
Book Review

Reviewed by Usha Thakkar

E-mail: ushathakkar@yahoo.com

**Girls and Girlhoods at Threshold of Youth and Gender, (Vacha Initiative)
by Vibhuti Patel
Published 2010
by The Women's Press
Delhi, xxv+480pp.
ISBN: 13:9788189110277**

This very well-edited volume with articles on important subjects is the outcome of in-depth deliberations on girls and girlhoods by scholars, social activists and representatives of women's organisations. This book has emerged out of Vacha's work on girls' issues focusing on the formative years in the second decade of women's life. Vacha works for rights of women and girls.

Gender adversely affects the education of girls, as the data and statistics in the book show. Lack of education robs women and girls of self confidence, self-esteem and opportunities to live a meaningful life. Children are exploited in home based industry and agriculture and become victims of rape, forced prostitution and sexual assaults. Their rights demand special attention in the frame work of human rights.

Vibhuti Patel, the editor of the book, rightly states that there is no specific national policy focusing on girls, their development and empowerment. Girls are covered under different government ministries and programmes and bracketed with categories of children, youth and women. Beginning of the second decade of life is particularly crucial for girls' physical and emotional growth. This is the stage when girls need special care and support. Youth is experienced differently by boys and girls. Despite this girlhood has not become an important focus in academic studies and in social movements except as specific problem areas such as reproductive health, education or trafficking. This volume fills up the gap and will certainly generate debates on the issue.

The book displays the academic insight of the editor and contributors and their ability to connect the empirical data with the theoretical principles. The scholars and practitioners in their articles analyse the issues pertaining to girls and girlhood. Their presentations and the participation of girls invited from different locations, in Vibhuti Patel's words celebrate girlhood and girls' strength. At the same time, they draw our attention to declining child sex ratio and other crucial concerns of girls such as health and education, child labour, trafficking, disability, media portrayal (in advertisements, television and cinema), violence, efforts made by the state and NGOs and relevant legal provisions and policy statements. Sonal Shukla and Pradnya Sawargaonkar in their article 'The adolescent girl in India' provide the relevant data and show that girls in India face systematic disadvantage over a range of human development indicators including health, education, nutrition, labour force participation, burden of household tasks and trafficking.

They draw our attention to the fact that people's organisations will have to be vigilant and the vanguard role of women will have to continue in developing new strategies for continued focus on this neglected group and on the gender issues within it. Vibhuti Patel in her article, 'Education and health of girl child in urban India' reveals that in India, compared to their male counterparts, girls are statistically less in number, less educated, less healthy and are more vulnerable to neglect, exploitation and abuse. Daksha Dave in her article on 'The declining sex ratio in India' draws our attention to the sharp decline in the male-female ratio in many states caused by neglect of the girl child resulting in their higher mortality at younger age, sex selective female abortion and female infanticide. Cynthia Stephen in her article 'Government's commitment to the girl child: promises belied?' provides details and statistics such as – the girl child constitutes 25% of the country's population and 45% of the country's female population, and shows that the government's response to the issue is not satisfactory. Sunita Parmar in 'The Indian girl child: trajectories of social construction' examines economic, cultural and social factors that constitute the socialisation of the girl child. After discussing urban/rural differences, ground realities, and initiatives at national and international levels, she rightly concludes that given the inherent vulnerability of the girl child in India, she is not simply to be protected, but taught to be confident and strong. In this context, the deep connection of the empowerment of girls and the improvement of their health as well as the direct link between poverty and adolescent girls' health cannot be overlooked.

Prabha Tirmare in 'Need to introspect factors responsible in upbringing of girl child to ascertain her identity and status in society' discusses the socialisation of girls and their behaviour pattern leading to subordinate role. She explains the formative factors in the socialisation of girl child, such as attitude of the family, quality and quantity of food and education available to girls, and portrayal in media, and emphasises the need to change them. Dolly Sunny in her article 'Child labour in India: emerging issues' discusses important determinants of child labour like poverty, deficiency in the education system, and profit motive of the employers. She also describes industry-wise distribution and measures of protection for children from exploitation. Rekha Talmaki in 'Trafficking of tribal girl child' describes intensity of trafficking in different states and concludes that this lamentable problem requires effective laws, awareness of the problem, government programmes and dedicated NGOs.

Prerna Sharma in 'Existence in shadows: women and disability' discusses the neglected issue of the condition of disabled women and girls and narrates harsh realities of their lives. Krishna Chandra Pradhan in 'Condition of female children in Orissa (with special reference to Ganjam district)' provides a district level profile of girls based on the Census and NFHS data. Indira Rani and N. Komali Saloni in 'Sibling abuse: a study of sibling interactions in family setting' present the findings of their study of an urban settling focusing on the relationship between various variables such as age, gender, sibling abuse and the impact of the abuse on the victim.

