Social Support System in Overcoming Social Barriers: A Case Study of Adolescent Girls in Birbhum

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ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a bridge between childhood and adulthood. The period of adolescence begins with the onset of puberty, a rapid change in physical growth accompanied by continuous sexual maturity and reaches to an end when individual assumes adulthood. The adolescents possess the tendency to experiment and attempt to push the boundaries and in this process they often indulge themselves into risky behaviors without having understanding of the consequences, which makes them vulnerable and it is a matter of concern. Adolescents constitute 21% of India's population and number about 243 million. Total population of adolescents of 15 -18 years in West Bengal is 23, 68,519. Even with such high number of adolescents it is found that they have very limited space to share their point of view and concerns. Their needs especially of the adolescent girls remain unheard and unmet, making the condition of girl adolescents more vulnerable. Their mobility is also often controlled by others. So to meet the unheard needs, adolescents should have assistance from the family and society. Social support here plays a crucial role, which has been characterized from numerous points of view. It has a number of positive effects on the recipient, for instance, it influences self-confidence, sense of belongingness, self-esteem, and so on. In this paper by analyzing three cases the author has tried to explore how effective social support facilitates adolescent girls in overcoming social barriers in Birbhum district.

Keywords: Social Support, Adolescent, Social Barriers

Adolescence is a significant life stage of human life. It is a bridge between childhood and adulthood. The transition from child to adult takes place more gradually during the adolescence period. The period of adolescence begins with the onset of puberty, a rapid change in physical growth accompanied by continuous sexual maturity and reaches to an end when individual assumes adulthood (Baron, 2007). Individuals between the ages of 10 years to 19 years are identified as adolescents (World Health Organization). Adolescents develop some common characteristics like curiosity, mood swings, identity crisis, value conflict, questioning the authority or societal rules and attraction to the opposite sex. Further, the adolescents possess the tendency to experiment and attempt to push the boundaries and in this process they often indulge themselves into risky behaviors without having understanding of the consequences (APA, 2002). This makes the adolescents vulnerable and it is a matter of concern. As the relationship/interaction between adolescents and adults increases, peer of the adolescents starts occupying a central role in their lives which again influence their behavior, attitude, health, mental health, and social skills (UNICEF, 2013). Adolescents constitute 21% of India's population and number about 243 million. Total population of West Bengal is 9,13,47,736 (Census of India, 2011). Total population of adolescents of 15 -18 years in West Bengal are 23, 68,519 (Census of India, 2011). Thus, almost 2.58% of the total population of West

Bengal is adolescents of the same age group. As per the Census 2011, total population of Birbhum is 35, 02,387. By considering the same logic i.e. 2.58% population of Birbhum would be adolescents of 15 to 18 years of age; that is approximately 90,362 of the same age group. Even with such high number of adolescents it is found that they have very limited space to share their point of view and concerns. Their needs especially of the adolescent girl remain unheard and unmet, making the condition of girl adolescents more vulnerable. Their mobility is also often controlled by others (UNICEF, 2013). So, to meet the unheard needs adolescents should have assistance from the family and society as a whole. Social Support is an integral part of human life. The term social support is often misunderstood as a synonym for social network but the term "Social Network" and "Social Support" go hand in hand. Social Network is a sociological build taken from the anthropological studies. A social network embraces all of an individual's social connections. They are of people from a variety of sources, such as family, neighbors, friends, co-workers and other informal and formal supporters. System ties can be named either loved ones, close connections, easygoing associates. An individual's informal organization ties can be portrayed along basic and interactional means including size, wellspring of ties, part homogeneity, recurrence of contacts (Ceballo and McLoyd. 2002). Social support has been characterized and open door for equal communication from numerous points of view with contrasting consideration regarding its passionate, open, material and social view points. Thus social support is a "relational structure through which people request support and make demand" (Garbarino, 1983). Social support resources have number of positive effects on the recipient, for instance, it influences self-confidence, sense of belongingness, self-esteem, and so on. Directly or indirectly, social support may place an individual towards perfect situation from adverse reactions of loss or illness or crisis (Schilling, 1987). Thus, it seems that social support system of an individual could help to become more confident of self and can push in positive manner in any problem situation.

