 200 years old, and has been led by

women's rights activists all over the world — including Mary Wollstonecraft in London, Raden Ajeng Kartini in Indonesia, Charlotte Maxeke and Olive Schreiner in South Africa and Pandita Ramabai Saraswati in India.² The 19th century saw the opening of schools for girls and campaigning for girls' education as a way to further women's right to equality.

The 20th century translated these women's movements into more global declarations and commitments for rights for women and children as embodied in a number of International conventions: the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1979, the Convention of the Rights of the Child in 1989, the Jomtien Summit in 1990, the Beijing Declaration for the Education and Training of Women in 1995, and the Dakar Education for All (EFA) Platform for Action in 2000. They all emphasized gender parity in education and likened it to equal access to primary education and recently secondary education.

The international development community adopted a global action plan in 2010 at Dakar renewing their commitment to Education for All and pledging to ensure gender parity in education and health, economic opportunities and decision making. "We the participants of the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative global conference, 'Engendering Empowerment: Education and Equality,' assembled in Dakar in May 2010, call for urgent action in support of girls' rights to education, gender equality and empowerment opportunities."³ This reflects their belief that

gender equality and women's empowerment are development objectives in their own right as well as serving critical channels for achieving the other development goals.

There are huge expectations from the education of girls. It is considered the "magic bullet,"⁴ the best investment that any country can make toward development⁵ and much more. It is supposed to lead to increased income for both individuals and nations;⁶ more productive farming; smaller, healthier, and better-educated families;⁷ reduced infant and maternal mortality; a reduction of HIV/AIDS;⁸ and gender equality. I review below the current status of girls' education, with a focus on gender parity, to determine whether it is in a position to fulfill its promise of achieving gender equality.

THE STATUS OF GIRLS' EDUCATION

Over the past 10 years, many countries have made strides in providing access to education for all children, and for girls in particular. A total of 91 countries are on track to meet the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) targets on access and gender parity in primary education by 2015. These achievements are welcome and should be celebrated, but this is not the whole story. Despite the fact that enrollment in primary schools has increased significantly since 2000 (when 105 million children were out of school), the *Education First* initiative of the UN secretary-general reports that 61 million children are still out of primary school worldwide⁹ today, and that "the quality of education remains

"ONE IN FOUR ADOLESCENT GIRLS is no longer in lower secondary school; many drop out from primary school, others during the transition from primary to secondary. Many hardly attend at all. Recent research by Plan International found that in a study of nine countries nearly 8 percent girls had never been enrolled in school and that enrollment is in itself not a meaningful measure of school attendance. We cannot really know how many adolescent girls attend school regularly and we understand even less about what might help get them into school and keep them there."

(Plan International 2012, 35)

desperately low in many parts of the world." The 2012 Global Monitoring Report¹⁰ states that the number of out-of-school children has remained stagnant for the past three years. The problem is worse in secondary school, where 72 million children are not enrolled in lower secondary school, 39 million of which are girls ages 11 to 15 years.¹¹

The quality of education available to millions enrolled in school is poor — 150 million children are at risk of dropping out, 100 million of which are girls. The most vulnerable are girls from the poorest communities, those marginalized by ethnicity, caste or language

and in rural areas.¹² According to UNESCO, the majority of the world's out-of-school children (53 percent) are girls.¹³ Plan International's recent Building Skills for Life research in nine countries show that girls are more likely than boys to never enroll, to drop out during primary school or after just one year of secondary school.

India and China have done an impressive job of increasing school enrollment in primary and secondary schools, together accounting for almost half the global increase in secondary school enrollment. India has reduced its number of out-of-school children from 15.1 million in 2002 to 5.6 million in 2011.¹⁴ Yet 59 percent of the remaining out-of-school children are girls, the highest percentage of any region.

Despite the impressive increase in enrollment in primary and secondary schools, the dropout rate is alarming. In India 55 percent girls drop out in primary school and 73 percent drop out before they reach class 10 as reported by the 7th All India School Education Survey, 2007. Of these, most are poor, rural and lower caste.¹⁵

More girls are in school, but they are not completing school, the poorest girls are par-

ticularly vulnerable. The ones who are in school are not learning much. Educational discourse is moving away from solely enrollment toward learning. There is growing awareness that there is a crisis in learning in India and the focus is shifting toward "quality education." In his *Education First* initiative, launched on September 26, 2012, the UN secretary-general recognized the crisis in education where an estimated 250 million school-going children, most of them the poor-

est and most marginalized, were unable to read, write and count. The Annual Status of Education Report in India, 2011 reports that in India, only 27 percent children in class 5 can read a simple passage and do simple division.¹⁶

International evidence shows that the positive social, economic and health benefits

attributed to girls education are related to the learning levels and most of them require completion of secondary school education.¹⁷ It is important, therefore, that girls not only enroll but also stay and complete school and, most importantly, learn.

GIRLS DROP OUT BECAUSE THEY ARE GIRLS

Evidence from international and India-based research details the following reasons for

THE PLAN INTERNATIONAL REPORT (2012, 11) PUTS IT WELL:

"Girls drop out just because they are girls—girls leave school to help at home, because their families are not convinced of the value of their education; because they experience violence at home, because they get pregnant or married; or because school is too far away and parents think their daughters, and their reputations are at risk."

girls dropping out, which include societal factors and school factors jointly. It is significant that the majority of them are gender related factors.

Societal Factors: Girls from poor families are most at risk of dropping out. Poor families find the direct and indirect costs of educating their daughters too high, especially considering the low value they attach to their daughters and to educating them. When family resources are scarce and the cost of education becomes unaffordable, it is the girls who get pulled out.¹⁸ In many countries secondary education is not free, which is another reason why girls do not make the transition to post-primary education.¹⁹

Even when elementary education is free as it is in India, the indirect costs and the opportunity cost of educating them is a strong deterrent. The subsistence of poor families is heavily dependent on the household and productive labor of girls.²⁰ The burden of household chores falls largely upon young girls, which leaves them less time to study at home, resulting in poor performance and eventual dropout.²¹ Plan International's Building Skills for Life study found that girls who go to school spend 65 percent of their time at home on domestic chores and girls who are out of school spend 74 percent of their time doing the same thing.²² Girls in poor families receive less than their fair share of the already scarce food at home, their share often being given to the higher-valued sons. This leads to malnourishment and poor health, which is the

cause of frequent absenteeism and falling behind in studies.

Parents who are poor also tend to be uneducated. Research shows that girls from families with no education or with very little education drop out more as they are unable to support their children's learning in school.²³ Plan International cites research that parents are reluctant to support their daughter's schooling because of concern for their safety in and en route to schools that are distant.²⁴ Parents' aspirations for girls are often limited by a view of them as potential wives and mothers.²⁵ The incidence of domestic violence is high in many low-income families. Children facing daily abuse at home either directed at their mother or themselves are traumatized by it, find it hard to concentrate in school, falling behind in their studies and increasing their likelihood of dropout.²⁶ Furthermore, domestic violence rates in India are high,²⁷ as are rates of sexual abuse. An Action India survey of 90,000 women in 2004 reported that 40 percent of Indian married women are beaten and 56 percent of them justify being beaten. A survey carried out by a nongovernmental organization report that 76 percent of their sample of 600 women, stated that they had been sexually abused in childhood or adolescence and of the abusers 46 percent were men from the within the family — such as an uncle, cousin, father or brother.²⁸

Child marriage and teen pregnancy rates are high among the poorest populations. According to UNESCO, one in seven girls is married by the age of 15.²⁹ Plan Interna-

**“THERE IS NO MORE ABRUPT
END** *to childhood than marriage or becoming a mother. For adolescent girls, marriage and motherhood are often connected, but not always. But which ever comes first — pregnancy or marriage — girls who face either usually also face an end to their education.”*

(Plan International 2012, 56)

tional cites research that 48 percent of the girls in South Asia, 42 percent in Africa, and 29 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean are married before they reach the age of 18.³⁰ Gordon Brown’s recent report on early marriage estimates that almost 1.5 million children each year are married by the age of 15, most coming from Sub-Saharan Africa, Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan.³¹ If present trends continue, there is a high probability that more than 100 million girls will be child brides in the next decade.³² Out of the 10 million child brides around the world a third are from India.³³ While the rate of child marriage reportedly dropped to 46 percent in 2009, in some states it exceeds 50 percent.³⁴ In Rajasthan, 56 percent girls are married by their parents before they reach 15, and of these 7 percent were under 10. National Family Health Survey shows that 71 percent of Indian women currently age 20 to 24 years who had been married before the age of 18 did not have any education at all.³⁵ For most girls the world over, mar-

riage means the end of education and the beginning of childbearing.³⁶

Plan International’s nine-country study, which sought to identify the reasons why adolescent girls dropped out, summarizes its findings: “What emerges from the data is that girls are identified with their sexual and domestic roles, whereas boys are seen as providers and household heads. In our research, a girl as future wife and mother carries little value. She is a demeaned person not seen as worthy of rights. This demeaned identity remains a key barrier to girls accessing their right to education.”³⁷

School Factors: Distinctive, school-related factors are often linked to family-related ones. Already reluctant parents are less inclined to send their daughters to school if they believe their daughters are unsafe there, likely to be abused physically or sexually in school or en route to school, are not learning anything or are disinterested in their studies because of poor quality, indifferent teaching and irrelevant curricula.³⁸ In addition, teachers’ low expectations from girls and lack of support for first generation learners further de-motivates both students and parents. An insensitive and inflexible evaluation system, oblivious to the gender constraints faced by girls from poor families is a huge hurdle in their transition from primary to upper primary school and on to higher secondary levels. Girls from poor families, due to all the challenges they face at home, have difficulty keeping up regularly with their studies, passing the gate-keeping exams at each level,

which leads to their repeated failure and eventual dropout.³⁹

If more girls are in school, but not completing school or learning much, this significantly decimates the gains made by the successes in enrollment of girls. The UNGEI Dakar Declaration 2010 voices the same concern, stating that “poor quality of education, extreme poverty, structural inequality and violence against girls continue to jeopardize the achievement of the education- and gender-related Education for All and Millennium Development Goals by 2015.”

EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT: A NECESSARY CORRELATION?

Another term that is used widely in recent international development discourse in close conjunction with girls’ education and gender equality is empowerment. Education and empowerment are equated by the international development discourse as though they are necessarily related, leading to greater agency for women and with that an improvement in their own well-being, that of their children and society.⁴⁰ Millennium Development Goal 3 is the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women to the removal of gender disparity in primary and secondary education. In 1986, the National Policy on Education the first important policy document for education in India, brought the issue of gender and girls’ education center stage. It linked education of women and girls to their empowerment, stating, “education should be a transformative force, build women’s self-

confidence, improve their position in society and challenge inequalities.”⁴¹

Empowerment is a much-used, theorized and re-theorized term,⁴² and some have said a much overused and misused term.⁴³ The World Bank defines empowerment in its broadest sense as the “expansion of freedom of choice and action.”⁴⁴ 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.”⁴⁵ Agency is an important element of becoming empowered, for people must be significant actors in the process of becoming empowered, not mere beneficiaries. Karen Oppenheim Mason adds that women’s empowerment involves knowledge of their rights to exercise choice and capabilities in order to take advantage of available opportunities.⁴⁶ I add the following element to the definitions given above: empowerment is the process of becoming aware of one’s subordination, understanding and analyzing the causes of one’s subordination and taking action to overcome one’s marginalization, perceiving oneself as an autonomous equal person, worthy of respect and acting from this belief.⁴⁷

Scholars have questioned a necessary correlation between women’s empowerment and education parity.⁴⁸ They point out that there is insufficient empirical analysis particularly qualitative in nature that supports the view that gender parity in education leads to the empowerment of girls. The World Bank cites evidence that agency, a key component of

empowerment, is an area in which gender equality is still lagging far behind in most developing countries: “Gender gaps have not narrowed in women’s control over resources, women’s political voice or the incidence of domestic violence.”⁴⁹ The report asserts that despite the narrowing of gender gaps in physical assets and human capital, in access to education, there are differences in the agency of boys and girls and later men and women which could lead to differences in gender outcomes.

