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Sexuality, Poverty and Law

Policy Audit: A Heteronormativity Audit of RMSA – A Higher Education Programme in Indian Schools

Nirantar, a Centre for Gender and Education, India

December 2013

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Introduction

How do sexual and gender norms affect school education in India? How do schools construct these norms? Are state policies and programmes addressing the linkages between sexuality, gender and school education? These are some of the questions that Nirantar, a Centre for Gender and Education, has been engaging with as part of its mandate to ensure that education is empowering for those marginalised because of gender, caste, sexuality and other dimensions of power. Since 1993, we have been fulfilling this mandate through training, development of teaching and learning materials, research, advocacy and community-based work. Our work in the area of sexuality gathered momentum in 2007, when we began working with community-based organisations to help deepen their understanding of sexuality and its linkages with work such as gender-based violence. Nirantar has also undertaken rigorous reviews of curricula and programmes covering adolescence and life skills education, as well as training teachers and NGOs that work with young people on issues of sexuality and gender.

This report shares the findings of a sexuality and gender audit of a national[1] government programme to strengthen secondary school education in India (ie the last four years of schooling). The programme is titled the *Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan* (RMSA), a scheme for universalisation of access to and improvement of quality at the secondary stage.[2] Since universalisation of elementary education has become a constitutional mandate,[3] the goal of the RMSA scheme is to achieve universal secondary education. Its vision is to make quality education available and affordable to all young persons aged 14–18. RMSA aims to enhance access, quality and equity as they relate to secondary education, with a focus on marginalised young people such as girls, *Dalits*,[4] Muslims and those who have disabilities.

Our objective is to highlight gaps and opportunities presented by the RMSA programme. This report also highlights critical linkages between education and sexuality that have not thus far been made in debates about either education or sexuality in India. These are linkages which feminist researchers and practitioners have not hitherto engaged with. The evidence presented in this audit shows that unless sexuality is addressed, goals such as making equitable, quality education accessible to the marginalised can never be achieved. For example, the data indicate that fears related to girls' sexuality – namely that girls might express their desires or that they might experience sexual violence in the process of going to school – are a significant reason for pulling girls out of school. This is important in a context where girls' access to higher levels of school education is seen primarily as a gender issue. In the absence of evidence and without an acknowledgement of the key role of sexuality as a determinant, we are left with an incomplete understanding of this critical issue.

This audit does not address all dimensions of gender. Rather, it looks at gender issues in two specific ways. One is gender as it relates to sexuality and the second is gender as it relates to transgender. In the larger realm of development, most players have an understanding of gender that is limited to the binary categories of 'man' and 'woman'. Nirantar recognises that

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[1] Education in India is a 'concurrent subject', which translates to both central and state governments, both being empowered by the constitution to develop programmes and schemes in education. State governments typically develop their own schemes and implement more centrally visioned and financed schemes and policies. This secondary education scheme was initiated by the central government.

[2] Classes 9 and 10 constitute the secondary stage, whereas classes 11 and 12 are designated as the higher secondary stage. The normal age group of the children in secondary classes is 14–16 and the age group in higher secondary classes is 17–18. There is however much variation with respect to age, particularly in rural contexts.

[3] India has guaranteed elementary education to all by passing Right to Free and Compulsory Education for All Act 2009. The universalisation of elementary education is overseen by a scheme called Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA); the RMSA seeks to build upon this scheme.

[4] The term *Dalit* refers to those who are considered by Hindu belief to fall outside India's hierarchical caste system. *Dalits* are recognised by the state as a marginalised community but continue to face discrimination at almost every level including education, health and livelihoods. Within the *Dalit* community, there are many divisions into sub-castes.

there are many lives and identities that fall outside this binary and that are invisible at the level of both policy and intervention. When policies talk about marginalisation based on gender, they primarily mean women and girls. Transgender people, their lives and struggles are constantly left out because anyone that falls outside of the gender binary is neither seen nor recognised. This audit seeks to bring them centre stage. By providing evidence related to transgender students, the report seeks to show the implications of reducing 'gender' to 'girls' and 'women'.

The significance of addressing transgender issues is therefore twofold. One is at the level of the inclusion of a gender identity that has been completely excluded from the discourse of education. It shows how the gender policing that permeates the institution of the school can harm transgender students and even drive them out altogether. The second is that transgender experiences offer compelling evidence and a powerful reminder of the need to understand and address gender as a social construct and not as 'natural' or 'normal'. The evidence related to transgender students' experiences in schools makes visible the means by which the school system perpetuates and enforces gender norms. This report illuminates the school as a site of gendering, as a space where one learns not just science, language and mathematics, but also about social norms and gender identities.

This report contributes to a new and emerging area of knowledge – and demonstrates how development policy and programme audits through the lens of sexuality and gender can be undertaken. This is an important and challenging area because, as we see in the case of RMSA, development policies and programmes tend not even to mention the word 'sexuality', while being replete with constructions of sexuality and with implicit or explicit messages about the need to be disciplined and to control one's desires. Such messages conflict with ground-level realities and have grave implications for the lives of those who are seen to break sexual and gender norms.

The report is structured follows: Section 1 explains the way in which we have used key concepts in the audit. The second section provides the context within which the audit is located, including the ways in which sexuality and gender are currently addressed by school education in India, both by the state and in the discussion of feminist scholars and practitioners. This section also provides information about the RMSA programme: its goals, as well as critical gaps. Section 3 presents the methodology used in this audit, followed by a discussion of the findings, presented so they can be read in relation to the three major goals of the programme – access, quality and equity. Finally, the report's concluding section includes the key findings of the audit and reflections on the methodology used.

1   Key terms and the lens

There is no one definition of sexuality and perhaps there should not be, because our understanding of what it is should be growing and evolving. It is, however, necessary to indicate how we define the term sexuality in this report and what we consider its key aspects to be. For us, the term incorporates erotic desires, acted upon or fantasised about, which are experienced at the individual level, but which also have larger social dimensions, including those relating to gender, age, dis/ability, etc. Sexuality can occupy realms that are biological, psychological, emotional or spiritual. However, sexuality is not limited to desires, and also includes social constructs such as shame, honour and wellbeing. So for example, in the Indian context, shame related to the body is considered to be a key aspect of sexuality. It is not only *related to* sexuality, it *is* a sexuality issue.

In India, the term 'gender' is often equated with the biological category of 'woman'. However, when we use the term in this report we are referring to the norms that seek to define the social constructs of masculinity and femininity. These norms are rooted in a patriarchal ideology and the material structures of power. Nirantar understands gender as a continuum in which there are different degrees to which one transgresses or breaks the social norms related to the 'ideal' woman and man. According to our understanding, everyone is assigned a gender (either male or female) at birth. Society creates strict norms that are meant to be followed by the two genders. These norms are upheld by a system of punishment and privileges. The norms are not only policed, they are also internalised. The process through which gender norms are assigned and maintained is referred to as 'gendering'. The key sites in which this occurs are the family, school, law, medicine, the media and so forth.

Given the focus of this audit, it is worth reflecting on the school as a site of gendering, in order to illustrate what we mean by the term. The school, by virtue of how much time a young person spends there, is a crucial site for this process. All aspects of school life – from textbooks, pedagogy, friendships and student-teacher dynamics to uniforms, bathrooms and seating arrangements – are informed by and further strengthen the gender binary. When students break its rules, they can be ridiculed, rebuked and, sometimes, severely punished with physical violence. Despite the strength of this system, we all break some gender norms. No one is fully masculine or fully feminine. There is therefore a continuum of gender transgression. However, transgender people do not identify at all with the sex assigned to them at birth. We understand gender not only in terms of norms and identities, but also as a critical tool for understanding the social relations of power.

The lens used for this audit is that of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity refers, in this report, to the system of sexual and gender norms, rooted in material realities, which together with norms related to caste, class, dis/ability, religion, age, race etc., maintains existing power relations in society. The reason why heteronormativity is a valuable lens to use is that it enables us to capture and analyse sexuality and gender in a framework of intersectionality. This is significant since we know sexuality and gender cannot be understood or addressed in isolation, and that they need to be related to the other social dimensions of caste, class and so on.

The lens of heteronormativity is also conducive to undertaking a political analysis focused on underlying structural and ideological factors. This reduces the danger of a neo-liberal approach to sexuality, which assumes that sexuality operates only at the level of individual choice, rendering invisible the many powerful factors that are at play. Since heteronormativity is based on an understanding that sexuality and gender are socially constructed, it helps reduce the risk of such essentialist assumptions. The heteronormative lens also lends itself to analysing the privileges and punishments that accrue when sexual and gender norms are adhered to or challenged. It is critical to underline that sexual and gender norms affect

everyone, not only those who are perceived as breaking them. Even the fear that someone might break sexual norms might have implications, sometimes severe, for the lives of individuals and communities. We will see the significance of this dimension of heteronormativity with respect to girls being 'pulled out'[5] of school for the fear that they might act upon their sexual desires. Whether the girls contravene the sexual norm of 'no sex before marriage' is irrelevant. What matters is the fear that they might do so.

Caste is an important social dimension within this audit. The terms scheduled caste (SC), scheduled tribe (ST) and other backward class (OBC) are used throughout this paper to refer to castes and tribes that have been notified in the Constitution of India. In recognition of the historical and continuing marginalisation faced by scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, the state makes special provision at certain levels in key sectors such as education and employment. In contrast to the term *Dalit*, which is used in a variety of contexts, the term SC is one that is used by the state and also used particularly in contexts related to the law and entitlements.

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[5] The report uses being 'pulled out' of school rather than 'dropping out'. To 'drop out' suggests that those who cannot continue education chose to leave the system as an exercise of their own agency.

2 An overview of education, gender and sexuality in India

2.1 School education and gender

There have been shifts in social attitudes towards girls' education, with a greater recognition and acceptance of the need for it. This does not mean, however, that education is seen as a right, or as a means of empowerment. In fact, education is often seen as a factor that will enhance girls' marriage prospects in a context in which education is equated with upward mobility and modernity.

With respect to the state and education, its main focus over the past decade has been on the universalisation of elementary education. The key aims of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), the government programme set up to help achieve this goal, include 'bridging gender and social category gaps, universal retention and education of satisfactory quality'. Building on SSA's achievements and vision, RMSA draws on some of the core components of elementary education and pushes them into the secondary sector. The discourse in secondary education is now moving beyond access, to issues of quality and equity.

Clearly gender is a core concern for the state and achieving gender parity in enrolment, retention and completion rates has been a part of its objectives. Diverse strategies and schemes across states have sought to get girls into school. These include the provision of free uniforms, textbooks, hostel facilities, the development of bridging courses, building of toilets for girls, an increase in the appointment of women teachers and community awareness campaigns.

