1. INTRODUCTION

For most girls, an invisible battle for education and dignity begins with their first entry into the local school. If they are born into a scheduled caste, scheduled tribe, backward class or minority family, especially of Muslims, the odds are greater. Further, if born to non-literates or those with low levels of literacy they face immense challenges, as the schools are just not ready to respond to the needs of the first generation learner. Yet, some of them have not given up even as they face insults, humiliation and discrimination at the school. They fight their way, day after day, and complete school up to class 10 and beyond. They cope with state deficit in provisioning of physical infrastructure such as classrooms and toilets, and human resources such as schoolteachers. They learn to accommodate threats from boys and men who invariably stalk and harass them with impunity. They come to grips with impoverishment, gender discrimination, domestic violence and abuse, fractured families and social exclusion. They work hard, earn wages, and support their family through periods of deprivation, lack of livelihood, and ill health as they claim their entitlement to education, which is so precious and essential to live a life of dignity.

This study is about the ‘Champions’, and millions like them in contemporary India, who grapple with multiple challenges and yet have survived pressures and are fighting to fulfill their aspiration for education. They are referred to as ‘Champions’\(^1\) to exemplify the participation of such girls who have won their battles for education.

\(^1\)Such girls have been referred to as ‘Champions’ by similar studies conducted by the Savitra Phule Centre for Women’s Study’ in Pune and also the Institute of Development Studies in Rajasthan. The respondents in these interviews have been girls studying of illiterate parents in the second year of degree college (post class 12) The current study draws from the research conducted by them under the guidance of Prof. Jacqueline Bhabha, Director of Research, François-Xavier BagnoudCenter for Health and Human Rights, Harvard University.
The study attempts to identify their experiences of participation in school, challenges they have overcome, the support they received both from the government as well as non-institutional structures from primary school onwards to reach the final year of secondary school.

Mothers, who were children of modern, independent India, barely in their mid-30’s and who had missed out on education themselves, definitely knew what was best for their daughters and sons. They bore violence, abuse and even threats to their lives in families that came with norms of patriarchy. They lived in a war zone with a husband, in-laws, neighbours, and society at large amid the pervasive values of male domination, with perpetual fear and uncertainty, trying to find solutions on all fronts. This they did maintaining dignity and yet at the cost of loss of selfhood. They worked relentlessly and at times without any support from male counterparts to maintain the family and support the education of their children. They felt that the cycle of lack of dignity and freedom could not be repeated unendingly.

It is hoped that this study will throw insights into the lives of the older girls, and their aspirations and dreams, and build a critical mass to empathize with their battles on the ground with full compassion. It is also hoped that sufficient evidence will be built through this study to make the voices of the girls heard loud and clear, just so that the system is awakened to fulfill its obligation towards children, their education, entitlements and rights.

2. **METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE**
The study is based on both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The quantitative component of the study was conducted in 20 colleges selected through a random sampling method, of which 14 were government junior colleges, 4 were private colleges and 2 were residential colleges. These colleges were selected from a total of 2,141 colleges (673 government colleges and 1,468 private colleges) in the state of Telangana. 6 government colleges and 111 Private Colleges in the city of Hyderabad and 36
government colleges and 213 private colleges of Ranga Reddy district were not included in the sample as the data could distort the trends since they were urbanized and also influenced entirely by commercialization of education.

The schedule of questionnaires was administered to 1017 girls on the following:

i. Individual level (e.g. past academic success and personal agency)
ii. Family level (e.g. socio-economic background, familial support for education)
iii. School experiences (e.g. support structures, discrimination, abuse and violence)
iv. Infrastructural factors (e.g. distance to school, availability of transport; facilities within the school)

The study also conducted focused group discussions (FGD) with the girls as well as the female lecturers in these institutions.

The criteria for selection of Champions (CH) from the sample of 1017 was on the basis –

Both father and mother no education(327)
- Father PS and mother no education(140)
- Mother PS and father no education (40)
- Father UPS and mother no education (74)
- Mother UPS and father no education (12)
- Father PS and mother PS (43)

Out of the 1017 respondents, 636 were designated as Champions (CH). The rest were non champions (NC). It must be noted that both the CH and NC are from a poor background with 90% of their Annual income not exceeding Rs.75000.
3. **SOME FINDINGS**

**Non-institutional Support**

1. The profile of parents of CH is marked by illiteracy with 85% of mothers and 60% of fathers who never went to school and only 28.7% of fathers and 13.0% of mothers completing Primary School. It is a well-known fact that the standard of education at class 5 in government schools is not particularly good and most of them cannot even read and write. Thus it can be stated that both parents of the CH are non-literates. As seen this has an impact over their livelihoods with the income earned annually is not more than Rs.50,000 per year. Thus the Champions in the study invariably contribute to household work even when they are in Primary school. They also do paid work to be able to earn for their education especially at higher levels. Some of the Non champions too contribute to household work and earn wages. This is clearly indicative of State deficit in provisioning of free education.