The word adolescence is derived from the Latin word '*adolescere'* meaning 'to grow up' (Mukhi, 1987). Usually the onset of puberty marks the beginning of adolescence. The word puberty is derived from Latin word '*pubertas*'. Puberty refers to the physical changes that take place in body of an adolescent. The period is identified by the spurt in physical growth, changes in body proportions and maturation of primary and secondary sex organs. With puberty adolescents go through many changes such as, biological, cognitive, and socio-emotional changes (Choudhary, 2014), which bring changes in how their family and others see and deal with them. Mensch *et al.* (1998) have mentioned that during adolescence a boy's world expands but a girl's word get narrowed. Menarche, in particular becomes crucial reason for this as after menarche restriction in behavior, dress, social interactions, and mobility are imposed. Joshi in 2004 points out "thus when a girl attains menarche there is a tightening of 'controls' on her movements and her parents impose an entirely new set of rules that she must comply with, in order to conform to the social norms. After reaching puberty, a girl is not any longer permitted to play outside the house, and she cannot wear frocks unless it is the school uniform. Girls are strictly instructed not to talk to strangers, and any such instance is sternly rebuked if it comes to the attention of the parents". Restrictions on the mobility of girls are one aspect of the larger process of socialization that for girls begins in childhood and continues throughout adolescence.

However, controlling the mobility of girls outside the home undermines their exposure to the outside world. Girls lose out in terms of educational opportunities and access to resources. These restrictions also limit the abilities of girls to develop key life skills and a sense of individual autonomy (Naved *et al.* 2007). Thus, it is clear that due to restriction in mobility girls of adolescence fairly miss out many things. Social barriers like lack of access to health care and other resources, basic education, as well as general exposure to the world is causing hindrance in their development. They are often denied to their basic entitlements. As mentioned earlier social supports have number of positive effects on the recipient like it promotes self-confidence, sense of belongingness, self-esteem, and so on. But to know how social support systems like family, school which have

pivotal role in an individual's life could help adolescent girls to overcome these social barriers it is important that the concept of social support becomes clear. A social support is that subset of persons in an individual's total social network on whom he can rely for support (Ell, 1984). As indicated by one comprehensive definition, social support "describes the comfort, assistance, and/or information one receives through formal or informal contacts with individuals or groups" (Barbara, 1983). So, it is viable to say that social support systems are those which are perceived by individuals as support givers be it emotional, informational and instrumental (WHO). Family is supposed to be and in many cases is the most important social support system that an adolescent have. School going adolescents spend lots of their day school, and the school itself acts as social support system in an adolescent's life.

Thus, it can be concluded that social support systems of adolescent girls are those where they feel safe to share their thoughts, emotions, and concerns. They demand such support and help from those support givers who can encourage them, guide them and push them to grow to their fullest potential that may be parents, siblings, extended family members, friends as well as school teachers.

Database and Method

The authors have adapted qualitative approach and exploratory research design to understand and describe the multi dimensional (family-level support, school-level etc.) support aspects of adolescent girls. The objective is to see how social support from family and school level as perceived by the adolescent rural girls is actually helping them to overcome at least some of the social barriers also perceived by them. The data is collected through case study. The cases were identified through purposive sampling as all the cases were unique and had social support from family and school that helped them to overcome many social barriers. The respondents are from across the three subdivisions of Birbhum district, namely, Rampurhat, Bolpur, and Suri. All the respondents are from Panchayat area, and belong to economically backward section of the society. The respondents are school goers. They are students of higher secondary government schools. To maintain confidentiality names of the respondents and family member's names had been changed but other variables like religion, caste and sex etc. had been kept intact.