While statistically the gender parity index has improved and more girls are now in school, gender issues still dog policymakers and the school system. There are wide disparities with respect to region (including rural/urban), caste, religion, dis/ability and class. Children from scheduled tribes comprise 11 per cent, scheduled castes comprise 20 per cent and educationally backward minority communities comprise 14 per cent of total enrollment in schools for the elementary stage. Out of this total enrolment for each category, the percentages of girls are 49, 48 and 49 for ST, SC and Muslim girls respectively.

There are new forms of discrimination and new hierarchies of access that have emerged in the recent past. Girls, particularly from scheduled caste, scheduled tribes and Muslim families are enrolled in government schools, while boys are accessing private schools, which are considered to provide better quality education. In addition, retention rates for girls are much lower than for boys. The levels of retention keep decreasing the higher up the school system you go. The attendance rate for girls in the age group of 15–18 years (secondary school level) at the national level for 2010/11 is 42 per cent as compared to 53 per cent among boys of the same age group.[6] According to the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, the percentage of girls who left school before completing elementary education (before standard 8 in which the average age is 14 years) was 41 per cent as compared to the rate till standard 5 which was 24 per cent.[7] The percentage of girls who dropped out of school was even higher in marginalised communities such as in the scheduled tribes where this was 55 per cent.

The factors underlying girls being taken out of school relate to the burden of domestic work, including care of siblings, poverty and early marriage. The challenge of retention in

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[6] The attendance rate for an age range is the proportion of children that report attending school at the time of survey.
[7] Government of India, Ministry of Human Resource Development , Bureau of Planning, Monitoring & Statistics, New Delhi http://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/SES-School_201011_0.pdf.

secondary education is closely related to gender roles that come into focus with the coming of adolescence. The NSSO (National Sample Survey Organisation)[8] shows that close to 40 per cent of scheduled caste girls aged 15–19 are not in school and are instead engaged in domestic labour supporting their mothers who work outside the home. Approximately 34 per cent of these girls are already in the labour force. A further 58 per cent are self-employed in agricultural or forest labour.

Efforts are being made by the state to address these challenges and girls' education has been prioritised in elementary and secondary education, as a result of both developmental goals and the need to meet international commitments. An important push for ensuring that girls are in school comes from the Human Development Index (HDI) which prioritises female literacy, an area where India's ranking is low. Other than female literacy, female fertility and age of marriage are seen to represent challenges that can be combatted by ensuring that girls are in school.

As a result, girls' education has, over the past decade, been constructed primarily as 'filling the gap'. The provision of resources is the key strategy that the state has adopted to ensure that equality is achieved in terms of numbers and statistics and its focus has been on 'girls' as a biological category. Gender as a concept which exposes the construction of masculinity and femininity has been excluded from this domain. Transgender as a category has not even begun to be recognised.

Failure to recognise sexuality as an access issue

The absence of sexuality as a factor in understanding girls' accessing to schooling can be clearly seen in the questions of the NSSO's national population survey conducted by the state. As can be seen below, other than early marriage, availability of lady teachers and toilets, options related more directly to sexuality are completely absent.

Item 11: reason for never enrolling / discontinuing / dropping out:
      parent not interested in studies ... 01
      inadequate number of teachers ... 02
      school is far off ... 03
      to work for wage/salary ... 04
      for participating in other economic activities ... 05
      to look after younger siblings ... 06
      to attend other domestic chores ... 07
      financial constraints ... 08
      timings of educational institution not suitable ... 10
      for helping in household enterprises ... 11
      language/medium of instruction used unfamiliar ... 12
Applicable for never enrolled cases only
      no tradition in the community.. 13
      education not considered necessary ... 14
Applicable for never enrolled cases only
      child not interested in studies ... 15
      unable to cope up or failure in studies ... 16
      unfriendly atmosphere at school ... 17
      completed desired level/class ... 18
Applicable for female students only
      non-availability of lady teacher … 20
      non-availability of ladies toilet … 21
      others ... 29

Source: Participation and Expenditure in Education – based on NSS 64th round survey (July 2007–June 2008) state sample, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi.

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[8] The National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), now known as National Sample Survey Office, is an organisation under the Ministry of Statistics of the Government of India.

Within the arena of access, the state has focused on the availability of schools and physical infrastructure, rather than on related social issues. Even so, many students still have to travel a considerable distance to secondary school and the physical infrastructure remains poor. Toilets either don't exist or are in a complete state of disrepair and are not used. The quality of infrastructure is particularly important for girls, as the lack of toilets and running water is one of the reasons they leave school.

The state has also ensured the appointment of more 'lady teachers'. This is because parents and communities tend to be more comfortable with girls being taught by women teachers, especially at the secondary and senior secondary levels. These efforts have thus far been limited to the towns because women teachers are mostly urban based. The rural-urban disparity is also reflected in the overall increase in the numbers of secondary school teachers – 14 per cent in rural secondary schools against 30 per cent for those in towns.[9] In addition, Nirantar's experience of working with school education in Uttar Pradesh has shown that the majority of rural school teachers come from the urban areas, from lower middle or middle income backgrounds and most often do not want to relocate to rural areas. Media reports, public hearings organised by rights-based and *Dalit* groups in states such as Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra as well as Nirantar's knowledge of the field also suggest that the issue of sexual harassment on the part of male teachers both towards students and female colleagues is one that continues to be unaddressed by the state. The law on sexual harassment of women at the workplace includes schools, but it is yet to be effectively implemented.

Other measures that have been introduced by the state to address girls' education have included cash transfer schemes and material incentives such as distributing uniforms, bags, bicycles and books to parents and girls who come to school. The evidence emerging thus far shows that cash transfers and incentives have not yielded the desired results in terms of retention and completion of secondary education, although they have increased enrolment. Another measure has been the provision of hostels, particularly for students who belong to *Dalit* and tribal communities. Some studies show that such hostels have facilitated girls' access to schooling, particularly those who live in remote rural areas. The quality of these hostels has, however, been an area of concern. A further criticism of this approach is that it removes children/adolescents from their surroundings and places them in an environment dominated by urban middle class culture and values. There is therefore a growing demand to provide quality education actually in the tribal areas.

2.2   School education and sexuality

This section focuses on sexuality as a factor determining girls' access to education and on the manner in which sexuality is engaged with in the school curriculum.

As discussed above, there have been several initiatives to enhance girls' access to education. However, any attempt to deal directly with issues of sexuality remains absent from these initiatives. The only factor in which sexuality is indirectly recognised is that of early marriage, which continues to be a significant phenomenon affecting the continuation of girls' education. Other factors related to sexuality, however, don't feature anywhere in the discourse on girls' ability to remain in school.

As an organisation that has been working in the field of gender and education for two decades and sexuality for the past seven years, Nirantar is aware that fears related to sexuality – of girls' expressing their desires or experiencing sexual violence – are an important reason for taking girls out of school once they have finished elementary education.

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[9] *Seventh All India School Education Survey, NCERT*
http://www.ncert.nic.in/programmes/education_survey/pdfs/Teachers_and_Their_Qualifications.pdf.

This linkage between sexuality and access to education needs to be studied to understand its multiple dimensions.

Before looking at how sexuality is addressed within the school curriculum itself, it is important to consider the need for sex education in the Indian context. While growing up, adolescents have many questions, doubts, misconceptions regarding sex and sexuality, but there are no sources of accurate, non-judgmental information. The implications for young people are serious. They are not helped to relate to their bodies in a positive way. The failure to address shame and fear associated with sexuality means that young people are most often not able to speak out about sexual abuse. They are also unable to talk about health issues that relate to parts of their bodies that are considered to be 'sexual'. In addition to this culture of silence, there is also an urgent need for sexuality to be addressed in the curriculum for young people who are seen to transgress norms related to gender and sexuality as they suffer a range of violations.

We now look at the ways in which sexuality is addressed in the curriculum. With respect to the examinable curriculum, the only place it is dealt with is in the chapter on human reproduction in science textbooks. However, many teachers feel too inhibited to teach this, whether in a rural or an urban context. The non-examinable area in which issues of sexuality are covered is adolescence or life skills education. As it is not examined, it has a lower status within the overall curriculum and this makes it vulnerable to the fears of parents, the wider community and teachers. Most often this part of the curriculum is allocated insufficient class time.

Adolescence education has gained considerable attention within the Indian education system, particularly over the past ten years. One of the key reasons for this is a strong push from agencies working on HIV and AIDs who see it as a means to prevent and control the pandemic. This has also had serious implications for the aims and the nature of the curriculum. It has necessitated the discussion of unprotected sex in a cultural context where the inclusion of such issues within the curriculum is often seen as inappropriate and dangerous. It was not surprising therefore that the curriculum developed by NACO (National Aids Control Agency) was banned across 12 states in 2007. The reworked curriculum is sanitised and replete with messages, direct and indirect, about abstinence. It provides rich ground to study how norms regarding sexuality are constructed without sexuality being explicitly addressed or discussed at all. The HIV and AIDs agenda has also meant that curriculum is 'message' driven and not one that enables the learners to have access to unbiased information or critical thinking related to sexuality.

There are many ways in which adolescence education/life skills curricula are highly problematic. Nirantar's reviews of the curricula have yielded the following findings:

First, there is very little positive articulation of sexuality. Much of the material suggests different ways to avoid sexual contact. For instance, West Bengal's lifestyle education textbook tells young people to 'Avoid sexual intercourse or defer it till marriage. Use other means of expressing love like offering flowers or holding hands. If sex is insisted on, say no firmly' (West Bengal Board of Secondary Education 2005). Apart from abstinence, sexuality is only talked about in the context of disease, sexual harassment, violence and rape. In fact, the curriculum constructs the phase of adolescence itself as one which is full of fear and traumatic. The Yuva[10] curriculum states that 'Poor information and skills, lack of a safe and supportive environment, being sexually active, substance abuse, violence and injury, early and unintended pregnancy and infection with HIV and other sexually transmitted infections threaten the health and lives of adolescents' (Department of Education, Government of Delhi). In order to drive home the message of abstinence, the curricula propagates the need to control one's behaviour and the value of self-discipline. The Yuva curriculum tells

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[10] Yuva is the life skills programme of the Department of Education, Government of Delhi, India.

adolescents to 'Avoid beverages with caffeine such as coffee, soda after 4pm' and to 'Avoid interesting reading and computer games before going to bed' (*ibid.*).

Secondly, with a focus on 'soft skills' such as confidence, self-expression and negotiation, the curriculum fails to address issues of discrimination, equity and justice. While there is no effort to promote the rights of young people, they are urged to contribute to social causes (that are safe and do not raise fundamental issues of justice and equity in society). 'The developing adolescent can be engaged actively in learning experiences that will enable him/her for example to practise basic hygiene and sanitation practices, listen and communicate effectively in relationships, practice abstinence and safe sex or advocate for a tobacco free school or community.' (*ibid.*) Instrumentalist approaches such as this do not view adolescents as being important in themselves. Their importance lies in the extent to which they can bring about certain changes in society.