Plan International cites the case of both Latin America and the Middle East, where “increased levels in female education has not led to corresponding equality in the work place or at home. Girls and young women still emerge struggling with the idea that they are second-class citizens.” 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.”

The international discourse on education and women’s empowerment has only recently recognized that, unless there is a focus on the process by which education can transform inequitable social norms and structures, education does not necessarily lead to empowerment or gender equality. Gender equality can be best understood in the framework of the rights discourse, which distinguishes between the right to access and participation in education, the rights within education to gender-aware or responsive schools, peda-

gogical practices and outcomes and rights through education that lead to meaningful educational outcomes that in turn link education equality to wider processes of gender justice.⁵⁰ Whereas achieving gender parity addresses girls’ right to education, more needs to be done to address girls’ rights within and through education in order for girls’ education to lead to gender equality.

In 2010, the UN Girls’ Education Initiative held a global conference in Dakar titled “Engendering Empowerment: Education and Equality.” It called for “urgent action in support of girls’ rights to education, gender equality and empowerment opportunities.” It also noted that “poor quality of education, extreme poverty, structural inequality and violence against girls continue to jeopardize” this. The same declaration recognizes that the urgency of putting a “rights-based empowerment framework” at the center of the educational effort for girls.

In India, motivated by the belief that inclusion of girls will lead to gender equality, has worked in a multipronged way through the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the Education for All campaign, to enhance access and retention of girls by ensuring that there is a school available at every kilometer of each habitation, by giving free textbooks to all girls up to class 8, by providing girls-only schools at the upper primary level, separate toilets for girls, recruitment of 50 percent women teachers and gender-sensitive text books. In addition two focused interventions especially for girls — the National Programme for Education

of Girls at Elementary Level, and the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalyaya — have been launched to reach out to girls from extremely marginalized social groups, girls from lower castes and families living below the poverty line. Despite all these interventions, the problem of girls' education and of women's marginalization and disempowerment remains deeply problematic.⁵¹

It is clear from the above that simply providing access does not lead to the empowerment of girls. It might secure their right to education but does not necessarily secure their rights through education. Much has been done but more needs to be done. Presented below is a case study of a girls' preschool through 12th grade school called Perna, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, in northern India, which takes a life outcomes approach, uses critical feminist pedagogy and making the empowerment of its students its primary educational goal. The students of this school are very poor and come with all the societal disadvantages related to gender and poverty, which according to research,⁵² result in low achievement levels and high dropout rates. However, Perna has been running its program for eight years now and shows increased enrollment significantly lower dropout rates, higher achievement levels, higher post-primary transition and secondary completion as compared to state and national averages.

Methodology: A mixed methods and multi-perspective approach toward data collection and analysis has been adopted to construct this case study in order to understand how

Perna defines and implements an education for empowerment, what the outcomes are and what lessons should be learned. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected over a period of three months. The qualitative data include a retrospective account of the history, vision and theoretical underpinnings of the school as narrated by the founding director in order to understand the way in which the school defines learning and determines its educational goals along with their theoretical justification. The perspectives of all the stakeholders — that is, all the teachers, 52 parents and current high school students and graduate alumni, 85 in all — have been gathered from semistructured interviews, focused group discussions and questionnaires. The data from teacher and principal interviews have been used to understand how the principal and teachers define learning and how this informs their role and responsibilities in the classroom. Information gleaned from the interviews and questionnaires from the students has been used to explain how they view their learning in school in order to evaluate its impact on their lives from their perspective. The parents have been interviewed to understand their evaluation of the Perna program and its impact on the community. The detailed description of the school, its daily schedule, curriculum, and assessment methodology is based on information gathered from the founding director and the principal of the school. Ethnographic participant observation, combined with a review and transcription of several hours of videotapes and audio tapes of various classes and events in the school, and a review of

written texts produced by the students including poems, essays and scripts are used to understand the pedagogical practices.

The empowerment syllabus has been described in some detail because that is the special focus of this paper. Self-narrative reflective accounts from high school students and graduate alumni have been used to understand whether or not they think they have been empowered by their education in Prerna and what according to them was the most empowering component of their education. This along with data that provides information regarding the current life status of 90 percent of the three cohorts graduated by Prerna in terms of their current educational status, marital status, employment and income levels was obtained from them through the school to evaluate life outcomes.

The quantitative data includes enrollment and dropout figures, average test scores for mathematics, science and language, along with student and teacher attendance averages for the last three years. These were derived

from the school records and used to evaluate the schools performance as compared with national and state averages. All the above has been woven together to construct the case study that follows.

PRERNA: THE SCHOOL

Prerna, founded in 2003, is an all girls pre-school to 12th grade formal school, run by a private foundation called Studyhall Educational Foundation (SHEF). SHEF began its work in 1986, with the goal of providing quality education to all children in India. Its main area of work has been in Uttar Pradesh, which is one of the largest and most backward states in India. Currently SHEF is reaching out to over 300 teachers, 6,000 children and 14,000 student teachers through its schools and other programs.

Prerna is located in Lucknow, the capital city of Uttar Pradesh (UP). UP is the most populous state of India with a population of more than 199 million, and a sex ratio of 908 women to 1000 men. Lucknow has a population of 2.81 million people and a sex

Table 1: Social Profile of the Prerna Student Body

	Literacy rates*			Gross Enrollment Rate** (Primary)			Gross Enrollment Rate** (Upper Primary)		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
India	82%	65%	74%	95%	91%	93%	62%	54%	58%
Uttar Pradesh	68%	42%	56%	89%	86%	88%	48%	39%	44%
Lucknow	76%	61%	68%						

*Census: 2011, Government of India.

**7th All India School Education Survey, 2007

Figure 1: The Setting of the School — Uttar Pradesh and Lucknow



ratio of 906:1000, less than the national ratio of 940:1000.⁵³ According to the Annual Plan, 75.37 percent of girls in Lucknow were married before reaching the age of 18 years (Government of UP, 2007-8).

Perna is located in Gomtinagar, which is a neighborhood like many in Indian cities, where posh residential homes live side by side with very poor slums. The majority of students come from the slums of Gomtinagar, some traveling from other more distant slums. It is housed in a fairly large, well-equipped and well-furnished building of a private fee paying school for middle-class children, Study-hall, also established by SHEF, and runs in a

second shift in the afternoon, after study hall is over. Perna is an all-girls' school and has a secure building with security guards. Perna classes are held from 1:30pm until 5:30pm in the summer, and 2:00pm until 6:00pm in the winter.

A Typical Day at Perna

Perna students enter the campus by 1:30pm. Most of them walk to school and are always in groups of six or more. They often arrive before time and crowd around the gate, waiting to be let in. They wear their school uniform. The older girls wearing a red and white checked shirt and white salwar (baggy pants) and the younger girls wearing a red

and white tunic. They all carry a small school bag, which they deposit around the quad area as they line up for assembly. The school day starts with a 10-minute assembly which the principal leads. The principal begins the assembly by reading out a short prayer which the students are required to recite after her. Students participate in the assembly by reading the headlines of the newspaper, making brief presentations of either a skit, speech or a poem. They end with a group song. The students then walk or run to their classes with their teachers. A school day is broken into 6 periods of 35 minutes each and a 20 minute recess, during which they are served a high protein small meal sponsored by Didi's Foods (a sister concern that employs the mothers of Prerna students), served by the older girls. They sit around the yard chatting and eating. A bell marks the end of each period. A visitor to the school is struck by the happy sounds in the classrooms, of children engaged in discussions, answering questions and sometimes simply reciting poems or their tables in a chorus. Students can be found engaged in drama, music or dance on the stage or in their classes, playing sports in the yard or engaged in learning martial arts. Sometimes things are not so cheerful in the principal's office as she listens to stories of violence and abuse from her students, talks to parents and counsels them. The school day concludes at 5:45pm. Most of the girls leave once again in their groups, though many can be found playing in the yard or chatting with each other and their teachers. Some stay back for after school help. The girls are thin and often not fully clean, but they are happy and smiling,

greeting you with a cheery "Good morning aunty" or "hello auntie" as you enter their class. Often coming up to give you a hug or reaching out to shake your hand when you meet them in the yard. As a first time visitor to the school wrote "These girls were glowing, full of joy. They loved school."

Social Profile of the School: The school is an all-girls' school by design as the founder wanted to have a clear and undiluted focus on girls and their needs. There is evidence that there are psychological and social benefits for girls in single-sex classes and that when given the choice, girls generally preferred single-sex classes. Furthermore, research reports that single-sex classes assist in breaking down sex role stereotypes and gendered of subject areas, whereas co-educational settings tend to reinforce them.⁵⁴

Prerna has an enrollment of 700 pupils with an average size of 35 students in each class. The school runs from preschool through high school. There are 22 teachers including the principal and vice principal. The students come from very poor families, with an average family income of Rs. 6,000 (\$120) per month and an average family size of 7.9 people. A total of 60 percent of the children come from homes without electricity, 70 percent have no lavatories at home, and 43 percent live in huts or temporary homes. Many of the students are first-generation learners with 48 percent of the fathers and 60 percent of the mothers completely unschooled. A total of 24 percent of the fathers have a primary education and 23 percent of the

mothers have studied only through grade 5. Only 12 percent of the fathers and 1.2 percent of the mothers have completed grade 10. A large proportion of the students, approximately 40 percent, are engaged in work outside the home. High rates of domestic violence prevail and 46 percent of the fathers are reported to be alcoholics.

Below is a brief description of two Prerna students to further illustrate the lives of those enrolled.

Laxmi Yadav is 17 years old. Her father is a painter (and an alcoholic). Her mother worked as a construction laborer and died at the age of 27, because of repeated and rapid pregnancies, poor nourishment and delayed health care. Laxmi's father refused to spend money for his wife's treatment and she died in Laxmi's arms when she was 11. Laxmi has three sisters and a brother. She has been working as a domestic help to supplement the family's meager income since she was 7 years old. After her mother died much of the burden of supporting herself and her siblings fell upon her as her father not only drank away everything he earned, he also sold household goods to buy liquor. In order to increase her income she took on domestic work in seven homes. She had dropped out of school after two years of poor attendance when she began to work with her mother and after her mother died she stayed out to take care of her siblings until she was recruited by the Prerna teacher who came to her house. She enrolled herself and her younger sister in Prerna, because of its low costs and the tim-

ing of the afternoon classes suited her. Laxmi works from 7:00am until 1:00pm every-day and then attends school until 6:00pm, Monday through Saturday. She goes back to work after school and works until 8:00pm, and then comes home to take care of her siblings. Her younger sister Lalita has also been working in three homes since she was 7 years old. Collectively in a day, they earn Rs. 2,400 (\$45), which takes care of their living expenses. They live in an abandoned one room house with no electricity or running water. The father is drunk most of the time and frequently abuses her and her siblings as he had done their mother when she was alive.