2. It is also found ill health of either the pupil or any of the members of the family is a cause for expenditure and a risk for the child to survive. In spite of this the Champions have shown determination to pursue education. This indicates a weak public health system and State deficit in health having an impact on child and her education.

3. Champions drew maximum support from their parents especially the mother and siblings, while the Non champions too depended on parents they also drew support from friends more than the CH did, indicating that the social network broadens with education.

4. In spite of illiteracy parents have involved themselves in monitoring regularity of attendance, homework, performance of the child in school indicating their aspiration for their child’s education. Being through the process of schooling greater percentage of non-champion parents were involved with their children’s education.

5. Sending a child to school brings about a change in the relationship between parent and child. It is more so in the case of a girl child who is being sent to school against the prevalent norms of patriarchy. The study shows how the NCs have an advantage over the CH in getting the support of fathers and brothers support for girls’ education. This is
indicative of a gradual process of role definition of male members’ vis-à-vis the girl and her education. This subtle transformation that schools and colleges bring about in the life of a girl has to be appreciated to combat gender discrimination and violence against girl-child.

6. One cannot conceive of how much sacrifice the poor parents face to provide basic education with an imagination and a dream that education would transform their lives in terms of self-esteem and dignity. To achieve their goals which are so minimal and can be easily met, they subject themselves to untold insult and humiliation.

**Institutional Support**

7. School teachers played a crucial role in giving students support to decide on the courses that they could opt for. This was more so in an individual capacity than as an institutional mechanism to counsel students on options for further education.

8. However, 98% of NC and CH felt that teachers practiced discrimination on the basis of caste. This is an alarming fact that needs to be addressed in all seriousness.

9. When provisioning of services is universal and available to all children there is a greater reach. Thus for example the mid-day meal program at the Primary to the Secondary school level has been utilized by 80% of CH. The NCs attending government school also benefitted from the scheme. Likewise, the program of Text book distribution to SC, ST and BCs have also had a greater reach among those attending government schools of both CH and NC. Other programs especially the cash transfers such as scholarships and stipends that are targeted have depended on a process of selection and exclusion making access to the schemes cumbersome. Inadequate amounts as scholarships and delays in disbursement cause untold anxiety to the student.

10. Hostels have been preferred by most CHs as they are spaces that give them friends to gain strength from peers; to get an atmosphere to study away from the tensions at home; to be informed by a sense of fairness and justice and pursue education.

11. Of the total number of 2141 junior colleges in Telangana only 31.4% are government colleges with 28% of students. Even in this small percentage of colleges there is minimal
infrastructure in relation to staff, classrooms, furniture, toilets and drinking water. The colleges children attend are never a match to provide the family’s very simple aspirations.

12. Poor parents and children have faith in the system whereas the government does not a similar pride in its institutions. Therefore, it is the poor who give legitimacy to the system by sending their children to those same institutions. Without them it is quite likely that the system will not be able to continue even at this pathetic level of efficiency. The government needs to recognize that students in their colleges have reached there after winning many battles. It ought to be giving support and encouragement to the students, and not send a message of indifference regarding their education.

Girls’ Agency-Changing lives

13. At every level of education there are tangible goals to be achieved for a girl student to reach to the next level. In this journey for education there is a discovery of self at every stage, even as she withstands social as well as familial pressures to conform to patriarchal norms. Being in an education institution gives her the strength to defy existing power structures. In exercising agency step by step as she goes up the ladder of education, she discovers her self which defines the roles and attitudes of her family members towards her. In a way there is a subtle change that occurs in the girl who pursues education and it is this that gives her the confidence to aspire for more.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GIRLS EDUCATION IN JUNIOR COLLEGES /SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL EDUCATION

1. Greater investments in government colleges and their physical infrastructure such as classrooms, furniture, libraries, labs, drinking water and toilets, as well as faculty
2. Provision of free education and education material, waiver of school/college and examination fees.
3. Provision of free bus passes and transportation facilities.
4. Provision of hostel facilities and scholarships for girls from SC, ST, minorities and EWS categories.
5. Educating boys about the fatal consequences of their actions on girls and their lives due to their eve teasing, stalking and other forms of sexual abuse; sensitizing them to look at girls as equals. Boys will also have to be given exposure to healthier relationships with girls.

6. Building awareness on Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, (POCSO) to all government functionaries and gram panchayats.

7. Inclusion of issues relating to gender equality in the school curriculum from primary school onwards in all classes.

8. Girls are to be given information and knowledge on reproductive and sexual healthcare.


10. Sustained campaign in all colleges, hostels and educational institutions on girls’ education.

11. Amend child marriage act to make all child marriage totally voidable. Build systems for providing safety to girls who defy child marriage and seek to pursue education.

It is universal knowledge that most girls enter into a hostile environment from the time of their conception. In the face of this the girls in this study through their everyday acts of defiance showed determination to extricate themselves from the quagmire of all forms of discrimination. With their firm conviction that education alone would help them break away from injustice, they have exercised agency to reconstruct their lives. Their voices must be heard. What is needed is an enabling societal environment and wholehearted governmental support for their education, against patriarchy and gender discrimination to end violence against them and give them dignity.