Thirdly, gender has been engaged with in limited ways and issues of discrimination have not received sufficient attention. Girls are held responsible for protecting themselves from the violence they experience, and to deal with it by being brave and through self defence. 'Yuva acknowledges that Delhi could be a more safer [*sic*] place for girls and women, and that it is up to them to protect themselves, so that they can say a firm no while required.' (*ibid.*)

Fourthly, the curricula do not recognise or address diversity among young people as it relates to gender, sexuality, religion, caste, etc. Although the state also tends not to recognise such issues, an important exception was made by the Working Group Report on Empowerment of Women (Ministry of Women and Child Development 2007). The report notes that, 'It is either related to population or reproductive health or seen as a problem associated with promiscuity and shame. While there are a number of programmes producing sex education materials, not all of them are informed by a holistic, rights-based perspective on sexuality. As a result, the content of these programs reinforces values, stereotypes and negative assumptions that do little to really inform or support youth.'

2.3   The RMSA programme

As stated above, the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) is a government of India scheme[11] to universalise secondary education. Its stated vision is 'to make good quality education available, accessible and affordable to all young persons in the age group of 14–18 years.' There is a special focus on girls' education. The programme document states that 'Education of girls is the primary focus in Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan.' It locates the significance of secondary education in equipping young people for higher education and paid work, in that it 'enables Indian students to compete successfully for education and for jobs globally.' It also places emphasis on vocational skills.

The goals of RMSA include the following.

- to provide a secondary school within a reasonable distance of any habitation;
- ensure universal access to secondary education (gender equity ratio of 100 per cent);
- universal retention;
- to provide access to secondary education with special reference to economically weaker sections of the society, the educationally backward and the disabled, children residing in rural areas and other marginalised categories like SC, ST, OBC and educationally backward minorities.

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[11] RMSA is a centrally designed and funded programme. However, as both the central and state governments have powers to legislate, the scheme 'can be implemented differently in different states.'

To fulfil these goals, the scheme has three key objectives and strategies, which are detailed below.

2.3.1 Access

With respect to access, the programme has a special focus on girls. The programme lists the following as barriers to girls' access to higher school education: 'poverty, domestic/sibling responsibilities, girl child labor, low preference to girls' education, preference to marriage over education, etc.' The key provision to enhance girls' access to education is to ensure that schools should not be too far from home. These distances were set at 5km for secondary education (classes in the 9th and 10th grade) and 7–10km for higher secondary (the 11th and 12th grade classes). Another provision is free bicycles as well as free public transport and ensuring the 'safety and security of girl child while commuting to the school', although the programme does not detail how it would achieve that. There is also a provision of bridging courses to enable girls who have been pulled out of school to re-enter the school system. Increasing the number of 'lady teachers', enhancing the involvement of women from the community in the School Development and Management Committee, providing cash incentives and hostels are the other key measures. There are also provisions to enhance the access of students from SC/ST/OBC communities, including addressing the issue of language, and the creation of a 'conducive ethos'.

2.3.2 Quality

The RMSA document has an excellent articulation of the scope of quality in education. It states: 'Quality is not merely a measure of efficiency; it also has value dimension. The attempt to improve the quality of education will succeed only if it goes hand in hand with steps to promote equality and social justice.' But the document does not go further to define quality. The document lists the following as its strategy to improve the quality of education:

- providing infrastructure such as blackboards, furniture, libraries, science and mathematics laboratories, computer laboratories and toilets;
- appointment of additional teachers and in-service training of teachers;
- bridging courses for enhancing the learning ability of students passing class 7;
- Reviewing curriculum to meet the National Curriculum Framework,[12] 2005.

(RMSA 2009: 6)

Since the quality of education is linked to capacity-building of teachers, it is worth noting that the RMSA says the focus should be on building leadership, including educational leadership, which will address, 'the art of teaching and learning'; personal leadership, which includes 'integrity and commitment to the professional' as well as 'moral and ethical behavior' and the 'capacity to model … capabilities to others; relational leadership such as 'interpersonal skills'; and intellectual leadership, such as 'clever thinking…and wise decision-making'; as well as organisational leadership, such as that needed for the 'management of human, financial and physical resources'.

The RMSA provides the following statement on education for adolescents: 'It is suggested that health-related education of adolescents, including awareness about AIDS, should be treated in the larger context of life skill education and holistic development which covers health, physical education and sports.'

The programme also has a provision for the counselling of students. It states:

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[12] The National Curriculum Framework 2005 is one of four National Curriculum Frameworks published in 1975, 1988, 2000 and 2005 by the National Council of Educational Research and Training NCERT in India. The document provides the framework for making syllabii, textbooks and teaching practices within the school education programmes in India.

This stage of education coincides with adolescence, a period in an individual's life that is marked by personal, social and emotional crises created due to the demands of adjustment required in family, peer group and school situations. Counselors, especially trained in theory and practice of counseling, can guide the students and help them develop the right attitudes and competencies to cope with educational, personal, social and career related problems and issues. The provision of these services in schools particularly at this stage would help students cope with increasing academic and social pressures. A multi-pronged strategy is needed to make available guidance services at school stage across the country.

(RMSA 2009: 35)

2.3.3 Equity

The focus on equity is reflected in the RMSA which states that one of the scheme's objectives is, 'To ensure that no child is deprived of secondary education of satisfactory quality due to gender, socio-economic, disability and other barriers.' The RMSA recognises that certain resources need to be made available to marginalised groups and girls to facilitate their education. These are:

1. Free lodging facilities for students belonging to SC/ST/OBC and minority communities.
2. Hostels/residential schools, cash incentives, uniforms, books, and separate toilets for girls.
3. Providing scholarships to meritorious/needy students at secondary level.
4. Inclusive education will be the hallmark of all the activities. Efforts will be made to provide all necessary facilities for the children living with disabilities in all the schools.
5. Expansion of open and distance learning, especially for those who cannot pursue full-time secondary education, and to supplent/enrich face-to-face instruction.

2.4 Key gaps in the RMSA programme

Universal access, quality with a focus on equality and social justice, and equity are highly commendable objectives of the programme. The focus on girls and students who are SC/ST/OBC/minority/disabled is highly significant. It is important to note that the programme addresses capacity building for teachers and principals as well as the need for changes in the curriculum. It also talks about the much needed provision of counselling.

It is necessary to briefly examine the RMSA's construction of sexuality and gender. With respect to sexuality, there are no references made – neither positive references nor even references to critical areas like sexual harassment and abuse – in the school and in the curricula. Needless to say sexual diversity is not mentioned. The false assumption made is that all young people find the opposite sex desirable. Even in the section on adolescence education, the programme focuses on health and is silent on sexuality. With respect to gender, the term is equated with girls and women. The category of transgender is completely missing and the constructs of masculinity and femininity are not recognised or addressed. The term gender is used in the context of gender as a barrier to girls' access to education and in terms of the need to mainstream gender in all aspects of the programme. There is, however, a striking absence of the discourse of gender-based discrimination. There are, in addition, several gaps and areas of vagueness in the scheme that this audit explores. The identification of these gaps is based on Nirantar's understanding and experience of working in education. The audit will examine these gaps and explore how they relate to ground-level realities.

1. The provision of infrastructure is not recognised as an essential part of creating access to secondary education to all children, especially girls, even though distance to the school is an important criterion in deciding whether girls may go to school or not. The distance of 3–5km is, in rural areas, not an easy distance to cover, given the fears and anxieties of parents in particular and the community in general about girls' vulnerability.

2. The secondary school-age population is a significant size in India. The population of children in the age group 14–18 years is estimated at 121.11 million in 2011, whereas current enrolment in secondary and senior secondary education is only 37 million.[13] The scale and nature of infrastructure required to achieve universal access to secondary education thus is huge and needs herculean efforts to make it possible across all communities and genders. This looks all the more difficult given that states do not spend more than 3 per cent of their GDP on education. The RMSA does not spell out any special effort or strategy to fill the infrastructural gap to accommodate the increasing number of young people of secondary-school age.

3. Although the achievements of all the objectives of the programme demand attitudinal change, the RMSA is silent on this critical educational dimension. This begs the question of whether universal access, quality, equality, social justice and equity can be achieved if attitudes in the community, among students, teachers, principals and those involved in designing and implementing the programme remain unchanged. The capacity-building for teachers and principals does not include developing an understanding of gender, caste etc.

4. The RMSA is silent on discrimination. There are repeated references to marginalised sections of the population and the need to enhance their access to education. However, the programme does not recognise issues of discrimination either in terms of an analysis of problems or how they should be addressed.

5. The RMSA programme document begins with a focus on globalisation, the opportunities that this has created and the need for education to enable young people to find jobs. This is the closest to a vision of education that the document gets. It says nothing about why education, or what kind of education, should be provided.

6. The document undertakes very little analysis of why and in what ways the present system is lacking in terms of quality or equity. The one exception is a section examining the barriers to girls' education, but it still fails to take into account issues related to sexuality.

7. The most substantive and detailed sections of the document focus on infrastructure (such as the availability of schools, what facilities they have) and management. While these are very important, the lack of visioning and detail related to other dimensions of access, quality and equity is a source of concern.

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[13] This data draws upon the education chapter in the 11th Five Year Plan (2007–2012) – www.aicte-india.org.in.

3   Methodology

3.1   The following tools have been used for this audit

1. Content analysis of the RMSA programme.
2. Focus group discussion (FGD) with members of Nirantar who were involved with the audit.
3. FGD with *Dalit* and tribal rural young women, studying in a bridging course to join or re-enter the school system.[14]
4. Rapid survey with parents of 20 rural girls who were pulled out of school.
5. In-depth interviews with three transgender people about their experiences when they were in school.

3.2   Rationale underlying the tools

How do we undertake a heteronormativity audit of a policy or a programme, which does not explicitly address sexuality or even many aspects of gender?

Development policies and programmes often do not mention the word sexuality and are yet replete with assumptions about sexuality as well as about gender. These assumptions actively inform the nature of the interventions, with serious implications for the lives of those they are aimed at. This is true in case of RMSA. The way in which we sought to examine this is as follows.

3.2.1   Deconstruction of content of policy/programme documents

This involves a close reading of the programme document, and spelling out the hidden assumptions being made about sexuality, gender, etc.

3.2.2   Beginning with oneself

The FGD with members of Nirantar involved with the audit was designed as an experiment with a methodological tool which might be of value to all those engaged in research, planning or implementation of development policies or programmes. One of the challenges in such processes is that the individuals/agencies involved tend to experience themselves at a distance from the issue or target population of the intervention. In the context of gender, for example, efforts by the Indian State to mainstream gender has meant that gender has become a buzzword often devoid of any real meaning to those in the development industry. It is therefore important to have a tool which connects people in direct, personal and meaningful ways with their own experiences of gender. With respect to sexuality there are strong fears, inhibitions and moralistic attitudes, often deep rooted. In the context of young people, for instance, rarely will those involved in educational planning recall their own experiences related to sexuality when they were growing up.