Khushboo Rawat is 19 years old. She lives in a two-room house with her father (37 years), stepmother (25 years) and six siblings — a brother, and five sisters ranging from 12 to 14 years old. Her father does not have a regular job. He and Khushboo are the main earning members of the family. Together, they earn about Rs. 6,000 (\$110) per month. All but two of Khushboo's sisters are in school, and both parents are unschooled and illiterate. Khushboo's mother passed away at 19 years of age, when Khushboo was just 3 years old. Her father remarried soon after. Khushboo was enrolled in a local school for two years, and attended intermittently until Class 2, but had to drop out in her second year because her step mother passed away (also under 20 years of age) after giving birth to her second child. She left Khushboo with a 9-month-old half brother and took care of her 18-month-old half sister. So Khushboo at only 6 years old had to drop out of school and take care

Table 2: Social Profile of the Prerna Student Body

Household Statistics	
Average family size	7
Average family income	4500 Rs/ per month
Lower caste	92%
Living with single parent	9.8%
Living with alcoholic fathers	46%
Mothers report being beaten	98%
Students report being beaten	88%
Students working	34%
Single parent households	9.8%
Completely unschooled mothers	60%
Completely unschooled fathers	42%
Mothers graduated from Grade 10	2%
Fathers graduated from Grade 10	12%

Type of House	
Huts and temporary housing	43%
No lavatories	73%
No electricity	60%

of her siblings. She says she still had a keen desire to study. "I would read my old school books again and again, whenever I found the time," she said. When she was 10 years old, her friend Laxmi told her about her school, Prerna, that it was very cheap and that the studies were very good and the teachers very kind and loving. "So I told my dad about it, but he didn't think there was any need to study and said he had no money for her studies." She persisted, telling him it was very cheap, so grudgingly he consented after she assured him that she would continue to care for her siblings and do the housework. By now she had another step-mother who was also illiter-

ate and did not "understand education or its value." Her grandmother brought Khushboo and her younger sister to school. Khushboo was once again enrolled in Class 2. Khushboo reports that her father is often violent with her stepmother and with her and her siblings.

The Story of Prerna — Emerging Theoretical and Ideological Underpinnings:

In this section I will present the theoretical underpinnings as they emerged during the history of the school, which led to the definition of education and learning guiding the school's programs.

Prerna was started with the aim of giving girls whose parents are loath to spend any money on their daughters' education access to a high quality education at a very minimal cost. The school began with classes from pre-school (three years) to fifth grade. Thirty girls were recruited by going house to house in a neighboring slum. The teacher succeeded in convincing 30 families, largely because the fee of the school at the time was only Rs. 10 (\$0.20) per month. The number grew to 80 in the first year and now, eight years later, there are 700 girls and the school has grown to become a high school.

In the first two years, the founders adopted a liberal feminist, inclusionist approach. Feminism is defined very simply to refer to "a theoretical framework and a social movement that is cognizant of and tries to correct the continuing inequalities of power between men and women across all social classes."⁵⁵ Liberal feminism takes an inclu-

sionist perspective equating equality in education with inclusion and participation also adopted by international policy discourse on gender parity in education. Well in line with the international development discourse, the founders linked access to schooling with development of girls and society. They used the state-mandated school syllabus, and bent all their efforts to teach their students to read and write well.

From “Learning Outcomes” to “Life Outcomes” — What Can You Do and Who Can You Be?:

In the first two years, student absenteeism was high as was the number of girls who dropped out. In trying to identify the problem, the school looked at the students’ lives and learned more about the serious challenges faced by them at home — of course they were all poor, but many of them were at risk of being married off soon after reaching puberty and domestic violence and sexual abuse were rife in their homes. Many of them worked as domestic help, starting as early as the age of seven. The girls all worked hard at home and started looking after their younger siblings very early, sometimes as early as three years.

The school realized that they were not doing enough. They redefined their task in response to the children’s needs, recognizing that unless their education taught the girls to deal with the challenges that they faced in their lives, they would not finish school, would not learn and most important, their school might not make much difference in their life outcomes. Educational access with-

out completion, completion without learning and learning without social recognition does little to ensure improved conditions for women in society.”⁵⁶

Guided by the question: “Why do we want to educate girls?” the school began to move their thinking from “learning outcomes” to “life outcomes.” The girls should be educated so that they may have better lives — or, to put it in terms of the capabilities approach proposed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum — so that they may be capable of living lives that are fully human. The capabilities approach looks at quality-of-life assessments pioneered by Amartya Sen, and now through the Human Development Reports of the United Nations Development Program.

It did not seem as though the students’ lives at home supported many of the capabilities mentioned by Nussbaum; namely, they were underfed, had poor health care, their bodily integrity was always at risk of violence at home, their movements severely restricted, no space or opportunity allowed for the exercise of the senses, imagination or thought, given that even a basic education was denied them and they were rarely allowed to speak up or express their desires or will. Their sexuality was tightly controlled and they were not allowed to form any romantic attachments in the fear that they would “go wrong,” that is, lose their virginity before they were married. They were married at an early age to men whom they did not know. They were neither expected nor trained to exercise their practical reason or critical abilities to plan a

life for themselves. Burdened by housework and often with work outside the home, they rarely had the opportunity to play and enjoy recreational activities.

In short, they were not treated as ends in their own right, persons with a dignity that deserves respect. Instead, they were treated as mere instruments for the ends of others — “reproducers, caregivers, sexual outlets, agents of a family’s general prosperity” and perceived themselves similarly, not as persons, who were ends in their own right, deserving dignity and respect.⁵⁷

Education and Gender Equality: There is evidence that schools that adopt a liberal, inclusive stance turn themselves into “unwilling allies of conservative forces” and often end up reproducing gender inequalities that exist in society. A commission set up by the United Nations Development Program in 1996, concluded that “schooling remains an essential institution in the reproduction and maintenance of modern patriarchies.”⁵⁸

Schools following this ideology do not give students the necessary tools to fight their circumstances or help them define their lives and their circumstances in ways that enable them to move beyond prescribed limits.⁵⁹ Giving girls access to schooling without giving them the tools to problematize the structural inequalities and broader social and economic factors which result in gender inequalities, does not help girls to reconstitute themselves in empowering ways.⁶⁰ If gender inequality is understood as relational and arising out

of unequal gendered power relations,⁶¹ then can an education that aims at gender equality and empowerment avoid discussions of power? Radical feminists have argued that a liberal feminist perspective does not go far enough because it neglects the ways in which power is organized socially and politically in gendered ways, in the family and in the larger society.⁶²

Scholars have variously defined “gender” as a socially constructed dynamic system of values that shapes the power relationship between men and women leading to socially constructed and approved distinct roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes for men and women.⁶³ West, Zimmerman and Deutsch argue that gender is a verb, not a noun, and it is something we do and is continually socially constructed in the light of normative conceptions of men and women. Families engage in continuous construction of gender through their daily interactions and socialization and that these “gendering processes” lead to institutionalized power relations within the family.⁶⁴ The same is true for institutions like the school.

Prerna recognized this and understood that unless they focused deliberately on gender and “gendering processes” in school, their school could easily end up reproducing the unequal gender relations of power already prevalent in the community. The education they provided to their girls would neither help them become equal nor would it lead to gender equality. The education in Prerna, like that in countless other schools, would be

“doing gender” and teaching their students to “do gender”⁶⁵ in socially approved ways. Thus, the school focused on determining how to “undo gender.”⁶⁶

Undoing Gender — Classrooms as “Radical Spaces of Possibility”:

Setting aside the macro-societal perspective of Laxmi’s life, looking at the micro-perspective, if the school did not take a definite gender perspective, Laxmi’s life might be the same despite her schooling — still living as a means to other people’s ends, not becoming an autonomous person or an end in herself, worthy of respect. If she was not empowered, her life would probably repeat the gendered cycle of her mother’s life. So if the goal of education was to seek better life outcomes for Laxmi, then it was important firstly to create an environment in Prerna that supported her capabilities and even more importantly to help her understand the dynamics of gender as she encountered them at home and in society, so that she could reconstruct and renegotiate them for herself. As Rothchild points out, children encounter gendering processes and gender structures daily at home in the family and often these are reinforced by the social structure and the education system. Children are therefore socialized into doing gender in “culturally defined ways.” However, gender structures are not fixed, they are dynamic and are open to negotiation and reconstruction.⁶⁷ So students must be enabled to look critically at the way in which power is structured in their lives, to problematize their gendered existence, to denaturalize it and to redefine it for themselves.

Based on her study in Nepal where she examines the complexities of genderization within schools, Jennifer Rothchild concludes that “although promoting access to and participation in existing formal education programs is necessary, it is not, in itself, sufficient to transform gender power relations in the wider society.” She goes on to say that “comprehensive education has tremendous potential to bring about social change. Education that develops and reinforces critical thinking skills in and outside the classroom, facilitates awareness of matrices of domination and oppression. Education that empowers individuals not only equips them with an understanding of their society and the place that they currently have in it, but also leads to their undertaking efforts to transform existing social relations and social structures.”

Propelled by a similar view, the school decided to take a determined gender-based stand. Adopting the view of the radical feminists described above, Prerna committed itself to focus on life outcomes and toward empowering girls through their education. The founders perceived this as an important way of working toward more gender equality in society. So Prerna moved toward a truly transformative education which had the aim of raising girls’ expectations and consciousness, enabling them to engage in critical and creative thought, to describe their reality, critically examine it, learn to imagine the possible, aspire to make it real, develop a voice in which to criticize, debate, inquire, resist, negotiate and to struggle to achieve transformation and equity. To this end of achieving

empowering learning, Prerna organized its structure, content and pedagogy.

Learning Defined — Looking at the

Students: Prerna's founders looked at Laxmi and her life and asked the question — what did she need to learn in order to have better life outcomes? These are some answers that shaped their thinking: She needed to learn how to cope with the challenges in her life. To do this she needed to learn first and foremost that she was a person worthy of respect, equal to anyone else in the world. She needed to understand why she was not treated as an equal. What was it about her sex, her caste and her class that made her inferior? Why did she have such little power? Why did she have no control over her life? Why could her father beat her whenever he wanted? Why could he cast her out if she did not do what he wanted? Why could she not have any freedom of mobility outside her home? Why did she not have the right to plan her life, to decide who she could be? Why did she have to drop out of school and take care of her younger siblings and not her older brother? She needed to know who she was and how she was related to others in her universe. She needed all these conceptual resources, this knowledge to live like an autonomous person.

She needed to learn the above along with learning to read, write, and do math and science. She needed resources and skills that would equip her for a job, which would enable her economically, and allow her to function autonomously. And to that end she required at least a high school certificate, probably a vo-

cational skill too. She needed to learn how to choose a career wisely, and how to equip herself with the required academic skills and information about avenues for financial support.

Above all she needed to be empowered by the knowledge that she had a right to access all these resources. That she had the right to a better life. In order for the school to help her achieve better life outcomes she needed a safe environment, material and intellectual resources and agency. Prerna put this understanding of learning, education and empowerment at the center and moved toward critically examining its educational goals, the cultural content of education, the pedagogical practices and the organizational structure of the school.

PRERNA'S EDUCATIONAL GOALS:

Prerna's main goal is to empower its students. To help them emerge as women with a perception of themselves as equal persons having the right to equal participation in an unequal society, and to be equipped with the appropriate skills for such equal participation.

To this end:

- They must learn to read, write and successfully complete the government-mandated syllabus up to grade 12.
- They must learn to perceive themselves as equal persons.
- They must emerge with aspirations for a future for themselves, have the confidence and the skills to realize it.

- They must have a critical understanding of the social and political structures which frame their life and determine its limits and possibilities.

In order to achieve these goals, Prerna has organized the school in the following way:

Organizational Structure: The school is headed by the principal who is assisted by a vice principal. They are responsible for recruiting teachers, monitoring and mentoring them, admitting students, managing the daily operations of the school, including making timetables, assigning classes to teachers, conducting planning meetings with the staff, organizing assessments, planning and organizing all school activities and events, including monthly meetings with parents. The management style is a consultative, democratic one. The school has made a special effort to foster a culture of care and support, with the needs of the students being kept at the center of the organizational structure. Students call teachers “auntie” in order to reduce the traditional distance between teachers and students. They are accountable to the students and the principal. The director of the school provides academic leadership and mentorship. SHEF initiated the program with its own resources and now supports the program, by finding donors and filling the gap from its own resources.