RESULTS: Experiences of Cases

Case: I

Gita Karmakar (name changed) is an adolescent girl of 18 years age from Bhadiswar village (Murarai), Birbhum (Rampurhat subdivision), West Bengal. She is in her graduation first year studying Bengali(Hons). She is determined to find a job for herself so that she could become financially independent and could also support her family. She looks after her sister and guides her to study well as she is still very young. Gita says that it is still very difficult for a rural girl from her area to remain unmarried and dream to become financially stable. According to Gita most of her friends from school are married and she is lucky that her parents stood by her in the journey. Gita's family struggle hard, to support her education. She does not belong to a financially well off family. Gita's father Surya Karmakar (name changed) is a daily labourer and does all kinds of odd jobs to maintain her family. Gita's mother Santi Karmakar (name changed) is a housewife but she has started a small scale business of making '*Muri*' (puffed rice), which she sales to local households and shops. Gita and her younger sister Rita Karmakar (name changed) also help her in this process. Gita also used to do the work of distributing news paper in her village to support her family. She has recently started taking training for computer and has taken up two tuitions in her village. She wants to be a teacher but she thinks it is very hard for a girl like her to secure that kind of job. She is determined that she will not sit ideally and will find a job for herself. Gita says when she sees her married friends at their tender age she feels scared and that is why she does not want to get married early or even without being financially independent. She says that her parents have always encouraged her specially her mother and one of her cousin elder sister have inspired her from a very young age. Her cousin elder sister studied hard and now she is a working woman and she single headedly changed her family condition. Seeing this Gita from an early age

always wanted to do the same for her family. Like every girl in their area Gita's extended family members from both her paternal side and maternal side have started looking for suitable groom right from when she was in class X, but her mother Santi stood against them. Santi herself was married off at a very young age and she feels it is wrong to married off young girls. She thinks daughters should be given full choices to finish their education and let them be financially secured and self-sufficient. Santi agrees that not everybody up holds her perspective and that is why still girls are married off very early. She is thankful that her husband understands her view and supports daughter's education. She says that they are constantly fighting hard to support Gita and Rita's education as it is very expensive to give tuitions for Rita and finance Gita's education at the same time. She is happy that Gita is studying hard. They never have smart phones but for Rita's education they have purchased a new smart phone as she can now coordinate better with her teachers through "whats app" and other communication apps.

Both Santi and Gita thanked the local school teachers who taught Gita in her school. The school teachers constantly helped Gita in her studies even after school without any monitory gain they even helped her by providing extra books. Once Gita got scholarship of rupees 5000 from her school. Even every now and then the teachers come and guide Gita in her studies. Many of their relatives not support Santi and Surya's choices of letting Gita go outside house and travel to the nearby college for study. They never support her idea to become a working woman and they constantly criticize them. They ask Gita frequently to get married and start a family as later she will not find any good man as she will become old and educated. In some hard times Gita also tends to lose strength but her parents cheer her up and motivate her to pursue her dreams. Santi thinks that her daughters should have better choices than her and they should not settle for any less.

Case II

Parveen Khatun (name changed) is the youngest daughter of Rashid (name changed) and Phulshuma (name changed). She is just 16 years old and she studies

in class XI. Parveen has two elder sisters. Salima Khatun (name changed) the eldest daughter of Rashid and Parveen and Fatima Khatun (name changed) is the middle born who is 20 years old. Rashid is by profession a carpenter and does not have the means to look after his three daughters. Hence, Parveen stay with her maternal grandmother in the village nearby Bolpur (Bolpur subdivision) whereas Rashid and rest of his family stay in Burdhawan. Rashid being economically backward never gave up daughters education and always prioreterized their education and their financial independence that is why Salima Khatun is now a graduate and after completing a vocational training in teaching she is putting up her dream business on her own. Fatima Khatun is also pursuing graduation in Bengali hons. Parveen also wants to follow her sister's footsteps and want to take up vocational training course on beautification and become financially independent after completing her education. Parveen even though stays away from her parents but still she is very close to her father. She goes on to saying "My father is my best friend" (*amar baba amar sob cheye priyo bondhu*) Parveen in a very young age had some health issues (heart problem) but after years of treatment now she is physically fit and healthy. Even after going through so much Parveen is of high spirit and she is very positive. Parveen feels that she is blessed to have parents like her who struggle for everyday due to economic hardship but her parents never made them feel burden. They never even suggested any of her sisters that marriage is ultimate goal of life rather they always supported their education and motivated them to become financially independent. Parveen is very much aware that early marriages are ugly truth of society and many girls are not given the proper environment and opportunity to reach their full potential. She also mentioned that girls of her religion get to enjoy lesser rights. Parveen also says that she loves going to her school as the teachers are very supportive and she can meet her friends there. According to Parveen her teachers and friends motivate her to do studies when she is distracted.