Even though we are an organisation that has been working on issues of education for two decades and we have facilitated participants in the training we conduct to reflect on their experiences in school, we had never created that opportunity for ourselves! Dr. Akshay Khanna, from the Institute of Development Studies in the UK, designed the FGD in a manner that allowed us to revisit our own experiences in school and explore in ways that were personal and at the same time collective. The FGD provided an opportunity to reflect together on personal experiences that ran deep and that many of us had not had much chance to process, even in our adult lives.

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[14] Since the RMSA is still at an early stage of implementation we did not include learners from schools covered by the scheme.

3.2.3 Identifying the gaps as they relate to sexuality and gender and seeking evidence

When undertaking the content analysis of the RMSA document, we began to identify additional gaps as they related to sexuality and gender. One of these major gaps was the absence of the transgender category. The second gap was the absence of sexuality in the analysis as to why young women are pulled out of school. As stated above, in our experience as an organisation working in the area of gender and education, we knew that the fears related to the daughter's sexual activity, whether consensual or not, and the risk that the route to school exposed girls to situations and opportunities to explore their sexuality were significant. The RMSA, however, offers no recognition of this factor and no research related to it. We therefore decided to undertake the rapid survey of parents of girls who had been pulled out of school to understand whether sexuality was a factor or not, and if so then to what extent.

This raises a critical methodological issue. In a context in which development policies and programmes tend to be silent about sexuality, it is often in the gaps and silences that the critique needs to be made. And when such gaps are being studied, it can be that the exercise being undertaken is not an open-ended one. As with this audit, the practitioners' experience in the area pointed towards certain gaps which then need to be studied. In this case, when we undertook the rapid survey with parents, it was with the stated objective of seeking to understand whether, and to what extent, sexuality was a factor in parents pulling girls out of school. The hypothesis, based on our experience, was that sexuality is a significant factor.

In the area of sexuality, in particular, there will be other contexts in which gaps form a crucial aspect of heteronormativity audits. However, with so little research, especially on how sexuality relates to development, it is highly likely that the evidence will not exist. What might exist is the knowledge of practitioners. This knowledge can be the basis on which gaps can be identified, and then evidence purposively sought.

3.2.4 Identifying the sites in which heteronormativity is being constructed

We know that heteronormativity is constructed in ways that are often not visible. There is a need therefore to identify those sites where norms relating to sexuality and gender are being constructed. In the context of school education, the sites that are usually identified are the curriculum and pedagogy – that is, if sexuality is addressed at all. The FGD with staff members of Nirantar as well as the FGD with the young women who are enrolled in the bridge course were designed to allow for the identification and exploration of other sites in which sexuality and gender norms are constructed. This included the sites of friendship, teacher-student dynamics beyond classroom teaching and formal and informal leadership roles. Exploring these areas enables a fuller examination of the school as an institution that seeks to engineer moral development and the ideological role the school plays, for example with respect to constructing notions of the disciplined, 'good' student and the implications for sexuality and gender.

3.2.5 Illuminating the implications of the sexuality and gender constructs on the lives of those who are impacted by the policies and programmes

As mentioned above, one of the gaps identified in the content of the RMSA programme is the absence of transgender as a category. We therefore gathered evidence, in the form of interviews with transgendered individuals about their experiences in school. Hearing from transgender people themselves about their experiences and their views on gender in education countered their invisibility in the scheme and in the larger discourse of education.

In terms of methodology, this sought to bring transgendered people centre stage and to hear directly from them and be educated by them.

When studying the implications of a development policy or programme for the lives of those who are highly stigmatised on the basis of gender or sexuality, tools such as surveys and FGDs are not always possible. In a survey or FGD it is highly unlikely that respondents will share their issues either because they fear being identified or others' responses. Trust between the subjects and researchers becomes critical. In such a context it is not the scale of the data that matters, but whether the tool successfully elicits the experiences and reflections of those stigmatised. Intensive, qualitative tools are likely to be most appropriate. In this audit, we decided to undertake three in-depth interviews which created a safe space for transgender people to share their experiences and reflections about their school-related experiences.

The audit also involved eliciting the experiences and views of gender transgression by women who identify with the gender assigned to them at birth, such as most of the participants in the Nirantar FGD. This was in keeping with our understanding of gender transgression as a continuum as well as the recognition of the importance of the category of transgender as an identity. Our understanding of gender identity as being fluid also ensured the inclusion of shifting gender expressions during the course of lives of participants in the Nirantar FGD.

4   Findings of the audit

The following section presents our findings in relation to the three core objectives of RMSA – enhancing access, quality and equity – and the RMSA's related strategies.

4.1   Access

The RMSA's key objective is to increase girls' access to higher school education. The programme also seeks to enhance the access of those who are scheduled caste (SC/*Dalit*), scheduled tribal (ST), Muslim and disabled. It seeks to enable 'universal' access to education. A category of young people omitted from the objective of 'universal' access is that of transgendered young people. In this section, however, we focus on the programme's objective of enhancing girls' access to education. Central to the issue of access to secondary education is, of course, an understanding of why young women are pulled out of school at this stage. The RMSA programme document does offer an analysis.[15] The causal factors identified by the programme document include low preference to girls' education, preference to marriage and domestic responsibilities.

The programme proposes several strategies to address the phenomenon of girls being pulled out of school. One of the main provisions is that schools should not be too far from home (5km for secondary classes and 7–10km for higher secondary classes). The programme also aims to provide transport facilities for girls 'in order to avoid covering the distance through walking'. Another provision is that of the bridging course, which is meant to enable girls who have dropped out of school to re-enter the school system. There is also, as mentioned above, the provision of hostels. These proposed strategies do not, however, address the factors identified by the programme as to why girls' are being pulled out of school (discussed below). In order to investigate the RMSA's analysis related to girls' access to education, and the gaps not acknowledged by the RMSA, a survey was conducted.

4.1.1   The survey – profile and method

The rapid survey was conducted with the parents of 20 girls who had been pulled out of school. Four respondents were men and 16 were women. The number of women interviewed was deliberately higher because the rapport established with them was greater. Those interviewed were from a village in Lalitpur District of Uttar Pradesh, a state in north India, where Nirantar is involved in a community-based programme. The interview team were members of the Nirantar office in Delhi and Sahjani Shiksha Kendra – the community-based programme for women's empowerment through literacy and education started by Nirantar.

Only three out of the four fathers surveyed had been to school. The highest level of education among these respondents was the 8th standard or the start of higher school education. The primary reason for leaving school was poverty and the need to earn money. Only one of the 16 mothers interviewed had been to school.

Collectively, amongst the families of the 20 girls who were pulled out of school, the total number of boys was 35 of whom 45.7 per cent had stopped attending school. The average level of education they had attained was the 7th. Only one boy had never gone to school. The total number of girls in these families was 50. The percentage of girls who dropped out was 52 per cent. The average class girls had reached was the 6th. Six girls had never attended school. The average age of girls from *Dalit* families at marriage was around 15 and

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[15] This is one of the few parts of the document to offer an analysis of the situation. The rest of the RMSA document is marked by an absence of such analysis and moves directly into strategies.

girls from the middle caste families even lower, around 8 years of age. The age when a girl would enter higher education, class 9, would be around 14 or 15.

The interviews were conducted mostly in the interviewees' homes. We sought to interview people without others in the family and community being present, but this was never possible, given that there is no concept of privacy in the rural context. The positive aspect of this was the daughters were also often around during the interview, and although we had not planned to interview them, when some of them accompanied us from one house to another they provided us valuable information and insights, often contradicting their parents' narratives about their motivation to study.

The interviews took between 30 minutes and one hour. A checklist contained a set of essential questions, but during the course of the interviews, the interviewees had to improvise substantially. This was because parents experienced a high degree of inhibition in talking about their daughters' sexuality and associated fears. For example, in a majority of interviews, the parents said that they could not send their daughter to school because 'now she has reached maturity'. We then asked, 'So if she is now '*sayani*' (mature), surely there is less reason to worry, not more? What is it that you are worried about? And then gradually, with some initial awkwardness, they would start talking about the fears. When parents spoke about their fears, they did not use words like sex. Such a direct use of language would have been too uncomfortable.[16] The indirectness of the language did not pose a problem since it was clear from the words they were using that they were referring to sexuality. For example, the term '*unch-neech*' came up often during the interviews. *Unch-neech* is a reference to sex. It is a reference, moreover, to sex that would disrupt heteronormativity. *Unch-neech* translates literally into 'upside down', with a sense of disarray and disorder.

The flow of the interviews was as follows. We began by asking the parents about their own experiences and education. This was considered to be important to mitigate parents' feelings of being under pressure as to why they were pulling girls out of school and also to locate the issue more broadly. We then moved to talking about the children's (boys' and girls') schooling and then focused our questions on the daughter who had been pulled out of school most recently and the factors underlying that.

4.1.2 Why girls were pulled out of school

When asked about the reasons why they had pulled their daughter out of school, 17 out of 20 respondents spoke about sexuality-related fears, either ones that involve the potential of girls acting on their desires or something happening against her will. The remaining three spoke about marriage as a factor in ways that linked closely to sexuality.

- Seven respondents mentioned their fear of girls willingly getting into a sexual relationship on the way to school. Although they also mentioned sexual harassment, in our reading of their interviews they placed greater emphasis on the former.
- Seven respondents spoke only of the fear that the daughter might experience sexual harassment or someone might kidnap her to take revenge on the family, but did not express concern that she might of her own free will engage in sexual activity.
- Three respondents emphasised that one of the disadvantages of education was that parents lose control over their daughters' mobility. They were clearly alluding to loss of control over their daughters' sexuality here.
- Fourteen of the 20 parents mentioned marriage as a reason for discontinuing their daughters' education. The need to get girls married at an early age is

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[16] Even in the context of adult consensual sex, the public use of language can often be 'indirect' other than when being used in humour or in an aggressive manner.

also closely linked to the fear of them breaking the norm of no sex before marriage.

Additional reasons for pulling girls out of school, not related to sexuality and marriage, were as follows:

- Three respondents cited poverty.
- Two respondents said that the teacher does not teach well, with one of them adding that the government school teacher was not good and that they could not afford private school education.
- One respondent pointed to the lack of women teachers.
- For two respondents the issue was transport to school: one didn't have a bicycle and the other said their daughters could not ride bicycles.
- One respondent said there was no value in education: even if the daughter studied, she would have to do what she was doing now.

The data from the survey highlight the significance of sexuality as a factor in pulling girls out of school.