The community is considered part of the organizational structure, as Prerna works closely with parents, community organizations like Suraksha (a local women’s group), Child Line (a regional child protection services or-

ganization), and government organizations such as the local police. All these groups work to support each other in the interests of the students. How they do this is described more fully in a later section below.

The entire organization works like a universe of care and support.

Figure 2: Organization Structure



THE TEACHERS

The school has all female teachers except for one part time male music teacher. This has been done by design, in order to provide a safe and secure environment for girls and to make the gender focus easier and less contentious.

There are 22 teachers, out of whom two are part time. A total of 11 of the teachers have been with the school for over five years. The others have been recruited as the school has grown. The recruitment process

is a simple one. The applicants are recruited on a need basis through a written application and interview by the principal and director. The school is not in a position to be very demanding as it is unable to pay competitive salaries. The management tries to get teachers with a teaching credential or bachelor of education degree, but is open to recruiting them without one as the school believes in training the teachers on the job and engages them in continuous training with a strong focus on gender training and critical feminist pedagogy, organizing several workshops for them each year. They are mentored continuously by the director and the principal. The teachers themselves are supported by the school when they face gender related problems in their own lives.

Twelve of the teachers have a postgraduate degree or diploma and the remaining 10 have a bachelor's degree. One of the teachers is an ex-student of Prerna. She joined after she graduated from high school as a teacher's assistant and has now been confirmed after she graduated with a bachelor's degree in 2012. Only six teachers have teaching credentials, two are pursuing them. When interviewed about their understanding of their goals and roles as teachers at Prerna, most joined Prerna because they needed a job and found the afternoon timings convenient. Only 20 percent of them joining it out of altruistic motives. All the teachers think of their goal in Prerna as a complex one that goes beyond "just teaching academics." In fact, one teacher said, "Our goal in Prerna is a very challenging one. We aim at mak-

ing our girls economically independent and mentally strong. They should be able to face the problems of society, take their own decisions. We have to make them aware of many things which their community might prefer them to be unaware of. We have to teach them to respect themselves and get respect from others." They see their task as understanding the needs of the students, teaching them to fight for their rights, developing a sense of self-confidence by providing academic and emotional support that they don't get at home. They all recognize the challenges that the girls face and see their role as teachers, mentors, confidants, counselors and guides. Most of them mentioned the importance of forging a very strong relationship with the students.

When asked how teaching in Prerna had impacted them, 50 percent of the teachers said that they had learnt from their students how to face challenges with good character. They found their students very inspiring. Thirty percent said they had been empowered by their work with the girls and had "gained their lost confidence." Twenty percent said they had learned to be responsible teachers and members of society. One of the teachers is a former student of Prerna. She says "I have studied in Prerna, so I know what I have to do. This school not only teaches formal subjects but takes care of its students psychologically, physically and financially. It helps them to be strong, face the challenges of life and fight for their rights. Other schools don't consider the personal lives of their students at all."

KEY ELEMENTS OF THE PRERNA PROGRAM

Financial Support: The school charges a very subsidized fee of Rs. 60 per month (U.S. \$1.05) up to grade 8 and then Rs. 100 per month (U.S. \$1.40) in the secondary classes. This is a commitment fee, so that parents value what they get and feel respected that it is not a dole. Need-based scholarships are given to those who cannot afford even this much. A scholarship of Rs. 5,000 (U.S. \$90) is awarded to those students who finish grade 12 successfully, without getting married, and intend to continue their studies by enrolling into a college degree program. Uniforms and books are provided at a very subsidized cost, often provided free in case of extreme poverty.

Convenient Time: Though Prerna is an afternoon school by default, it has turned out to be a boon, because many of the girls are compelled to work to support their families in the morning. These girls are able to attend school without losing a livelihood. If the girls had to make a choice between work and school, many of them would not come to school. The flexibility of the timings has enabled many girls to go to school and finish a school education, which has enabled them to emerge from domestic work by equipping them for better jobs.

Engaging Closely with the Community:

The school engages closely with the community with the goal of moving the community to value and treat their daughters as equal autonomous persons deserving of dignity and

respect and is an active advocate to change social norms that are discriminatory. All new parents are required to attend an orientation meeting where they are told about the school's goals and philosophy and their empowerment and rights-based approach. Parents are required to sign a bond that states that they are aware of the law concerning child marriage and they agree to abide by it. Though the bond is not a legal document, it creates awareness and instills a minimum commitment. Parents are invited for regular meetings and workshops where their children's academic learning is discussed, along with other non-academic issues. Parents are given information about the laws related to domestic violence and child abuse. They are also directed to engage with community organizations providing child services and women's organizations. They are encouraged to support each other in case of violations in the community. The school conducts gender workshops for the parents, engages in continuous counseling of parents on all fronts — absenteeism and irregular attendance, intervention counseling in the case of proposed child marriages, domestic violence, sexual abuse, often enlisting the support of community organizations like Child Protection Services (Child Line), women's rights organizations and the local police.

The teachers and management pursue possible cases of drop out/pull out very actively and persistently and are able to prevent several such cases. For example, Khushboo's father wanted to pull her out of school in grade 9 and again more determinedly in the grade 10, in order to marry her off.

Khushboo resisted at home and informed her Principal, seeking her support. The Principal tried repeatedly to counsel her father against this, reminding him that it was illegal as Khushboo was underage. He refused to listen and was so infuriated at his daughter's defiance that he abused her severely. She reached out to her peer network and sent word to the school. The school immediately called Child Line and the police. They both intervened immediately and Khushboo was rescued. She is now living with her grandmother, has graduated from high school, is working part time and is enrolled in a three-year bachelor's program.

Taking Care of Physical Needs: Based on their observations that most of the children looked malnourished and were coming hungry to school, a mid-day meal plan was put in place. A protein-rich, mid-day meal is provided free of cost to all the students, to supplement their nutritional needs.

Early Enrollment and Multilevel Accelerated Learning: After the initial recruitment of the students, the enrollment has been voluntary. Students are enrolled by parents, mostly mothers, neighbors, current Prerna students and community organizations. Though every effort is made to encourage the community to send children to school at the appropriate age, many girls who have fallen through the cracks and have had no school education at all are brought in by current students, others in the community and often by themselves. The school does not turn them away, but tries to have a multi-level learning and accelerated

program, so that these girls learn at a different pace and are transitioned to higher grades as rapidly as possible. The goal is to ensure that students achieve a primary grade education as early as possible and are transitioned to the upper primary level and finally to high school.

Pedagogy: The pedagogy is engaging, interactive, participatory, and activity based. Rote learning is kept to a minimum. The

CURRICULUM:

Primary classes (Class Nursery to Class 5): Hindi, English, math, science, social science, computer science, sports, drama, music and empowerment classes from grade 3 onwards.

Upper Primary: 6th to 8th: Hindi, English, math, history, geography, science, computer science and empowerment classes, sports, drama and music.

Secondary and Higher Secondary (Class 9 to 12): Hindi, English (Compulsory), in addition to any four out of the following classes: math, history, geography, science, home science, psychology, sociology, Indian culture and history, computer science, empowerment classes, sports, drama and music.

teachers monitor their students' learning and attendance very closely, assessing them after each unit in each subject. These scores are shared and discussed with the principal and director at the end of every month, along with attendance averages. Student reports are shared with parents on a quarterly basis, in problematic cases even more frequently. The teachers take a gendered perspective while teaching all the subjects and a clear critical feminist pedagogy is practiced while conducting the empowerment classes. This is described in greater detail later in the paper.

Flexible Assessments: Keeping the constrained home circumstances of the students in mind and the fact that many of them are forced to work during the day, the school has opted for the National Open School exam, which offers a high quality curriculum of a national standard, recognized nationwide by universities and colleges, with the advantage that it is extremely flexible in their examination schedule, giving the girls several chances to pass. Even for internal assessments, the teachers are sympathetic of the constraints faced by the girls at home and willing to make necessary adjustments. It is common for a student to ask the teacher for more time to study for a test "because there was no time to study last night. I was cooking till late."

An Enriched Curriculum: The school follows the state mandated syllabus, with a focus on reading, writing and numeracy skills in the early grades. The primary language of instruction is Hindi (also the mother tongue for 99 percent of the children), with English as a second lan-



Curriculum enriched with sports, dance and drama

guage. English is added as a second language in grade one and taught aggressively in order to ensure that students have mastery over a language that continues to be a power language and necessary for getting better paid jobs in the state and in the rest of the country. In response to popular demand, the state has introduced English in all its public schools at grade one. In addition, students are also given instruction in social studies and simple science in the primary grades. The syllabus grows in complexity in the upper primary and secondary grades.

The academic curriculum is enriched with sports, martial arts, music, art and a strong focus on drama. The students are encour-

aged to develop a strong voice and to use it in a variety of fora. They are given several opportunities to express themselves and make presentations and performances to which parents are invited regularly. The drama performances provide a safe site for the girls to give voice to their feelings of being oppressed and discriminated against by their families. Since the complaints are not voiced directly or personally, they are protected from real consequences and repercussions.

Vocational Training and Career Counseling:

Students are provided vocational training by enrolling them in apprentice programs in study hall and the community from grade 9 onward, when they are at a legal age to work. Career counseling is provided regularly through a mentoring process with the aim of building aspirations for a better life and helping them plan ways to achieve them. Computer training is given to students from grade 4 onward. High school students are encouraged to use the internet, make digital movies and use the electronic medium to express themselves and expand their connections with others in the world, thus giving them a more cosmopolitan and expanded view of themselves and their lives.

Making Education Relevant to Their Lives by Practicing Critical Feminist Pedagogy:

Poor quality teaching and irrelevant curricula are cited as reasons for girls' high attrition rates.⁶⁸ Many policy documents recommend "making curricula applicable and relevant to their lives," though the "relevance" is mostly defined as vocationally

relevant.⁶⁹ Prerna has defined "relevance of the curriculum" more broadly to include their gendered life circumstance and needs. The teachers are required to make a very detailed social profile of all their students upon enrolment after intensive interviews with the students and their parents. This ensures that the teachers are fully aware of the lives of their students and are able to counsel them accordingly taking care of their special learning and well being needs, reporting their progress or problems regularly to the principal.

Empowerment and Gender Studies:

Prerna has made education relevant to their lives by including a very strong rights based empowerment component in the body of the curriculum from grade 4 onwards, where every week there are focused discussions on various issues that affect their lives closely, ranging from child marriage, to domestic violence, sexual abuse, and health such as menstruation. The goal is to undo the inequitable mental constructs that the students have formed as a result of their gendered socialization at home. Uttar Pradesh is well recognized as a state associated with some of the starkest indicators of gender discrimination on the Indian subcontinent.⁷⁰

Prerna has constructed its own empowerment/gender studies course collaboratively with the students. This course has evolved organically over time. It has emerged from the needs of the students and their lives. It is not formalized in textbooks, work sheets or formal written tests. Empowerment classes are part of the regular timetable and are

conducted once a week in all classes, beginning in grade 4. The teachers practice critical feminist pedagogy, which is based on Paulo Freire's idea of critical pedagogy and motivated by the goal of gender equality. Very simply, it is defined by them as a pedagogical practice with the goal of raising girls' critical consciousness regarding oppressive social conditions and norms, patriarchal power structures and consequent gender relations that impact their lives. It further empowers them by leading them to imagine an alternative, egalitarian social order and to aspire and work towards realizing it.