Case III

Champa Sutradhar (name changed), 15 years, belongs to an economically backward family. Her father Mohit

Sutradhar (name changed) is a carpenter and mother is a house wife. She is from Saithia (Suri subdivision). She is a very quiet and content girl. Champa says that her family is very encouraging. Her mother is a class five passed woman, but she still studies and dreams to give her matriculation exam from open board despite the fact that she is nearly 42 years old and have to take care of her son who is just 6 years old. Champa says that her mother is super supportive and she does not even let her daughter do house hold chores so that she does not get tiered or distracted. Ranju Sutradhar (name changed), Chaampa's mother is also part of a self help group through which she has taken computer training. She says that she believes in all kinds of opportunities and grabbing them as nobody knows what can come in handy. She proudly says that though she is not very educated but she has all ways kept touch with books that is why she even can help her daughter in her study. She supervises her daughter. Ranju says that it is important that parents supervise children's education. Champa's mother wants her daughter to have full education and want her to marry only after she becomes financially stable. She believes early marriage is very bad and so is dowry system. She believes because of dowry parents feel burdened. Ranju says that *"instead of saving money for daughter's marriage and dowry parents should spend money in giving education to their girls and make them independent."* Ranju also wants her daughter to give vocational training so that she can have more choices. Champa wants to join police service after education which her mother does not approve but she feels that if Champa gets the opportunity then she will not hold her back. Champa says that because of her parent's support she feels confident about her-self and that is what it matters to her. External distraction from friends and even bullies does not get to her because she knows that back home she have her parents are there to support her. Both Champa and her mother feels great full towards Champa's teachers as they supported Champa a lot.

DISCUSSION

After observing the first case of Gita and her family closely it becomes clear that even in contemporary times it is a struggle for girls to continue their study

from a young age especially in rural area (Naved, et al, 2007). There are many girls who get married in early age (NFHS-3, 2005-06). She is forced to discontinue her education. It is sad that not only the girl but even parents who think differently face constant criticism and pressure from society to married off their daughters. Gita's case also indicates that with social support system (emotional support, instrumental support and informational support) from family girls can really do better for themselves as well as for their family (Barua, *et al.* 2007). This case also portrays that parents and school teachers could play immense role in motivating a person. Thus social support systems like family and school could motivate people to fight all the social barriers to move forward. Social supports (emotional, instrumental and informational supports) from the parents and school help a child to overcome obstacles. The second case of Parveen is perfect example on how social support systems like family could help a girl to become confident enough to face the world on her own. She not only overcame her illness but also dealt with it very positively (Schilling, 1987). She is totally grateful towards her parents as they raised her differently and it is because of her open relationship with her father that made her think beyond her age. That is why she has a dream to become independent. It is her parents who made her think that she can become whatever she wants for example beautician. Usually a girl child is deprived of so many things like mobility, nutrition, access to health care system but in Parveen's house she has access to all (treatment for heart problem). Parveen's case also says a lot about informational support as despite of being just 16 year old she is aware of things like vocational training, and she is aware of rights of girls and the fact that girls of her religion enjoys less rights which she clearly got from her elder sister and parents. Her thought process is also very positive and clear. The parenting style of this family must be an authoritative style as studies suggest that authoritative style may have most beneficial effects. Adolescents whose parents adopt this type of parenting are generally competent both socially and cognitively (David R. Shaffer, 2000). The third case of Champa, a young girl despite of her family's education is doing great with her education and life as a whole. In her words *"My parent's support*

is everything for me. I get motivated, and inspired from my mother." Ranju and Mohit's way of parenting says a lot about their way of providing social support for their daughter.

CONCLUSION

The cases also makes it more evident that social support could help daughters to move forward in life with more confidence and motivate them to become self reliant despite of economic struggle which sometimes becomes main hindrance or rather excuse for many families to treat their daughters' differently (Barua *et al.* 2007). Social support itself is pivotal in providing strong support to every human being. It helps in boosting one's moral and give sense of belongingness and emotional security. For adolescent girls specially in rural Bengal there are lots of restrictions imposed by the families due to societal pressure and for security purpose but these case narratives explains that there are families who are looking their daughters differently and their expectations from their daughters are not limited to marriage. The daughters from these families are getting social supports from their families and schools which in return making them strong and giving them the opportunity to have their own identities.

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