Fears related to sexuality

As shared above, parents' fears are twofold – first, that the girl might be sexually violated on the way to school or second, that she might willingly enter into a sexual relationship. It was easier for the respondents to talk about violation than consensual sex, although even so they required facilitation and probing. Seven of the parents referred to cases of sexual violation/affairs in other villages, rather than reflecting on their own fears. Below is an excerpt from one of these interviews:

> Respondent: She is not able to ride a bicycle. We won't send her alone. She keeps falling here and there... When we tell her about studying, she says that she doesn't want to go… I'm scared. What if someone approaches her on the way? Who will we send her with…? We will send her with a friend. We are worried, afraid in our heart, if a girl who has now become mature goes…
>
> Interviewer: What does your heart fear?
>
> Respondent: The fear that someone might approach her. The girl will also want... The boy will also want... There is also the fear of rape.
>
> Mother (caste *Dalit*, village Muriya)

Marriage as a factor in pulling girls out of school

Parents' fear of what might happen on the way to school is very closely linked to the desire to see their daughters married, since an important motivation is that she is safely 'sent away' lest she gets pregnant before marriage.[17]

> Interviewer: Why do you want her to get married now?
>
> Respondent: The times are bad. Only if she is married can honour be preserved.
>
> (Mother – as above)

Early marriage is the norm here, as in most of rural north India. And marriage does mean the end of girls' education. Parents who had married daughters said that they had tried to

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[17] At the time of the survey, it was a festive season and so many of the married daughters had come to their natal homes. It was utterly depressing for some of us to see such young women with babies in their arms.

negotiate with the in-laws, but the in-laws were not interested in sending girls to school. As one mother explained (*Kushwaha* – middle level caste, village Jakhora): 'In her marital home they said – however much she has studied, it's enough'.

There were reasons other than sexuality which negatively link marriage and education. These include the difficulty in finding a match if the daughter is 'too' educated and the fact that a greater amount of dowry will be demanded, since the boy will also be more educated.

At the same time, with the onset of modernity, education for girls, up to a certain level, has became desirable as educated boys are seen to need educated girls, related to the idea of the companionate wife.

Tanmay (gender queer, caste *Brahmin*, member of Nirantar, New Delhi) said:

> I had a group of *Tambrahm*[18] friends… The girls would be top [of the class], but in entrance exams, it was always the boys who would be top… and the girls said that they didn't want to be top because they wanted to marry the cleverest boys, who would not marry them if they were too clever.

Archana (woman, *Brahmin*, member of Nirantar, New Delhi) said:

> It's like what Uma Chakravarthy, the feminist historian says… in the previous century, men wanted educated women because they wanted good companions, ones who can make conversations with them, who are presentable, but not ones who will challenge them.

The corrupting desire for education

There is another link between sexuality and education that was discerned in the interviews. Both education and sexuality are seen as threatening because these activities encourage girls to think about what they want, their own desires, whether it is the desire to study or the desire to express their sexuality. In our analysis, what seems to be at work here is that a 'good girl' is being socialised to become a 'good woman', who must only think about others and not herself. She must not be at the centre of her world. This idea is captured in the following interview extracts:

A grandmother (*Kushwaha* – middle caste, village Jakhora)

> Respondent: Education can take her ahead in life. But if she gets more educated, then she's out of our hands.' [The literal translation would be 'out of the house' which indicates the connection being made between education and the fear of no longer being able to contain her within the boundaries of the home and its rules.]
>
> Interviewer: Doesn't she insist that she wants to study?
>
> Respondent: [proudly] In our family/community, girls do not insist on anything.

Education can be seen as enabling a girl to think and act independently and to go against social norms. The view that education corrupts girls is not just a rural notion.

Archana (introduced above) said:

> I had an inter-caste marriage. My father reluctantly went to meet my boyfriend's mother to discuss our marriage. He said to my boyfriend's mother, 'If I had not

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[18] Slang for Brahmins from the southern state of Tamil Nadu, stereotyped as being educated, seemingly modern but actually conservative.

allowed her to study beyond the 10th standard, I would not have had to see this day today.'

When parents were asked during the survey about the advantages and disadvantages of education, almost all said the value of education was that the daughters might be able to find jobs. Very few said that it would help them develop their minds. A few said it would help the girls find husbands. Some said that if their daughters are educated, then they would in turn educate their children. Notwithstanding parents' fear and concerns about girls' sexuality, they could still see some, albeit limited, value in education. Given this conflicted situation, the following section examines the extent to which RMSA's strategies are likely to be effective.

How appropriate are the proposed strategies?

The RMSA programme proposes to enhance girls' access to higher school education by ensuring that schools are not too far away, and through the provision of bicycles, public transport, bridging courses, hostels and women teachers. The data from the survey shows that a major reason for girls being pulled out of school is the sexuality-related fear that the girl might act on her desires or be sexually harassed on the way to, or in, school. This factor is not recognised by the programme. The critical question that arises is that if this key, deep-rooted attitude is not addressed, to what extent will the programme's proposed strategies be effective? We focus here on providing the girls with bicycles and relate it to the findings of the survey, in order to assess whether this provision can be effective.

In the survey, when parents were asked whether they would be willing to send their daughter to school on a bicycle, the response tended to be that their daughters did not know how to ride bicycles and that they might fall. However, as we probed further, other concerns emerged. These related to where the girl might go if she had a bicycle and also to her safety more generally with respect to sexuality. In some cases the daughters were present during the interviews and they clearly said that they wanted to use the bicycle. In the following example, an important piece of evidence that challenged the idea that girls would be unable to use the bicycle to go to school, was the presence of the bicycle during the interview.

> [Backdrop: bicycle lying against the wall in the open courtyard.]
>
> Interviewer: Can't she ride that and go to school?
>
> Respondent [Father, *Dalit*]: She does not know how to ride. She herself doesn't go alone anywhere, without her friends.
>
> Daughter [replying immediately, eyes lit up]: I want to learn to ride. When I have work I go alone anyway.

The fear of what might happen on the way was so acute that only a door-to-door service seemed appropriate. Clearly a bicycle cannot be a solution when fears are such that the desired solution is complete surveillance/physical protection. Parents' fear is that their daughters will be alone and will be able to choose where to go. Bicycles will not address parents' anxiety related to sexual agency, in fact they might even enhance it.

> Mother (*Kushwaha* – middle level caste, village Jakhora): 'The younger ones go to school easily. No problem. But the older ones… god knows where they will go. If there's a vehicle which drops her to school, then it's fine. But not a bicycle, because she doesn't know how to cycle. There is always the fear that she has still not come back from studying.

During another interview, we thought that the daughter, from the way she dressed and from her body language, might be transgender. We felt it might be good if we could talk to her in private to understand if there was any support that she needed, so we asked her mother.

Interviewer: Can Bharti come tomorrow to our office for a discussion?

Respondent: [*Kushwaha* – middle level caste, village Muriya] – Yes, if you can pick her up from home and drop her back home. She can go with you. If she goes alone we will feel scared. Where did she go? How do I tell you what's in my heart? [Later, Bharti herself refused to come with us.]

The provision of bicycles is highly positive since it creates the opportunity for girls to be mobile in a manner that can be highly empowering. The RMSA must retain this provision. It is also to be appreciated that the document says that the girls can continue using the bicycles after school. There is a need to recognise, however, that, without attitudinal change, bicycles alone will not alter the situation. If people have sexuality-related fears about their daughters, these will remain whether a bicycle is provided or not.

With respect to the other RMSA provisions, there is a need to think through the underlying issues related to sexuality. Although hostel accommodation was not included in the survey, Nirantar's knowledge of community responses to residential educational centres shows that parents tend to perceive these as spaces where their daughters will be safe. This safety is both in terms of ensuring that no sexual harm will come to them, and in terms of certifying that girls are not able to exercise sexual autonomy. However, other than the serious improvements in the functioning of hostels that are needed, students and parents need to have a real choice as to whether they want to take advantage of a hostel, and it ought not to be viewed primarily as a way of ensuring sexual restraint on daughters, almost like a chastity belt.

RMSA also ensures that there are more 'lady teachers' in schools. It is true that this would be reassuring for parents. However, it leaves unaddressed the very serious issue of sexual harassment by male teachers.

One of the girls said:

The teachers say, 'Are you waiting for a boy?' They say, 'Why are you being so coy – so that boys wink at you?' If the story has a husband and wife, the teacher keeps staring... What the teachers say, how they behave... is bad... The teacher uses words of abuse like whore.

The survey showed parents' fear of sex on the way to school, their desire to marry girls off early and their concern that education will corrupt their daughters, causing parents to lose their control over their daughters' sexuality. It also showed the students' experience of sexual harassment by male teachers.

Given these ground-level realities, the gaps in the strategies proposed by RMSA are as follows:

- Providing resources aimed at surface-level concerns while failing to address underlying attitudes is not likely to succeed (for example, giving bicycles is not going to be effective if fears related to sexuality remain unaddressed).
- There is nothing to address attitudes underlying early marriage (which also relate to gender and sexuality), even though the state is concerned about the phenomenon of early marriage.
- The provision of female teachers does not prevent sexual harassment by male teachers.
- None of the provisions does anything to address attitudes to education, including parental fears and their failure to recognise the empowering potential of education.

Provisions that RMSA should include

One of the strengths of the RMSA is that it identifies that need for community mobilisation, the participation of the community, including women, in the SDMCs (School Development and Management Committees) and capacity-building for principals and teachers. It does not, however, examine why these interventions are necessary or what their substantive content should be. These spaces need to be used to enable perspective-building related to sexuality, gender and education, as well as the linkages between the three. A space for this also needs to be created for all those involved in the designing and implementation of RMSA.

Discussions, in particular those related to sexuality, will prove to be challenging. There is a real danger in highlighting sexuality-related fears, not only at the level of the community but also at the level of policymakers. The sexual norms relating to young women and sex before marriage run so deep and strong that drawing attention to this in the public realm might actually result in undesired consequences such as greater fear and restrictions on girls' levels of independence with respect to mobility, with provisions which are 'protective' and which increase the control over, and surveillance of, school-going girls.

The strategy of engagement with sexuality-related fears will need to be carefully thought through. What is clear, however, is that progressive civil society actors such as feminist educationists, practitioners and researchers need to be aware of the significant linkage between sexuality and education. This needs to form part of the discourse on gender and education.

Some possible strategic elements highlighting sexuality and education in the more public realm could include:

- Broader engagement with sexuality and gender, which will reduce the fears around sexuality and which will help adults see the implications of sexuality and gender in their own lives.
- Working with women's collectives to develop the strategy of perspective-building.
- Collaborations with large-scale government empowerment programmes for women and girls, such as the Mahila Samakhya (MS). MS has formed girls' forums in which they discuss their issues and collectively take action. These forums are supported by the women's collectives which have been formed by MS. The girls' forums have allowed their participants agency to negotiate with both family and community. Nirantar's experience of working with such programmes as well as smaller community-based NGOs shows that it is possible to build perspectives and to begin to bring about attitudinal changes related to sexuality and gender in this way. Dialoguing with rural women about sexuality, in Nirantar's experience, was easier than with more urban, educated women, whose freedom of thought was restricted by their internalisation of notions of middle class respectability.[19]
- More far-reaching capacity building – it should not be limited to teachers and principals. Only when the capacities of school committee members are strengthened, will they be able to effectively engage in community mobilisation.
- Work on both the 'push' and 'pull' sides of the attitudinal scenario as it relates to education. There is a particular need for enhancing an understanding of the 'pull', the desirability of education.