Teaching is participatory, including many activities, like games, role-play and drama, including formal and informal performances. The students engage in critical literacy which includes journal, script and poetry writing on issues related to gender emerging from their own life experiences, shared discussions in class and reading of age appropriate feminist stories, poetry and plays. Most important, the students and teachers engage in critical discussions or dialogues as they question, discuss and analyze topics relevant to their lives. The discussions are led by the teacher and older peers intermittently. The teacher serves as a facilitator and guide, but also participate actively in sharing her own experiences. Relevant statistics, theory and related laws are introduced in the higher secondary classes. The teacher works at building the classroom into a safe space for discussions and activities. Most of the topics are ongoing, becoming progressively more complex as the students grow in age and understanding.

At the primary level topics related to their rights as girls, to bodily integrity, to equal nutrition, to equal health care and to education are introduced. Topics such as gender, sexual abuse, domestic violence and child-marriage are introduced in the post primary classes and expanded upon with a special focus on patriarchal societal and family structures and the construction of unequal power relations within them. Marriage and its impact on girls lives, adolescence and its special problems for girls regarding their mobility and freedom and their relationship with boys are discussed with an emphasis on teaching girls their sexual and reproductive rights. In post primary classes the girls are mentored into building aspirations for higher education with specific careers in mind. The focus of all the classes is to build a sense of agency and transformative power to enable the students to take action in their lives to meet all the challenges facing them. (See Appendix for full details of the syllabus, along with one module described in detail.)

Critical Dialogues: Critical dialogues are aimed at making people critically aware of their social and political reality. The underlying belief is that being able to name their reality will enable people or empower them to transform it. As philosopher, educator and activist Paulo Freire says, "To be dehumanized is to have no control over the form one's humanity takes, to live in a world named and made by others" and "to become human is to become more critically aware of our world and gain more control over it"—that is, to gain agency. The students engage in critical dialogues in culture circles, which are both

teacher led and peer led. These are all focused on the themes that govern their lives and are critical to their well being — marriage, child marriage, domestic violence, “honor,” sexual abuse among others, with a focus on power and how its distribution in a patriarchal society impacts their lives. Perna believes that in order to empower their students it is critical to discuss “power.”

Described below is an example of the critical dialogues that the students engage in every week, as a regular part of the curriculum.

Defining the ideal man and the ideal woman:

Teacher(T): Which is the most important quality of a man?

Rachna: The man should earn money.

Jyoti: Strength.

Rachna: Freedom.

T: So money. She’s talking about freedom and she’s saying strength.

Rachna: Anyways men are stronger.

T: Tell me what in your opinion should be the qualities of an ideal man.

Christina: He should give due respect to a woman.

Kunti: He must respect everyone.

T: Everyone should say something or the other, you cannot sit dumb.

Kunti: A man needs to think about a woman’s aspiration and

dreams not only this he must respect a woman.

T: You mean this is the most important quality a man should have, never mind being rich or poor...? He could be handsome or ugly...?

Sadhana: He should give freedom to a woman.

Rinky: Equality must be considered. He should be helpful.

Kunti: He should respect everyone.

Christina: He should be employed somewhere.

Kunti: He must be wise.

Rachna: He should be allow the woman to work outside.

T: Ok now tell me about an ideal woman.

Kunti: She should be independent.

Christina: She must know about her rights.

Arti: She must be educated.

Christina: Freedom is a must.

Sadhana: She should be aware about her own rights.

Kunti: She must make her own decisions.

Rachna: Woman should be economically independent.

Jyoti: If she is educated then she also has an authority.

Kunti: She should respect others and should be able to fight for herself.

Rachna: A woman must be educated and confident about herself.

This dialogue came after a series of conversations in which the students describe marriage as their mothers, older sisters and aunts had experienced it. They had interviewed their mothers for this. The purpose of these dialogues was to help the students challenge and resist the conventional notions of masculinity and femininity which they had internalized and which framed their ways of knowing, of behaving and constructing themselves in the world. The goal was to help them logically identify their reality, envision possibilities, aspire to realize these and to give them the power to transform their lives.

The dialogue circles provide a safe place, for the girls to risk definitions that they are too afraid to articulate to their families and communities. They would be severely chastised if they were to ever to state thoughts such as these. They are also developing supportive relations with their peers and teacher, which gives them the strength to resist and take action in their lives. As is evident from the transcript – the students are constructing alternative definitions of masculinity and femininity that position them as equal persons, even though nothing in their lives at home or in society gives them an equal position. These are not the traditional definitions of masculinity or femininity that their upbringing has taught them. Yet they are able to imagine a possibility of equality between men and women. Imagining pos-

sibilities is the first step in moving toward realizing them. “The availability of alternatives at the discursive level, of being able to at least imagine the possibility of having chosen differently, is thus critical to the emergence of a critical consciousness, the process by which people move from a position of unquestioning acceptance of the social order to a critical perspective on it.”⁷¹

The girls live in a world named and made by their fathers, brothers and to some extent by their mothers. The social conditions lead them to expect to have a life named by their husbands and in-laws after they are married, which they perceive as an inevitable condition of life, one over which they have no control. The critical dialogues and the other activities in the empowerment classes and the school calendar, help students become more critically aware of the gendered construction of the institutions in which they live their lives and in so doing they denaturalize and deconstruct their social and political structure.

As part of their empowerment studies, the students are required to interview adults and adolescents in the community on various topics in their course. For example, they interviewed their own or friends’ mothers, sisters, aunts, some fathers, brothers and uncles about their views on child marriage, its incidence and justification. They collected all these interviews and put them together in the form of a report and a short play, which they performed back to the community.

OUTCOMES: DOES PRERNA SUCCEED IN ACHIEVING ITS GOALS?

Enrollment: Prerna's enrollment has grown steadily every year since its inception in 2003, when it began with 30 girls, ended with 80 in the first year and has 700 students in 2012.

Students' Academic Learning Outcomes: Prerna students take the state board exam for class 8 and the national open school exam for classes 10 and 12. They are also tested every month with more summative assessments twice a year. Their academic test scores are benchmarked against national averages as reported by a study conducted by National Council of Educational Research and Training, New Delhi (NCERT). The school

attendance average at Prerna is 85 percent as against a state average of 50 percent. The dropout rate is less than 10 percent annually against a national average of 73 percent. School average scores in language, math and science in class 8 are 62 percent, 65 percent and 61 percent, respectively, against mean achievement scores for the state, which are 47, 33 and 32 for language, math and science. Prerna has graduated three cohorts from high school, where 92 percent of the girls who enrolled, finished.

Life Outcomes: Though the students have not been tested for empowerment formally, the life outcomes of the cohorts who have graduated are very encouraging. Life outcomes are defined in the following terms:

Table 3: Prerna's Performance: Attendance, Completion and Achievement

Comparison Data	Prerna	Uttar Pradesh	India (National)
Mean achievement (end of grade 8)			
Hindi	60%	47%*	52%*
Math	56%	33%*	38%*
Science	61%	32%*	40%*
Dropout rate [†]			
Up to grade 5	7%	52%	40%
Up to grade 8	7%	73%	61%
Up to grade 10	8%	78%	73%
Attendance [†]	84%	50%	N/A
Transition rate to upper primary [†]	93%	64%	N/A

* Figures include scores of male and female students.

[†] Prerna figures from 2011–2012.

Sources: Mean Achievement Scores NCERT Survey 2006/7; Drop out figures for girls from Seventh All India Education Survey (reference date 2002), NCERT; UP Attendance rate from State Elementary Education Report Card 2010–11.

Table 4: Cohort Progress

SL. No.	Cohort by Year	Student (X)	Students (XII Grade)	Higher Education Levels	Marital Status	Employment Status after XII Grade	Personal Avg. Annual Income
1	2009–2010	9	9	100% (9 girls) 55% Graduated with a BA degree (3yrs prgm) 45% Pursuing a BA degree currently in 2nd yr.	22% (2 girls) Married at 20 yrs Married at 23 yrs	90% (8 girls) 4 girls—Asst. Teachers 2 girls—Call Ceter Reps 1 girl—Shop floor Sales Girl 1 girl—Asst. Accountant	Min: INR 48,000 Avg: INR 56,250 Max: INR 78,000
2	2010–2011	20	17	71% (12 girls) All pursuing a BA degree currently in 2nd yr. (No. information on 4 girl)	6% (1 girl) Married at 20 yrs	65% (11 girls) 5 girls—Call Center Reps 2 girls—Office Receptionists 2 girls—Shop floor Sales Girls 1 girl—Asst. Teacher 1 girl—Office Assistant (No information on 4 girls)	Min: INR 24,000 Avg: INR 54,000 Max: INR 84,000
3	2011–2012	16	16	88% (14 girls) All 14 pursuing a BA degree currently in 1st yr. (No information on 1 girl)	6% (1 girl) Married at 19 yrs	75% (12 girls) 3 girls—Asst. Teachers 2 girls—Shop floor Sales Girls 1 girl—Call Center Reps 1 girl—Store Manager 1 girl—Office Receptionist 1 girl—Asst. Librarian 1 girl—Professional Typist 1 girl—Office Assistant 1 girl—Asst. Photographer (No information on 1 girl)	Min: INR 24,000 Avg: INR 35,800 Max: INR 72,000

- Successful transition and completion of grade 10 at the very least and grade 12 optimally;
- Escaping marriage before the legal age of 18 years;
- Transition to higher education;
- Having a future life or career plan; and,
- Empowered: that is, emerging with recognition of themselves as equal autonomous persons, a critical understanding of social structures, knowledge of their legal rights and a sense of agency.

Prerna has graduated three cohorts. Ninety-two percent of the girls who enrolled finished, successfully resisting societal dropout pressures. All of them have found placement and are studying for their bachelor's degree either through the IGNOU distance learning program (IGNOU is a highly respected and internationally recognized university having over 3 million students) or other colleges. Part of the first cohort has just graduated with their bachelor's degrees.

Empowerment Outcomes: CARE's Gender Empowerment Framework identifies the following three interactive dimensions of empowerment: agency, supportive relations and structures.⁷² I use this framework to understand and evaluate Prerna's empowerment outcomes.

Agency involves gaining skills, knowledge of one's rights, perception of oneself as an equal person with rights, a critical analytical understanding of society and one's place in it,

the ability to take control, make decisions and take action. Developing supportive relations has been identified by several empowerment practitioners and advocates as being central to empowerment.⁷³ People develop mutual support by forming new supportive relations or networks, which gives them the strength to resist, negotiate power and become agents of change in their own lives and in their communities. Structural change involves gaining a critical understanding of social and political structures, and the power relations of the so-called social order that define their lives, which enables them to challenge the routine, conventional norms, family forms, stereotypical definition of roles and responsibilities and other taken for granted behaviors that shape their lives.⁷⁴

Prerna has not measured the empowerment outcomes of the students by way of formal tests. As such they have no quantitative test scores available for analysis. The school assesses their students' development of voice and agency, ability to resist child marriage, transition successfully to high school and onward to tertiary education, their ability to mentor their junior students, to speak out at performances and parent meetings against discriminatory social norms, to advocate in their communities against domestic violence, their ability to find employment outside the home and to participate in decisions regarding their marriage. This method of assessing empowerment is adopted by other programs around the world. For example, the Tuseme project, which works toward girls' empowerment through drama, has

had a large impact in 13 countries in sub-Saharan Africa. They have not developed formal measurement tools of their students either and instead assess their students' empowerment by observing their participation and behavior in the activities.

Participant observation and a review of video tapes of the critical dialogue sessions and other student activities like the one described below reveal that a majority of the students have developed a strong voice, speak up in their classes, and are ready to share their experiences and speak up at home against unfair practices. Several of the students have sought help from school authorities, and with their support have successfully resisted child marriage. Most importantly, they are able to see the unfairness of the practice and question it. The interviews of the parents reveal that parents are listening to their students' voice. Of the 52 parents interviewed, 44 percent of them thought the students from Prerna were independent, 28 percent thought they were self-sufficient/self-reliant, 18 percent thought they were intelligent and 9 percent called them outspoken. One of the mothers said that "there are times when I am taking a wrong decision and my daughter helps me think right. . . . I learnt from my daughter that marrying your daughter at a wrong age is against the law." Another father was determined to put an end to his daughter's education after class 10 and marry her off. She resisted strongly and refused to either drop out or get married, citing the law to her father. He said to her, "It is your education in that school, that has made you disobedient.