'Politics of gender and the familial structure in the story – 'girls' by Mrinal Pande' by Pratima Dave Shastri is interesting as it brings out gender discrimination depicted in the touching autobiographical story. Mira K. Desai in 'Girl child, television advertising and status quo: gender in HDFC standard life advertisements' deals with the interesting theme of advertisements on the television. Her analysis shows that the projection, portrayal and representation of women and girls in media have far reaching implication for the present as well as the future. It is time that the girls' portrayal on the Indian television changes and goes beyond fathers' daughters who are nothing but the entity waiting for the

approval of the fathers. Amrit Gangar in 'Absence of an age: had it been a Durga trilogy?' in a balanced analysis of the mainstream Hindi and regional films shows that neither the formula films nor the art cinema critically or compassionately explore or represent the bal-kishori. A successful effort has been made here to analyse her depiction and the reasons for the film-makers for shying away from compassionately dealing with the girls' passage from preadolescent to adolescent age in the context of gender, sexuality and patriarchy existing within the social structure.

Shalini Mathur in her article 'Adolescent girls, expelled by the community-detained by the state' presents some case studies and brings to the surface harsh realities of the lives of girls in the government run protective homes. These girls need understanding approach and love from their families, and not severe control and indifferent treatment. 'Understanding of the issues of vulnerable and violence affected girls through Mukta's intervention' gives glimpses of the efforts by a women's collective called Mukta in enabling rescued adolescent girls to rebuild their lives in a dignified way. Rohini Kashikar Sudhakar in her paper 'Violence against girls residing in two slums of Mumbai' presents some case studies and discusses the pattern of violence and survival struggle of girls and child-wives in the urban slums of Mumbai.

Parul Sheth in 'Shaishav Balsena' discusses the efforts of Shaishav, an organisation in Gujarat striving to make the world more children centred, just and humane. Ruby Ojha in 'Empowerment of adolescent girls through NGO intervention' describes efforts made by the non-government organisations in the areas of health, education, skill building and socio-cultural empowerment of girls.

Vijay Hiremath in 'Girl child and law' gives information about some important acts and government schemes for the protection of the girl child in India and observes that there is a need for serious change in the attitude and mindset of the people towards the girl child.

The book also contains a useful report 'At the threshold of youth and gender national symposium on girls and girlhoods on November 6 to 8 2008 at SNDT Women's University, Mumbai and Organized by Vacha Resource Centre for Women and Girls and PG Department of Economics, SNDT Women's University'. Its process documentation is done by Media Matters.

Various articles in the book make us painfully aware of the fact that the condition of the girl child is deplorable, and majority of girls in India continue to remain unwanted and uncared for. Some initiatives have been taken by the government and voluntary organisations, but much more requires to be done.

We need to understand this issue in the larger context of our democracy. Giving fundamental rights and passing of some laws including the much awaited bill for reservation of seats for women will not solve the problem by themselves. What is required is constant challenging of inequalities around us, conscious formulation of positive ideology and practice for reconstruction of equality.

We need to focus our attention to the question as to the kind of people we wish to be. Democracy is not just about voting in elections and choosing a government. It is also about deciding what kind of country we wish to be. We must have vision for that. That vision must have the principles of equality, equal opportunities, social justice, freedom and a sense of belonging to the society. The state must guarantee basic security and social justice to all its citizens, especially women so that they can develop their capacities, and can contribute to the nation's development as equal citizens, and can fight against

exploitation and vulnerability. The issue of girls' development is of crucial importance in this context.

Women's organisations and citizens' organisations will have to work for the betterment of girls. Women will have to develop new strategies for betterment of this neglected group and gender issues within it. And every woman will have to be aware of her own strength. In the words of Maya Angelou, 'A woman should have a feeling of control over her destiny'.

After participating in a meeting of women over Sarda Bill, Raihana Tyabji wrote to Gandhiji that they were glad that Gandhiji upheld the age of 18 for marriage for girls. But she was distressed to see the general feeling of the society to view women as 'the weaker sex'. When she wrote to Gandhiji about it, his response was, "I do not need to be a girl to be wild over man's atrocities towards woman. I am uncompromising in the matter of woman's rights. In my opinion she should labour under no legal disability not suffered by man. I should treat the daughters and sons on a footing of perfect equality. That he wrote in *Young India*, 17-10-1929. This is 2010. Still we are far from putting daughters and sons on the same footing of equality.

I conclude with, 'The Woman', a poem from the volume of Hebrew poetry. It is written by Yehudit Kaffri and translated by Tsipi Keller.

...This exaggerated woman wasn't pruned right she sprouts all sorts of odd branches water roots cries of thirst. ...Remove her from the scenery, say the superintendents of nature, she spoils the line, the water budget of half a neighborhood is wasted on her even a river wouldn't be enough for her. It doesn't matter, someone says, in one of the driest summers I saw several small birds hiding in the shade of those odd branches of hers, it was the only shade in the whole area...

Women have grown and will continue to grow, in different ways. Many more birds will find shelter in their branches. Our best wishes to Vacha and its director Sonal Shukla, and to Vibhuti Patel, the editor of the book and to the contributors of the book for all their activities.