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[19] For more details please see Sharma (2011).

The content of capacity-building for school staff and members of SDMCs must include understanding – as well as developing the skills to build further understanding at the community level – about the empowering potential of education. While dialogues about sexuality and gender are needed, we know that this will provoke a high level of resistance. We will not, in the foreseeable future, have a situation where parents are 'alright' about their daughters exercising their sexual agency. The hope is that dialogues about sexuality and gender will reduce the general levels of anxiety and perhaps build awareness of how sexuality and gender norms also constrain adults in their lives. Returning to the question of the value of education, it is critical to build an understanding about this at the community level. The survey shows that at present the perceived value of education is related to enhancing the marriage prospects of daughters and to the role of education in procuring jobs for the young women, the possibility of which is highly limited in rural north India. There is a need to build an understanding about the role that education can play in empowerment, in terms of being in a stronger position to negotiate one's way through the challenges and vulnerabilities of life, to have access to information, including knowledge regarding entitlements, and in embedding a greater belief and confidence in being able to bring about change in one's existing situation, including at a collective level.[20]

In concluding the programme analysis and evidence from the audit, although the RMSA recognises existing barriers to education such as early marriage, domestic work and the low preference for girls education, its assessment of the barriers is grossly incomplete because it does not take into account the factors related to sexuality which contribute significantly to girls being pulled out of school. The most direct of these are parents' fears related to sexuality, both consensual and non-consensual, on the way to school. The other factors are the fear of sexual relations before marriage, which contributes to the phenomenon of early marriage, as well as the fear that education will mean a loss of control over girls, including control of their sexuality.

The linkages between sexuality, gender and access to education need to be recognised in order for the provision of resources, such as bicycles, to be more effective. Providing hostels and transport facilities is important but if the impetus behind them continues to be fear related to sexuality and gender, education will be sustaining the heteronormative structure, rather than enabling empowerment.

Deep-rooted attitudes to sexuality and gender must be addressed and engaged with if more girls are to gain access to higher education.

4.2   Quality as defined by the RMSA

The RMSA document states that quality is not just about efficiency, but is also about equality and social justice. While this is commendable, the document does not define quality. It nonetheless lists the following ways to improve the quality of education:

- providing required infrastructure (blackboards, furniture, libraries, laboratories for science, computers and toilets;
- appointment of additional teachers and in-service training of teachers;
- bridging courses for enhancing the learning ability of students completing class 8;
- reviewing the curriculum to meet the NCF 2005 norms.

(RMSA 2009)

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[20] The attitudinal scenario might look somewhat like this. On one hand, there are fears related to sexuality that are likely to continue. On the other hand, is the perceived value of education. A possible strategy would be to strategically address issues of sexuality and gender to address the former, and to help the parents and community to see greater value in education and to hope that the decision making will tip in favour of the latter.

The document does not state what the content of teachers' in-service training should be, or say anything about the curriculum or pedagogy of the bridging course. It is positive, however, that the RMSA states the school curriculum should be reviewed to meet the NCF, 2005 norms which do address many key gender dimensions, although transgender and sexuality issues find space only in the National Focus Group on Gender's 2006 position paper. (www.ncert.nic.in/new_ncert/ncert/rightside/links/pdf/focus_group/gender_issues_in_education.pdf)

Life skills education is the one space where there was potential to address issues of sexuality, yet the RMSA document only speaks about health, HIV and AIDS and yoga. It does, however, list guidance and counselling as a means to promote the universalisation of secondary education:

> Guidance and Counseling services can help in promoting students' retention and better scholastic performance in curricular areas, facilitating adjustment and career development of students, developing right attitudes towards studies, self, work and others. This stage of education coincides with adolescence, a period in an individual's life that is marked by personal, social and emotional crises created due to the demands of adjustment required in family, peer group and school situations. Counselors, especially trained in theory and practice of counseling, can guide the students and help them develop the right attitudes and competencies to cope with educational, personal, social and career related problems and issues. The provision of these services in schools particularly at this stage would help students cope with increasing academic and social pressures.

> (RMSA, 2009: 35)

While this step is promising, it needs to be recognised that 'guidance and counseling' can be used as a powerful way of perpetuating heteronormativity, seeking to ensure that young people make the 'right' choices. It is thus important to question what the RMSA means by 'right attitudes and competencies'. This notion of right and wrong, when used along with the language of 'crises', in the context of describing adolescence, is worrying. The language of 'adjustment' and 'coping' is also symptomatic of an approach to education which seeks to maintain the status quo, rather than to bring about positive change.

The RMSA does not define what it means by quality and the provisions it enumerates appear to be highly limited, vague and potentially detrimental. Applying a heteronormativity lens to the quality of education requires assessment of the extent to which schools are promoting or countering heteronormativity, and the implications of this for the lives of students. Since heteronormativity is a system that seeks to maintain existing power relations, education that promotes heteronormativity would clearly be violating principles of equality and social justice, which RMSA considers to be key aspects of quality in education.

The tools and findings shared below explore sites of construction of sexuality and gender norms and their implications for young school-going people. After sharing the findings we will return to the question of how good quality education needs to be defined.

4.2.1 The tools – FGDs with Nirantar staff and young women enrolled in a bridging course

Focus group discussions were the tools used to explore heteronormativity in schools. One was conducted with Nirantar staff and another with young women on a bridging course.

The FGD with eight Nirantar members was an experiment in evoking the personal experiences and collective reflections of those involved in an audit process. The FGD lasted a whole day. The themes included desire, discipline, shame, performance, leadership and

intimacy. We were asked, in small groups, to share a remarkable incident from our school days and then to share them with others as role plays. After discussion of the issues these raised, we examined other areas not yet covered. The participants were urban, almost all 'upper' and 'middle' caste. All had university degrees, most to postgraduate level. The FGD was exploratory and open-ended in nature.

The second FGD was conducted with *Dalit* and *Adivasi* rural young women who had been taken out of school and who were attending a bridging course to be able to return. The course was run by Sahjani Shiksha Kendra, Nirantar's community-based programme for women's and girls' education and empowerment. Participants also included some young women who had attended Janishala, an eight-month residential programme for *Dalit* and *Adivasi* young women, which was run by Nirantar. Out of 20 girls, only one had never been to school, the rest had studied from the 4th to the 11th standard.

We had anticipated that it would be a challenge to engage the young women in discussions on gender and sexuality. In order to help them feel more relaxed we showed films. One was a Bollywood version of *Bend it like Beckham* and the other was a romance whose heroine also defied traditional gender stereotypes. Despite these and other strategies adopted during the FGD, it was extremely difficult to get the girls to talk. Often it was those who had studied at Janishala who felt sufficiently comfortable and confident to take part.

We had also anticipated these differences between the groups: the bridging course girls were in the process of going through experiences which for the Nirantar team were in the past and so easier for them to talk about and reflect upon.

4.2.2 Findings from the FGDs

In analysing the FGDs, we explore the manner in which heteronormativity was being constructed or challenged by the participants' schools and the implications of this for their lives. We begin with the sites in which heteronormativity is constructed in schools. Typically, in the discourse on gender and education, the sites explored are the curriculum and pedagogy. The FGDs looked beyond these, examining in addition student-teacher interactions outside the classroom, the teachers themselves, the physical spaces of school and pupil-pupil relationships – all of which also constitute sites where norms related to sexuality and gender are constructed, but in ways that are not so visible or direct.

Curriculum

Participants in the FGDs said that the only section of the curriculum that addressed issues of sexuality was the chapter on reproduction in their biology textbooks. This was, and continues to be, a chapter that teachers tell the students to read on their own because they are too embarrassed to teach it. One chapter which addresses only one act of sex and which does not even begin to address the larger construction of sexuality, is clearly grossly insufficient. (The FGD participants had not received life skills education, which has only recently been introduced into the curriculum.)

> We were taught [the chapter] only after 9th standard and it is usually avoided or we are asked to read it on our own.
>
> (FGD with young women)
>
> There is only tokenism [in the textbooks]. Eid [the festival] is given one chapter and one chapter on Christianity, but it never became part of our lives and consciousness. And the children don't take it seriously. [Similarly] one chapter on reproduction did not explain sexuality.
>
> (FGD with Nirantar members).

Construction of heteronormativity in out-of-classroom interactions with teachers – the 'good student'

In the young women's focus group, they shared instances of how teachers tried to enforce sexual norms.

> We had a teacher who was terrible. She had a small mouth, but was always shouting at us. If we didn't come dressed to her liking, she would yell, saying, 'Is this a fashion show? How have you worn your *dupatta?*'[21]

As well as direct messages of heteronormativity, such as the one above instructing students how to dress appropriately, there were powerful indirect messages given by teachers that constructed the idea of the 'good student'. The construct of the good student is not limited to sexuality, but abiding by sexual norms is a key dimension. This is not merely about controlling sexual desires, but spills over to other behaviour – for example, expecting a student to be disciplined, straightforward, obedient etc. Such a student is much less likely to break sexual norms. The larger construct of the 'good student' has its pleasures, such as being the teachers' favourite, but it can also have its pains, including emotional rejection by the teachers. These pleasures and pains together constitute powerful tools to ensure the student remains 'good'. In the Nirantar FGD several experiences were shared which led to this articulation of the 'good student'.

> I was dating two boys, one of whom was my good friend's ex-boyfriend. This was when I was in the 9th or 10th [i.e. 15 or 16 years old]. One of my teachers... I used to be the teachers' favourite and the good girl... she said to me... she was very dominating, scary... 'What have you become?'... That haunted me for a long time.
>
> (Member of Nirantar FGD)
>
> Till about class 8 [age 14] I was labelled as a good girl, because I was a good student and scored well... In the march past, I had to walk with the flag. I developed a personality. I was asexual, strict... [with] limited friends, simple clothes. Teachers had expectations from me which I couldn't break.
>
> (Member of Nirantar FGD)

It is not only in terms of admonishing, or rewards. Heteronormativity is also constructed through the way in which students try to emulate their teachers.

> [In my convent school we had] strict nuns... We used to be punished... I used to want to be a sister. They were so powerful. They liked me even though I was Hindu. I used to think they could do nothing wrong. I was good at studies.
>
> (Member of Nirantar FGD)

In the Nirantar FGD it also emerged that it is the good student who is chosen as the leader by school authorities. Even if the student did not abide by the sexuality and gender norms, exceptions were made if the student was successful in her studies. There were also the informal leaders who tended to be the norm breakers, and were often more powerful than the official leaders!

Heteronormativity also operated through the construct of the 'good school' and its need to promote a good reputation, not dissimilar to the way that families, communities and nations have reputations to keep.