It has given you teeth of rebellion. You now talk of your rights to me."

From "Personal" Activism to "Social"

Activism: The students from class 9 who graduated from high school in June 2012, initiated and formed a group called "Veerangana" (meaning woman of courage) and have already engaged in two community campaigns, one against domestic violence and child marriage and a "clean our community" campaign, in which they collaborated with the local political representative. Their campaign against domestic violence (DV) and child marriage (CM) was a two-month-long one, during which they conducted critical dialogues with groups of women in their homes using the content and methodology from their classes at school. During these dialogues, they informed the women about related laws and urged them to resist violence individually and collectively. They conducted a signature campaign in the community and collected 250 signatures from men and women pledging that they would neither violate nor abuse anyone nor would they accept being violated or abused. They publicized the names, contact information and services of community organizations like Child Line services and Suraksha (a local women's organization) widely in the community along with the laws related to DV and CM. Finally they conducted a three-hour-long rally, in which they led a procession through the community carrying posters to show solidarity against DV and CM. They scripted a play on the topic and performed it in the street square for the community. The play is a hard-hitting one

showing how a father's alcoholism, violence against the mother resulting from that and a mother's acceptance of the violence as inevitable given his status as "lord and master" are detrimental to the peace and well-being of the family and the community. During the play, students questioned the father's right to be "lord and master" and the mothers' resigned acceptance of the violence. The teachers of the school supported their students by participating in the rally.

Retrospective Self-Narratives: Scholars studying the measurement of empowerment have pointed out that given the subjective and procedural nature of empowerment, for evaluation of empowerment to be accurate must not only include qualitative measures, but it should also be subjective. Sen and Kabeer recommend the inclusion of "retrospective self-narratives," as the process of empowerment must be self-assessed and validated by the agents themselves. The students are encouraged to write self-reflective journals regularly. They share these with their teachers, which helps their teachers to assess their empowerment outcomes. For the purpose of this study, the graduates of Prerna were interviewed and asked to write retrospective self-narratives. Given below are some of the responses:

Khushboo: When Khushboo became 15 years old and reached grade 9, her father found that he wanted her to marry. He said that he saw no value in letting her continue her education, since her purpose was to get married. Khushboo resisted. Her dad was adamant that

she should marry. Angry that she would defy his authority and disobey him, he began to beat her and abuse her regularly. When she completed grade 10, he refused to let her study any further. Khushboo resisted steadfastly.

"At home no one cared about what I wanted, no one listened to me. In school I spoke to my teachers and my friends and they heard me. That gave me courage and the confidence to resist before I had been through the critical discussions in school I did not know I had rights. I thought I was bound (by God, by nature) to do what my parents asked of me. Then I realized that I have rights and I can be someone. So I found the strength to resist and defy my father. I wish I had got my parents support, I might have done even better." She values her education "because it is not just the studies that changes us, but all our discussions. . . This other stuff. We learn about our rights. We realize that child marriage, domestic violence, child labor — is not ok. It shouldn't be happening. That we are equal to our brothers and should get equal opportunities. I know that education is very valuable and my only chance to get myself a life. Before I joined Prerna, I just lived; I didn't know I was someone. Now I know. I have more self-confidence, I am more self-dependent... I feel I can take my own decisions and live my life on my own terms."

Kunti Rawat is a student from our first cohort. She graduated in 2010. She comes from a very poor family of seven sisters and

one brother. Her father has been ailing, her mother is illiterate and worked as a construction laborer for years to support her family and only recently stopped, after her son began working. He earns Rs. 7,000 and was the chief breadwinner of the family, until Kunti and Rama began working to supplement the family income. She has nearly finished her bachelor's program with nearly one more year left. She competed and won a year-long scholarship to a community college in the U.S.

Kunti has a clear life plan for herself: "I want to be an independent girl. For that I plan to establish my own business. I could also be a teacher or counselor, but being a business woman is my first preference. I have made an outline for myself. I know my goal is not easy, but I have worked in a food manufacturing business almost from its inception and have some experience of seeing how a business grows. I am also going to take business classes at Whatcom and that should help me." She has a clear understanding of gender and believes that "society is very unfair to women. Everyone has the right to live in their own way. No one has the right to discriminate against us. But people do — for example, they think boys should get more education than girls. That is totally unfair." She thinks her parents are also very conservative and want her to get married and live like her other sister," after all they are also a part of society. They think men should get all the opportunities and power. I think if women get the same

opportunity they can do even better. My parents don't have the strength to oppose society. But I think I can convince them and get them on my side."

Laxmi learned to speak about herself openly in front of a group. "Before I came to Prena, I knew I wanted an education but I didn't know why. Now I know who I am. And I want to be someone, and I think I can be who ever I want to be." She thinks the most important thing that the empowerment classes gave her was that it helped her aspire. It gave her a voice and gave her the strength to face her problems. "I was pushed to talk about my problems and face them. This helped me find ways of solving them. Today I am not scared of anyone or anything, Even my father has learnt to respect me. He can't beat us anymore. I wish he would also stop drinking."

Moni Kannaujiya comes from a family of four sisters. She is a recent graduate. Currently enrolled in her first year bachelor's program and an apprentice photographer. She wants to be a professional photographer.

"I feel I can now become someone, anyone I want to be. I have learned I can fight for my rights. In my family girls did not have the right to speak up or take any decisions, but I learned in school that I have the right to take decisions about my life. Today I have convinced my parents that I can take my own decisions. Now they discuss things with me... Society is like a wall for girls. It does not let us do anything, doesn't let us grow. I know

Figure 3: Girls Empowerment Framework



Source: Adapted from CARE (2011, 13)

now that this is unfair and society should change, let us progress, hear us. I have learned that I can speak up when I see something wrong and I have the confidence to do that."

Aarti Singh belongs to a family of five siblings. Her father is an alcoholic and used to frequently beat her mother. A few years ago she called in distress. In desperation her

mother was threatening to kill herself and all the children. Aarti graduated in 2009, was apprenticed as an assistant teacher in Prerna and has graduated with a bachelor's degree this year in June.

"I could never open my mouth at home. I was a frightened weak girl. Now I speak up. Now I am not afraid. My father has stopped beating us because we speak

up... I know my rights and am not afraid to demand them. Now I dream and I want to be a teacher. I wasn't sure I would even finish high school. But now I have a BA and I want to do a B.Ed. I want to learn dancing and computers and everything, anything. There are many challenges but I know that we can find solutions, I am not afraid now. At home my mother asks my advice and I am confident now that I can give her good advice."

Rinky Kannaujiya is a student from the first cohort. She is in her final year of college. She works as an assistant-apprentice teacher in a special needs school.

"I have a friend in another school. She does well in her exams, but can't talk to anyone. She is so scared. Once we went to the store and she had to return something. She couldn't do it. She asked me to speak for her and I did. I am not scared, I can speak to anyone. I have learnt to be confident."

In their self-narratives and their interviews, all students mention being able to speak up for themselves,, being confident, being able to make decisions, being unafraid, knowing their rights and being able to fight for them. They mention aspirations and have made specific plans to realize them by equipping themselves with the required skills. They also display an understanding of an unequal social structure with the added knowledge that it is not fixed, but can be altered with effort. Several of them mention that over time they

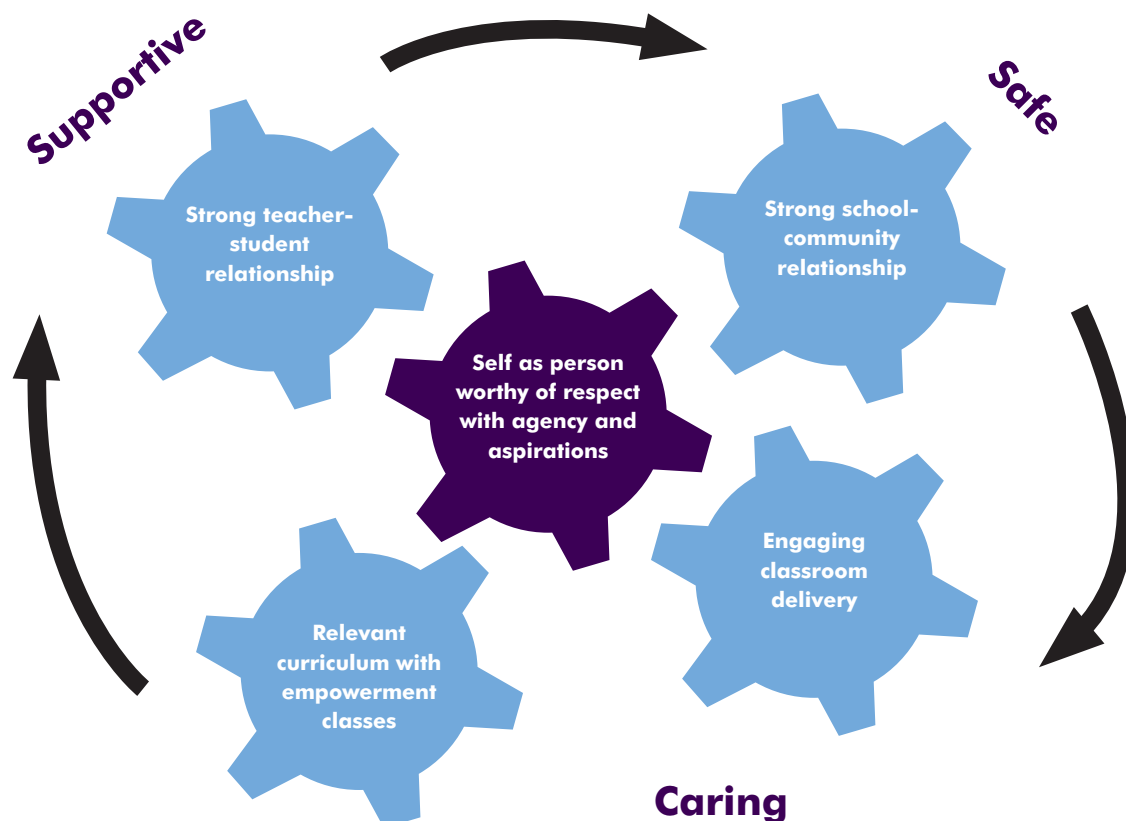
have been able to negotiate a better place for themselves in the family. And they all mention that they have learnt to become like this. They make a clear distinction between studies and this learning as they distinguish their own learning from that of their friends in other schools. One of them even mentioned the difference in the pedagogy, "In their school, if you don't write exactly what the book says you get no marks. Here we are encouraged to write in our own words."

The qualitative evidence above shows that the students develop an identity of themselves as equal persons, and they begin to assert this identity, and resist practices at home that would deny it. They make a conceptual shift, a structural change in the way in which they look at themselves and their lives. This structural change, along with the supportive relations developed in school with their peers and teachers gives them a greater sense of agency in their own lives and in their world. All three dimensions of empowerment work together and in tandem to lead to their empowerment.

PARENTS' PERSPECTIVE ON THE IMPACT OF PRERNA

In order to get the community perspective on the impact of Prerna, 52 parents were interviewed. They were asked questions in focus group discussions and in some cases, individual interviews about their perception of Prerna, the kind of education the girls received, the impact it had on them and on the community. All those interviewed think that Prerna offers a good education, and

Figure 4: Key Features of Prerna's Success Working in Tandem



94 percent of them think it is very different from other schools. They felt that in other schools the atmosphere is not as good and girls are not as engaged as they are at Prerna. Parents expressed a lot of faith in the teachers. "I completely trust all Prerna teachers with my children. I trust them to teach well." Some of them valued the school because it took care of everything. They provide clothes, food and good learning without charging exorbitant fees.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Does Prerna Achieve Its Goals?

As evidence from the school records shows, more girls come to school every year, most of them stay and complete, they learn, and they leave empowered. They have better life outcomes. I construct the key features of Prerna's success below:

1. An expanded vision of education that focuses on life outcomes of its students and keeps their empowerment at the center of

the program as the main goal. The whole school is aligned with this goal and committed to keeping all the girls in school by actively devising strategies to counter societal obstacles and challenges. They work actively to retain their students. The teachers are trained to take a critical gender perspective in the practice of critical feminist pedagogy.

2. **Supportive Relations:** There is a strong network of supportive relationships, between the teachers and students, among student peers and between the school and the community. The school has expanded its vision of education to include active advocacy for girls' rights with their parent community. Prerna has been careful to create a safety net of support for their students in order to protect them from a potentially violent backlash from the community as a result of their empowered resistance to unfair social practices. Teachers are mentored and trained to take a gender perspective and to be caring and sensitive of the students' needs and home backgrounds. All the students mentioned that their teachers were very caring and supportive. They ranked this very high in their valuation of their education at Prerna. They often referred to Prerna as their "family." Parents also expressed a lot of faith in the teachers.
3. **Strong classroom delivery** using an engaging, participatory, interactive, activity based critical feminist pedagogy.
4. **Empowerment classes** with a feminist focus, as part of the official curriculum.

All these features are relevant and work in tandem one with the other to realize the educational goal of the school which is to empower its students and help them emerge as women with a perception of themselves as equal persons having the right to equal participation in an unequal society, and to be equipped with the appropriate skills for such equal participation.

LESSONS FROM PRERNA

Girls Need Not Drop Out Because They Are Girls

Reddy and Sinha point out in their study that "providing access to schools in areas of high dropout, large numbers of working children and large numbers of illiterate parents, requires more effort. The rules, procedures and administrative set up need to be sensitive to the requirements of illiterate parents and first generation learners."⁷⁵ They go on to argue that there is too much focus on social factors and too little on the role of schools in the "push out" of girls.

A reform or reorganization of procedures and rules in schools, and in the wider education system, can reduce the drop out or push out of children from school. Innovative programs like Escuela Nueva in Colombia, The RIVER program in Andhra Pradesh, the Bodh Shiksha Samiti in Rajasthan, the Mahila Shikshan Kendra in Jharkhand, and the Sahajani Shikshan Kendra, Lalitpur demonstrate that reorganizing schools by keeping students needs, social context and challenges at the center and build-

ing the organizational structure, curricula and teaching methodology around them, including strong community outreach, can have a positive impact on learning and the reduction of dropout rates.⁷⁶ Prerna lends its voice in agreement to the scholars and practitioners above. Schools can indeed defeat the social obstacles to girls' education if it is so committed and engages actively to counter the gender-based factors that keep girls out of school in order to retain girls who are in danger of being pulled or pushed out.

Prerna is not an expensive boutique innovation. It is a very cost effective program, costing \$350 per child per year. This is comparable to the amount spent by the Indian Government per child per year in public schools, which allocates as much as \$367 per child per year in some states. Education is complex and is further complicated by gender and poverty. Prerna demonstrates how schools may ensure that girls come, stay and learn and goes one step further by adding special focus on gender equality.

Undoing Gender Should Be Part of the Official Curriculum

Without looking at the social, economic and psychological environment in which girls grow up; without looking at the context of their lives of their parents' and communities' views of them, we are unlikely to realize a girls' right to education. Enrollment alone does not show whether girls are attending school or learning anything. Securing girls'

rights to access a full course of secondary education remains a significant challenge, and without tackling the issues outlined above, it will not be met in this generation or the next (Plan International 2012).

The uniqueness of the Prerna program is that it puts an empowerment course, with a strong focus on the critical study of institutionalized gender power relations in society, in the official curriculum and time table. It does not treat empowerment work as an extra curricular or after-school activity. Furthermore it demonstrates how a formal K-12 school can successfully incorporate gender study alongside other more traditional curricular subjects like math and science with very positive life and learning outcomes. In 1999, Nelly Stromquist in her address at a conference on gender and education acknowledged that several countries had attempted to do a gender scan of their textbooks, revise them and develop new gender sensitive educational materials, but regretted that no country had till then developed a gradually graded curriculum of gender knowledge, that deals with gender issues across the different levels of schooling and ages of students appropriately. Prerna has recognized this as an important part of providing an empowering education for girls and has begun the construction of just such a curriculum. Prerna is in the process of developing simple textbooks in collaboration with gender experts, alumni and the teachers.

Other projects and programs around the world have also demonstrated the value of

focusing directly on student empowerment. The TUSEME project is a theatre based empowerment program started in 1996 in Tanzania and has spread to 13 countries in sub-Saharan Africa through facilitation by the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE). The schools that adopted the program report higher achievement scores, reduced drop out. Less pregnancies along with positive attitudinal change.

The Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS) program jointly developed by ICRW, CORO for literacy and the Tata Institute of Social Sciences is a school-based program for students in grades 6 and 7. Its goal is to promote gender equality by encouraging equal relationships between girls and boys, examining gendered social norms and questioning the use of violence. It has been implemented in Mumbai, India and is being tested, though the initial results show changed attitudes toward more equitable gender roles, gender violence and early marriage.

The Mahila Shikshan Kendra program in India is an 11-month residential program for poor, illiterate girls and women between 15 and 35 years of age. It is an accelerated learning program, covering course content up to grade 5, with the intention of mainstreaming girls' progression to upper primary public schools. It focuses on teaching life skills, vocational training, computer training and gender training in its curriculum. It has a learning focus, with a holistic, feminist approach.

The programs outlined above adopted an approach that is similar to Prerna's, which has prioritized students' lives above decontextualised academic learning goals and devised an educational plan that addresses their needs. The TUSEME and MSK programs take a gender-based approach to education and prioritize empowerment. They differ from Prerna in an important dimension. TUSEME and GEMS are extra-curricular add-ons to the official curriculum and MSK is a non-formal program. They do not include empowerment/gender studies in the official curriculum. The formal curriculum always receives more serious treatment than anything that is extra-curricular, with appropriate attention to teacher training and the development of instructional materials. Non-formal programs have limited impact unless they are mainstreamed into the formal system.

Prerna shows how a curricular focus on empowerment and gender, a redefinition of learning in terms of life outcomes and the use of a critical feminist pedagogy, can provide an education for girls which fulfills two goals — providing an education that helps girls realize their right to a fully human functioning and the larger societal goal of gender equality. I conclude with recommendations specific to Prerna and Education in India and more general recommendations to the international global community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Prerna: Scale Up

The development discourse in India and internationally has recognized the need for well de-

defined strategies for interventions, improvement in our methodologies and innovations to ensure that girls have meaningful access to education.⁷⁷ Much has been done, but much more needs to be done. “Scholarships, conditional cash transfers, community schools and female teachers are all cited as initiatives that might go some way to making sure that adolescent girls have meaningful access to education. But in fact, the evidence is limited — we just cannot be sure what would work, where and why.”⁷⁸

Innovations like Prerna and other small programs like it show very specifically what works and how, in specific contexts. Prerna is a successful program. Its holistic life outcomes approach, when benchmarked against national and regional averages, outperforms them by a large margin on indicators like enrollment, attendance, achievement and completion. It also achieves high empowerment outcomes. However, the program has not been rigorously tested or evaluated. In order to consider its model for scale, the program should be implemented fully in at least 30 public schools, it should be scaled carefully with well-documented processes and materials, as well as a well-designed teacher training program with detailed training modules and manuals. This pilot scale up effort should be rigorously tested using methods that appropriately evaluate the comparative effectiveness of the different elements of its program. This will include developing a measurement tool for testing empowerment outcomes.

Prerna has collaborated with a sister program in SHEF called Digital Studyhall ⁷⁹ which

has videotaped all its gender study classes. Together they plan to use these videos for continuous post training, onsite support and guidance, to standardize and sustain quality while scaling the program. The use of simple, cost-effective technology to share its critical pedagogy and empowerment curriculum is a unique idea and deserves to be tested for effectiveness. If found successful, it has enormous potential globally for teacher training and for sharing effective pedagogical practices across geographies.

For India: The Bordia Committee Final Report, evaluating the status of girls’ education in India, found that while there have been improvements and innovations in the area of gender and girls’ education, gender is still understood largely in quantitative terms. It has recommended the mainstreaming of successful innovations, good practices and processes, within the education system and has invited civil society organizations “to help in the development of appropriate curricula, teaching learning materials, gender informed pedagogies and teacher training.” I echo the recommendations made in this government report. Findings from successful formal school initiatives like Prerna and nonformal programs like the MSKs should be mainstreamed and incorporated in the formal system. Prerna with its life outcomes approach, shows many useful directions for school organization, teacher training, school-community relationships and student empowerment, which should be adopted in the formal system.

According to the World Development Report 2012, the “stickiest” obstacles to achieving gender equality are social norms.⁸⁰ Social norms are maintained by socialization at home and in school. Education should engage students in critical reflections and analysis of discriminatory social norms. Gender study should become an official part of the academic curriculum for both boys and girls for postprimary classes, as a separate, distinct course like other traditional subjects such as math, science and language. Gender training with an emphasis on critical pedagogy should form an integral part of pre-service teacher training courses for all teachers, male and female. Age appropriate course materials for gender study in schools should be developed in collaboration with representatives from programs like Prerna.

For the Global Education Community:

We should expand our vision of education and learning if we want to meet not just MDG 3 by 2015, but all of the MDGs. Education experts, international development agencies and think tanks are engaged in developing global metrics of learning outcomes. This is a good time to move our thinking about education and learning to life outcomes, to make education more holistic and to stop putting it in a box isolated from other parts of life. Yes, all students must learn to read, but as Paulo Freire taught us four decades ago, for their reading to be meaningful and transformative, they should read “their worlds.” We must give students all over the world, rich or poor, white or colored, a meaningful education, one that speaks to their specific condi-

tion and one that engages and educates their minds and hearts. “Schooling must address the real problems of contemporary life.”⁸¹ We should make global development concerns a part of the curricular agenda for secondary education, let students critically examine the problems of their times and bring their learning to bear upon them. It will engage them, and they will become allies in the developmental project.

APPENDIX

Empowerment Studies Syllabus for Primary Classes (Grades 4 and 5):

At this level students are introduced to topics related to their rights as a girl such as bodily integrity, equal nutrition at home, health care, equal leisure and education.

1. **Health and Nutrition:** Girls have the right to be fed as much as their brothers. They have the right to equal health care. They should look after themselves and demand that they be treated fairly at home.
2. **Gender:** Why do we have different gender roles — boys and girls can both do everything, for example, domestic work and work outside the home, equally well. Boys and girls share the work outside and inside the home. Discuss mobility and safety issues.
3. **Molestation:** Girls have a right to their own bodies. No one can touch them without their permission. What is molestation? What is a bad touch? What should they do if they are molested? Discuss no-

- tions of “shame” and “honor” and the dangerous silences they engender.
4. **Domestic Violence:** What forms does it take? Do their parents and brothers have the right to hit them? Is it fair for their father to hit their mother? It is unfair and illegal. What should they do if they are being subjected to domestic violence? If their mothers are being beaten, what can they do? Who can they seek help from?
 5. **Child Marriage:** The legal age of marriage is 18 for a girl. Their parents do not have the right to marry them off before 18 years of age. They have the right to their own lives. What should they do if they are being married off? Who can they seek help from?
 6. **Menstruation (in grade 5):** Know your body and love it. Discuss menstruation as a normal bodily function. It is not a sickness or dirty. Discuss traditional myths of pollution and quarantine during menstruation.
 7. **Abusive Language at Home:** What do abuses mean? Why do people abuse? How they hurt us and others.