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[21] Dupatta – a scarf which is meant to cover the woman's breasts as a marker of 'modesty'.

> If a scandal happens in a school, then the *izzat* [honour] goes away. There was a senior of mine, who got pregnant and then people always talked about it…and then we talked of another school which was also 'like that'…
>
> (Member of Nirantar FGD)

Heteronormativity and teachers' sexuality

In the FGDs there was the beginning of a dialogue about teachers' sexuality. We began to see how heteronormativity operates not only in constructing the good student but also the good, respectable teacher. Although the dynamic between the teacher and student is not meant to be a sexual one, in our experience, some of us had felt attraction towards certain teachers. There are also assumptions that students make about teachers and judgments that they pass about teachers with respect to their gender and sexuality.

> There was a teacher, who was very strict and hit with the duster, and she was not married, and people used to say she is not married and that's why she is like this…and then [when she got married] we expected she would change. [when she still got angry] we used to think she is [*sic*] frustrated or had a fight with husband…
>
> (Member of Nirantar FGD)

> If there was a sari which touched us…we would feel so happy. I had a favourite teacher, who I used to always take a rose for… I used to find her pretty and she talked nicely…
>
> (Member of Nirantar FGD)

Gender and sexuality in school as a physical space

Physical places at school are also sites for the construction of heteronormativity. Participants in both FGDs talked about playgrounds and toilets. Many reflected on the separate lines for boys and girls to stand in and separate rows of seating for boys and girls. These apparently innocuous arrangements were an important way to enforce both gender and sexual norms. By separating boys and girls, not only is the gender binary constantly policed, but boys and girls are also reminded constantly of the heterosexist notion of the 'opposite sex' being the forbidden fruit that they should keep away from.

In the FGDs with young women, we asked who was present in the school ground – boys and girls, or both. We expected participants to say that there were many more boys claiming that space. However, they said that the school playground had as many girls as boys. It took us a while to figure out that boys were permitted to leave the school premises during lunchtime! When we asked about girls leaving, some of the participants started laughing. One of them said, 'No way can girls leave the school premises. Boys can of course leave and they do go roam [*sic*] about at lunch time.' It seemed to be not only externally imposed rules but also a self-restriction in mobility which is strongly linked to sexuality as girls are socialised to fence themselves into spaces more than boys are, in order to prevent sexual mishaps and adventures.

From this exploration of sites where heteronormativity is constructed or reinforced in schools, we now move to the implications of this for the lives of students.

Heteronormativity hurts – friendships/relationship with peers

In adolescence education/life skills education, peers are always seen as potential threats to heteronormativity – peers are the ones who will encourage deviation from sexuality and gender norms, through peer pressure. However, the FGDs emphasised the positive

dimensions of peer relationships. Participants argued that heteronormativity has the power to disrupt friendships and cause deep emotional stress to students. During the FGD with Nirantar, almost everyone had a story to share about a strong friendship that had soured because of sexual and gender issues. Such stories dominated much of the FGD and were told with deep feelings, some of which remain unresolved, many years down the line. As demonstrated in the following examples, participants felt that if the school could be a space which countered myths and negative constructs of heteronormative sexuality, students would not have had to suffer in the way that they did.

> Jaya shared a story about how, on a school trip, her best friend F and B (who was butch looking) were harassed by their classmates because they thought that the two of them were having a lesbian relationship. Jaya went as part of a 'delegation' of class students to tell F's cousin what F was doing with B and ask whether she could do something about it. Fortunately, F's cousin (who was considerably older) was sensible and told the delegation that this happened in every class, it was no big deal and they should forget about it. However, this incident brought Jaya and F's friendship to an end. Jaya carries her guilt about this even now.

> Sadia broke off her friendship with a girl after the friend started dating a man. Initially, she thought it was because she didn't want to be friends with a 'bad' girl, but it was only years later, after she joined Nirantar, that she realised it was probably because she was jealous of the man as she had feelings for her friend.

During the discussion we also talked about why it is that the school and the family might find friendships threatening. One reason is the perceived threat of friends who are considered to be a bad influence and the concomitant encouragement of friends who are considered to be a positive influence in the hope that they will further the creation of the 'good girl'. However, it is also perhaps the case, as some of us felt, that the school and family as institutions are threatened by friendships because these compete for loyalty and resources which might otherwise flow in the direction of the family and the school.

Heteronormativity harms – shame

Shame was an important theme in both FGDs. The shame related to menstruation, certain parts of the body, changes in the body and sexual abuse. Clearly shame is a highly significant impediment to bodily integrity. There was nothing in school education that helped students counter shame. The implications for the students' lives were serious. These ranged from them not being able to attend school during days of menstruation, to their emotional stress related to growing breasts and pubic hair, their inability to tell anyone about discomfort and diseases relating to parts of the body considered to be sexual (even if the problem was not sexual in nature) and, finally, their inability to report sexual harassment and abuse by school teachers.

Shame related to menstruation

Initially, when asked about attending school during menstruation, the young women were silent. Then they began saying that they did not go to school because of the pain. Also, they feared spotting on their uniforms. The lack of a suitable place to dispose of menstrual cloth was also an issue. Several of the girls also mentioned how scary it was when their period first started because they did not know about it. Some said they found out from friends.

During the Nirantar FGD, we spoke about our continuing embarrassment of being seen with sanitary napkins. Mridu said 'It also depends on where we are. If you are a trainer conducting a literacy training then how can you take [a napkin] out? I find it odd.' This touched upon how we feel the need to be de-sexualised (in a context in which the sanitary napkin is constructed as being sexual), when we are in a powerful and respectable role.

Shame related to the body

We asked the young women to write anonymously on cards, identifying adolescent changes of which they were ashamed and those of which they were proud. The most frequently cited source of pride was growing taller, while the most frequently mentioned sense of shame was about pubic hair. More young women were proud of their feelings of attraction than were ashamed.

In the young women's FGD, they were asked to list the diseases/illnesses/aches that they can tell their family about and those that they could not. Examples of diseases which could be openly discussed were headaches, jaundice and acidity. A few girls also identified TB and pregnancy. But, periods, pregnancy, (vaginal) itching, white vaginal discharge, vaginal burning (referred to as *peshabki jagah par jalna* – burning in the place where urine comes out from), boils on the breast and underarm, any 'internal' problems, stomach ache and chest pain could not be discussed with their families.

The issue of shame related to the body also assumes particular significance in the context of transgender students. During the Nirantar FGD T, who is transgender, said:

> I was one of the last people to develop breasts, and my friends would stare at my chest and measure it, and this was very shameful for me. I used to take the bandage and wear it, but there was a lot of pain.

Shame related to abuse

The young women were silent when, in the FGD, they were asked if they would be able to report an abusive teacher. Some girls said they did not have the space to talk to their teachers about such incidents. Yet, in one of the role plays performed by the young women, a male teacher spoke rudely to the students and ordered them around while distributing the midday meal.[22] During the subsequent discussion, the girls added that 'upper caste' students were always seated in front and served first, while *Dalit* and 'backward' castes were seated in the back and served last. They also said that, although not shown in the role play, this teacher was also abusive to female students. He would wink at them and harass them. When we asked the girl who attended the school represented in the role play, she seemed reluctant to talk further and we did not push it. It was clear that caste-related violations were easier to talk about than sexual ones.

A related discussion on violence in schools took place in the Nirantar FGD. A participant pointed out that this is not only physical in nature. To her, the character assassination she experienced also felt like violence. Following on from this, we discussed whether all corporal punishment constituted violence. One point of view offered was that it didn't, but that physical punishment was a means to enforce a certain culture of manliness and discipline; it was more likely to be experienced as violence when the teacher hit you because he or she did not like you.

As shown above, there are many ways in which education and schools reproduce heteronormativity and this has particular, often negative, implications for the lives of students. Heteronormativity is also embedded, as the section below shows, in other social relationships and structures.

4.2.3 The need for intersectionality as an approach – sexuality and caste

The RMSA speaks of marginalised identities of gender, caste, religion, dis/ability in separate and distinct ways. There is no recognition in the programme document of the intersectionality between these different axes of marginalisation. The FGD with the young women in

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[22] A free provision to address enrolment/retention and nutritional needs.

particular pointed to the need to recognise and address intersectionality. This is critical if the programme is to address equality and social justice in pursuit of its objective of providing quality education to all. For example, in the discussions with the young women about their idea of a 'good woman' or a 'good girl', they brought up caste early on.

One participant said:

> A girl is called bad by upper castes if she is lower caste. Poor people are called bad people. No matter how good someone from a lower caste is, they will still be called bad by upper castes... If an upper caste girl runs away with an upper caste boy, she won't be called bad.

Another said:

> If *uunch-neech* [sex which disrupts social norms] happens with upper caste girls, the upper caste communities try to sweep it under the carpet. But if a *Dalit* girl happens to do something bad, that is talked about all the time and [made] into big news. On the other hand, the *Dalit* community itself says that our girls have loose morals. We call our own girls bad.

The girls' passionate, insightful and political responses made clear that it is not possible to talk about the categories of 'good' and 'bad' women and girls without discussing the contexts in which those from 'lower' castes are perceived as 'bad', in particular the difference between the public and private realm. The implications of breaking sexual norms, according to the participants, were different and more severe, for girls belonging to 'lower' castes. While the girls from the *Dalit* community spoke of how they have to deal with all manner of comments on their character, it points to the way in which their sexuality is constructed. As women who labour and as a result are mobile in contrast with 'upper caste' women who remain close to home, they are stereotyped as being sexually 'loose', 'immoral' and 'available'.

The young women also spoke about inter-caste relationships. According to one young woman, 'If something like this happens, the blame still falls on the girl. But if the boy is from an upper caste, then nothing can be said to him. No one ever blames the boy.' Clearly, if the couple consists of an upper-caste boy and a lower-caste girl, there is less danger to caste identity and lineage, as the name of the upper-caste family will still pass on through the boy. On the other hand, if the couple consists of a lower-caste boy and an upper-caste girl, the girl will have to take the boy's name and the boy's caste, which means their child will be of a lower caste. This is seen as a lowering of caste status, which is associated with a loss of power and control over material resources. At the same time, it is an affront to upper-caste male sexuality because it shows a failure to keep control over their women.

4.2.4 The need for a different approach

The RMSA document describes adolescence as a time of crisis and does not recognise that this phase of life also has positive dimensions. There is a need in the audit processes to ensure that we do not go into victim mode. For example, in the Nirantar FGD, Akshay as the facilitator had to encourage us to speak of school as a space that many find liberating. It can be empowering to challenge norms.

Purnima spoke about how she felt safer in school than she did at home:

> For me to leave home and go to school was the best… When I came to hostel it was the best thing, otherwise I would have died. There was pressure but we also broke rules… We play out gender and sexual norms and also challenge them… There is a backlash… but I am a victor and a challenger at the same time… I thought of strategies, in my daily life.