For Post-Primary Grades:

1. **Patriarchy:** What is patriarchy? How does it lead to unequal power relations between men and women? Why should there be unequal power relations in the family? What is the cause of these? Who does it benefit and who does it harm? Is it desirable? How does it harm women? It is socially constructed and can be socially de-constructed. How can it be changed?

Discuss democracy and the incongruity of Patriarchal family structures in democratic societies.

2. **Domestic Violence:** What forms does it take? Do parents and brothers have the right to hit them? Is it fair for their father to hit their mother? It is unfair and illegal both. How is patriarchy responsible for the occurrence of domestic violence? Why do their mothers have such little power? Why do they accept being beaten without retaliating? What should they do if they are being subjected to DV? If their mothers are being beaten? Who can they go to?
3. **Poverty and Gender:** How does being poor makes it even harder to be a girl. Being financially independent is important to live an empowered life. Most of them work, why doesn't that give them more power? Who controls their income? Their mothers work and earn money and yet they are subjected to violence at home and seem to have less power. Why is that the case?
4. **Adolescence and Gender:** How does their body change after puberty? Discuss menstruation and traditional ideas and practices of pollution and quarantine. Mentor them into accepting menstruation as a natural bodily function. Begin discussion of relationship with boys. Why are they forbidden at home? Discuss gendered ideas of chastity, “honor,” “shame” and sex. This is a very inflammatory and dangerous territory and could have serious repercussions for the girls. So we proceed very carefully

and cautiously. Our goal is to get them to start thinking about relationships with boys in a reasonable and responsible manner. Freedom of mobility for girls. How it gets particularly restrictive after puberty. Why is this? How does it harm them? What can they do?

5. **Education and Empowerment:** Why is it important to finish a school education? Why is higher education important? Why is education empowering? Older students and students who have graduated lead these discussion, serving as role models.
6. **Who do I want to Be?** Building career aspirations. Marriage is not their only option. We let them imagine possibilities at this stage and show many options and role models.
7. **Caste System:** What is caste? Trace its history in India. Is it a good way to organize societies? Does it lead to equality? It is illegal to discriminate on the basis of caste in our country. Yet caste discrimination is rampant. Discuss some caste practices, rules and restrictions, including inter-caste marriages. Are these ethical? Are these legal? What can be done to change them? There is a great deal of literature on caste in India, which we use to help focus our discussions.
8. **Child Marriage:** What is child marriage? Give the legal terminology after they provide their own definition from their understanding and experience. Give national and global statistics along with the consequences of child marriage. Why

does it happen? What compels our parents to do this? Discuss the pressure of social norms. Is it a fair practice? Whom does it harm? We ask them to interview their mothers, older sisters, cousins and aunts who were married very young and find out how it affected their lives. Why is it not fair to girls? It is illegal and a crime. Discuss the reasons for child marriage and show how most of them are not ethically valid and can be practically worked around. Emphasize that they have the right and responsibility to speak out against it, and to resist. What can we do if it happens to us, in our community, to our friends, sisters, cousins? Teach them the laws against it and together think of safe resistance strategies.

9. **Marriage and its Impact on Girls' Lives:** Since marriage is such a strong determinant of their life options, we spend a lot of time discussing the institution, from a traditional, social, legal and ethical perspective. Marriage is not the only option for one's life. Discuss the structure of marriage as an institution in patriarchal families. Critically examine the unequal rights, roles and responsibilities of husbands and wives. So can we define another kind of family structure? And what would that look like? What kinds of roles and responsibilities would each member have? What rights would they have? Do you have the right to choose your own husband? Should you have the right to choose your own husband? How would you do that? What

would you do if your husband denies you an equal status? How would you negotiate that relationship? How would you negotiate your relationship with your in-laws? What is a fair status for you in your marital home? Discuss patrilocality and patrilineage from a justice perspective. These are socially constructed, and there is nothing natural or God given about them. There are laws pertaining to marriage and divorce. What are these? What is the history of these laws? Our goal is to discuss marriage and lead them to an understanding that ideally it is a partnership of two people for the good of both. It needs two mature adults to make it succeed. We are trying to get them to imagine possibilities, build aspirations and deconstruct naturalized notions and redefine them for themselves.

10. **Dowry:** What is dowry? What are its causes? Give history, discuss social practices and finally discuss the laws prohibiting it. How does dowry reduce the status of girls? Discuss the persecution of girls due to dowry often resulting in violence and deaths. Everyone understands the ills of dowry, yet why do people feel compelled to participate in the practice? How can it be resisted collectively?

11. **Health and Nutrition:** It is important for women to take care of their health. It is a right and a responsibility. Why do women put themselves last? Why is this unfair to themselves and their families? Students share stories of their mothers, aunts, cousins and neighbors who have died because

of poor or delayed health care. Give statistics related to women's health.

12. **Sex After Marriage, Reproduction, Reproductive Health and Reproductive Rights:** Discuss sex and when it is safe and when it is unsafe. Discuss reproductive health, reproductive rights, contraception and safe motherhood. Women have the right to decide if, when and how many children they want to have. They have the right to use contraception. What will they do if their in-laws or husbands deny them this right? Understanding the preference for male children and how it leads to female foeticide and female infanticide. Give them statistics and teach laws against foeticide and infanticide.

13. **Sexual Harassment:** Girls have a right to bodily integrity. What forms does sexual harassment take place at home, in their work places and on the streets? What should they do when they are harassed? What should they do when it happens at home? Recognizing it and learning to deal with it. When to protest, how and to whom. Is it their fault when men harass them? Discuss dress codes for women and sexual harassment. Discuss notions of "shame," "honor," and engendered silences around incestuous sexual harassment.

14. **Trafficking:** What does this mean? How does it happen? What is prostitution? What is wrong with it? Why are girls lured into it? How are girls victimized and exploited? Discuss how it degrades and dehumanizes women. Leaves them open to

disease. It should not be seen as an option to escape poverty. Some girls see it like that. Discuss the dangers of this view. Prostitution is not only unsafe, dangerous and dehumanizing, it is also illegal.

15. Substance Abuse and its Dangers

16. Personality Development: Communication skills and leadership skills. Focus on developing a strong “voice.” Importance of speaking up and speaking out against unfair practices. Learning to be assertive, confident and a good decision taker. Drama is used extensively for this. All students are given opportunities for public speaking.

17. Superstitions and Blind Beliefs in Religion and Social Traditions: Why is their mother the only one who fasts for their father’s long life, brother’s long life and health? Why does their father never fast for their mother’s long life and health? Why do some religions allow men to have 4 wives simultaneously, while they deny the same right to women. Let us examine our own religions for sexist rules and tenets. Are they un-changeable? How can we change them?

Special Focus for Grades 9 to 12:

1. **Making a Life Plan:** Girls have the right and the responsibility to plan their own lives.
2. **Career Planning:** Breaking the cycle of poverty. Showing several options and

paths. Very focused career counseling and mentoring. Helping them to think of different careers in a specific, detailed manner. If I want to be a teacher then what kinds of qualifications do I need? What will it cost? Where can I get the money?

3. Higher Education and its Importance

4. Financial Planning for Higher Education and for Life

5. Citizenship: What it means to be a full citizen in a democratic country like India. The right to vote. History of female suffrage in India and around the world. What does it mean to be a participant in social and political terms? Discuss women leaders, how they got there and how they performed. Build aspirations and imagine possibilities.

Lesson on Domestic Violence with High School Students at Prerna

The goal of this lesson was to give the students an understanding of domestic violence in terms of the forms it can take, causes, its relationship to an unequal social structure (patriarchy), its relationship to gendered social norms and the Law pertaining to domestic Violence in detail. The further goal was to give the students a sense of how they can collectively take action at home and in the community against domestic violence.

The Class: The teacher begins the lesson by asking the question: So what is domes-

tic violence? Do not tell me, show me. Get into groups of six each and spend some time discussing what you understand by DV. Then do a short improvised drama about it as you know it and experience it in your lives.

The girls all break into their groups and spend the next 15 minutes discussing it and working out a small play, assigning roles and planning their presentation. There is a lot of giggling and talking. Everyone is engaged.

They present their plays one group at a time, while the others watch. They are collectively discussed after all the groups finish presenting. Group 1 presents DV as depriving girls of food, feeding the son more than the daughter. Mother takes up for the girl but father shuts her up; group 2 presents on depriving girls of education, as it spoils them and since they are only going to do housework all their lives there is no need to study. They should get used to housework early; group 3 ordering her around from cooking to cleaning to washing the clothes and simply not letting her study; group 4 shows it as physically violent and verbally abusive behavior against the mother for not doing the house work well, in front of the daughters. In all the plays, the mothers were shown as very submissive and helpless.

Discussion: The teacher leads the students to describe the various forms of domestic violence with reference to the plays and to their own lived experience. She then leads

them to examine the location of power in their families. Who has the power to hit whom? Asking provocative questions like, “Do wives hit their husbands?” in order to highlight the gendered dimension of DV. She helps the students make the distinction between “power” and “rights.” The discussion is interspersed liberally with several stories provided by the students about DV as experienced by their friends, neighbors and family. The teacher uses these, lends her own to move the discussion along and to make her points. She leads the students to an understanding of the role of social norms, or patriarchal structures, gendered public institutions like the village council and the police in the persistence of DV in their communities. She leads them to an understanding that these norms can be resisted and changed by persuasion and argument. That dialogue is a better way to resolve conflict than violence. The students are taught the law and ways of using the law by a volunteer from a local women’s nongovernmental organizations, invited to the class. They are told that the law came into existence in 2005 as a result of concerted advocacy by women’s groups. She then leads the students to think of what they can do to prevent DV in their own lives and in their communities. The students who have resisted DV at home successfully tell their stories. Finally the group comes to the conclusion that if they collectively act to help each other, to lend each other strength, to speak out and to collectively advocate against it, much can be done to stop DV.

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- 79 Digital Study Hall (DSH) initiated by SHEF in 2005, is an innovative approach to improving the quality of teaching and learning in rural and urban slum schools. The model of DSH works on a community-based video production and sharing system. DSH has digitally recorded live classes in Prerna, taught by their best teachers. These lessons, taught in Hindi, the local language and based on the state mandated syllabus, are collected in a large distributed database. DSH then distributes these lessons on DVDs to poor rural and slum schools, where local teachers are coached to “mediate” the DVD lessons by emulating, expanding upon, and tailoring the content in the video. The local

teacher periodically pauses the video and engages the students in various activities based on what has just occurred on TV. These activities may include asking questions, inviting kids to do board work, and organizing role-playing activities. The mediator's job is to make his or her class as lively, dynamic, and interactive as the one conducted by the model teacher on TV. In effect, the video and the mediator form a "team," the video provides an example, a framework, a lesson plan, and a content and methodology model; while the mediator, who may not be highly skilled in some domain-specific knowledge, supplies the crucial interactive element. In this way, local teachers improve their knowledge of both subject matter and pedagogical principles.

The academic content captured by DSH consists of 30 minute videos of lessons

based on the state mandated syllabus and text books for English, Hindi, Math, Science and Social studies from class 1-8. DSH has developed over 2000 videos so far covering the state curriculum, special education, digital stories and teacher training videos. DSH is currently serving over 6000 students. DSH has rapidly expanded beyond schools and beyond academic. In collaboration with State Council of Education and Training DSH is running a capacity building project with 70 District Institutes of Education and Training in the state of UP, India. DSH videos have been widely appreciated and around 140 teacher educators and 14,000 teacher trainees are benefiting from this intervention.

80 World Bank 2012

81 Noddings 1987

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