Some of the Nirantar members recalled their transgender friends who were female-bodied but masculine (who would not then perhaps have thought of themselves or even known of this as an identity) and were very popular with the schoolgirls and the teachers.

T, who is transgender, said:

> At home... I was very conflicted… In school, there was a lot of space. My senior whose name was P negotiated… and he [also female-bodied] was two years older to [*sic*] me and would wear pants… When he was in 3rd standard and I was in 1st standard, we were friends… People thought [of] the two of us as boys and thought that I was a younger version of P.

4.2.5 Reflections on education and sexuality

In the RMSA document, making infrastructural changes, conducting teacher training, reforming the curriculum and providing students with counselling support are listed as strategies to improve the quality of education. However, if quality is to be understood within the context of social justice and equity, each of these objectives needs to be re-examined through a gender and sexuality lens. Further, there is a need to look at other sites – such as friendships, out-of-class interactions with teachers – where gender and sexuality are constructed.

In India, holistic education has become something of a buzzword. A holistic approach to education should include: not only text books and classroom interactions, but the entire range of relations among and between student teachers, teachers and students; not only the class room, but the playground, toilets, and assemblies; and not only behaviour but the construction of gender, sexuality and equality through notions of 'good students'. If the good student obeys existing norms, how can she or he be part of a move towards equality and social justice, given that existing norms uphold inequality and injustice in terms of gender, caste and sexuality?

The RMSA programme needs to recognise and address the ways in which heteronormativity can harm; students' experience of shame as a major barrier to bodily integrity; and their inability to address sexual abuse within the school system. Creating an environment where it becomes more possible for students to talk about such issues involves tackling issues of bodily integrity, promoting a positive approach to adolescence, and helping students understand and counter feelings of shame and fear. A space where students feel safe to express their fears and experiences is essential to building an environment conducive to learning. Finally, an approach of intersectionality, which recognises and takes on board the linkages between different forms of marginalisation, must be adopted by the RMSA.

In addition, a good quality education needs to recognise that heteronormativity is damaging, that it causes extremely painful ruptures in peer relationships and that teachers need help to understand issues of sexuality, both for themselves and for their students. A good quality education must also address issues of equity.

4.3 Equity in RMSA

Equity is the third major objective of the RMSA programme which includes several provisions to ensure that marginalised groups and girls have access to education. These include:

1. Free lodging/ boarding facilities for students belonging to SC, ST, OBC and minority communities.
2. Hostels/ residential schools, cash incentives, uniforms, books, and separate toilets for girls.
3. Providing scholarships to meritorious and/or needy secondary level students.
4. Inclusive education as a hallmark of all activities. Efforts will be made to provide all necessary facilities for differently-abled children in all the schools.
5. Expansion of open and distance learning, especially for those who cannot pursue full-time secondary education, and to supplement face-to-face instruction. This will also play a crucial role in the education of out-of-school children.

The RMSA repeatedly states that gender is a strong focus which will be mainstreamed into every aspect of the programme. However, as stated earlier, the programme equates gender with girls. This means that gender transgression and the violations associated with it are completely invisible.

At Nirantar we understand gender as a continuum. At either extreme are the 'ideal' girls/women and 'ideal' boys/men who subscribe perfectly to all gender norms, which perhaps none of us do in reality. During the FGD with members of Nirantar many of us shared experiences of how we transgressed gender norms in school and got into trouble because of it. This included hair being 'too short', or in the case of Akshay, the facilitator, who is male-assigned at birth, 'too long'. Mridu, who does not identify as transgender, but used to be perceived as masculine in school, told us how, on her birthday, her classmates gave her a shaving kit and how taken aback she was by this. Conceptualising gender as a continuum enables greater flexibility. As we move along the continuum, there are people who do not identify at all with the sex assigned to them at birth, i.e. transgender people. In contrast, the RMSA makes transgender invisible as an identity, despite equity being an important objective of the programme.

As part of the audit, we conducted interviews with three transgender persons, one biologically female and the other two biologically male. These transgender people spoke about a range of violations faced by them, including bullying from peers and classmates for not conforming to gender norms; pressure from teachers to dress, talk and act a certain way; and being punished for wearing the uniform of their choice as this usually did not 'match' the sex assigned to them at birth.

Sakshi (gender – queer, female-assigned at birth), who works as an interior designer and lives in Delhi said:

> In school we had to wear skirts, but I liked wearing jeans or trousers. I used to feel ashamed to wear *salwar kameez* [traditional Indian female clothing in parts of North India] in front of people even at home, if I was ever [forced] to wear them. In Meerut where we used to live, I only wore pants, but when we moved to Dalhousie in school I had to wear skirts. Even small kids there wore skirts. I cried a lot and told my mother. My mother felt that it was her fault and that she had encouraged such behaviour to wear these ['boys'] clothes. My father wrote an application [asking for permission to wear pants] because I had stopped going to school… When I wore pants and reached school I felt people were staring at me. A girl came and asked me if I [was] a girl or a boy and I didn't know how to respond to such a question. They would all tease me, and take my lunch… and I ran after them.

Transgender youth never see themselves represented in textbooks. A male to female trans person who was interviewed said, 'We read about kings, there were stories of girls and boys… We never saw anyone like us, even in science and biology there was nothing… There is no place for us, like girls and boys have… There was no one like us around.'

Maria, a male to female trans person expressed her desire thus: 'In biology class, in addition to "man" and "woman" there should be "transsexual" and "transgender" as well. This should be the case in other textbooks too.'

The interviews made clear that use of toilets is not only a girls' issue. Sakshi said, 'I had short hair and behaved like a boy, so when I used to go to [the] toilet, the senior girls or teachers would say that I should go to [the] boys' toilet, as I will [*sic*] not feel comfortable in the girls' toilet and in the boys' toilet they would say that I should just stand outside and do it. I used to feel angry with myself… not with others.'

The experience of these transgender students shows that teachers are no better than students in terms of gender discrimination. In a context in which teachers ought to be countering the gender discrimination being meted out by peers and creating a supportive environment for trans students, teachers themselves become part of the discriminatory system. This is not to blame teachers, since they have not had the opportunity to unlearn their own biases. Gender is at best addressed superficially in teachers' training courses, and transgender issues are not part of the curriculum. Maria's hope for the future is that, 'Teachers' and students' attitudes should become LGBT friendly… gay friendly, lesbian friendly, transgender friendly and bisexual friendly.'

Along with all the problems faced, happy times were also remembered. Sakshi (see above) shared the following incident.

> There was a 26th January (Independence day) celebration in school, and a *bhangra* dance was organised and [there was one too few boys] in the group. My teacher asked me if I could join as a guy. I was so happy. She became my favourite teacher after that. She took pictures and told me I looked cute, and made me wear a *sehera* [decorative tassels that are meant to cover the bridegroom's face]. My mother was also very happy! During the dance, I felt happy with the girls coming close to me... I realised that I am interested in girls.

Bodily changes during adolescence can be stressful for many young people. These changes can be particularly difficult for adolescents who don't identify with the sex they were assigned at birth. Sakshi spoke about her experiences:

> It was torture. My parents didn't tell me and I was disgusted. When I found out for the first time that something like this happens, I felt very bad. There was a lot of shame around it. I didn't know whether I should wear tight clothes or not, and would wear clothes which could hide my identity. I used to walk with my chest out like guys, even though it was uncomfortable… I still don't like it... Why does it happen only to girls? I like to call myself a guy, and I could never ask this question about periods to any other girl, because there was shame. I felt like it was a dual life. Those five days I have to stay in control, and they are really bad days mentally and physically... can't wear certain clothes. The other days I would walk like boys and sit with my legs apart.'

The experiences of trans young people as they relate to bodily changes and menstruation, night fall and access to toilets and so on will need to be addressed by any life skills education curricula that claims to be inclusive.

For trans people the emotional stress of the hostility they experienced can also affect their performance in school, which has implications for them in later life. Maria (see above) said, 'I hated the school… it was the best school for boys in the country. I only got 55 per cent in my 12th exam. With that I could not get admission anywhere.'

Maria is currently unemployed despite knowing several foreign languages fluently. She feels that she is in this situation because of the discrimination against her as a transgender person. Given RMSA's concern with livelihoods, this is an aspect of transgender people's lived realities that it must engage with when it is hoped that education will lead to job opportunities.

As a result of a sense of alienation, ridicule and harassment, many transgender youth are pushed out of the education system. Bunny, a biologically male, transgender person employed by an NGO that works with MSM (men who have sex with men) and male to female transgender people in Delhi shared his experience:

> My teacher used to complain about my hair, asked to cut my hair. He would say that I should be kept separately. I always sat with girls… People in my neighbourhood also started saying that I am different…. They complained to my mother. I could not adjust to all this. My teacher used to torture me. He asked me to change myself… and I stopped going to school altogether. Some said I was ill and needed to see a doctor… One has to feel for studies, and have dreams. My heart was broken. I no longer felt for studies. I thought if I have problems with my teachers and peers now, the same thing will happen later. New friends will also torture me, they will make fun of me – and so I could not complete class 10. Then my mother said that we could try in a private institution. But when I joined it [it was night school and a boys' school] everyone started laughing, and then I just didn't feel like studying….'

If RMSA is to achieve its objective of equity, it is critical that it moves beyond equating gender with 'girls' and addresses gender transgression and the severe violations faced by transgender young people.

5   Conclusion

In this concluding section of the report we share the key findings of the audit and recommendations as they relate to the RMSA programme. We also share here the key lessons and recommendations related to the methodology.

5.1   Key findings of the audit

1.   The RMSA cannot achieve its stated objectives of universal access and quality, defined as equality, social justice and equity, if it does not address attitudinal changes. The programme will need to move from its present focus on infrastructure and management concerns. It will have to use community mobilisation, capacity-building of school committee members, teachers and principals, the curricula, pedagogy as well as other sites, in ways that build an understanding of sexuality, gender, caste, adolescence, discrimination, agency and of the transformative potential of education. If the RMSA does not recognise the attitudinal factors related to sexuality, provision of resources such as bicycles will never help. Given its stated focus on girls and young people from marginalised communities, how can gender, sexuality, caste, religion, dis/ability, etc. not form part of the capacity-building of teachers and principals? If appropriate processes of unlearning and learning are not ensured, measures such as the counselling of students can be dangerous. Counsellors who do not have an understanding of sexuality, gender and so forth might seek to mould young people according to the existing construct of the 'good student' and, in so doing, fail to promote social justice, equality and equity.

2.   Significant barriers to girls' access to higher school education are related to sexuality. A primary reason for removing girls from school is parental fear that their daughters will act upon their desires on the way to school or that they will be raped or sexually assaulted. Parents' desire to get their daughters married early is also closely linked to sexuality since one of their main fears is that of pre-marital sex. Measures such as providing bicycles will not work as long as these attitudes are not recognised and addressed. The existing provisions cannot achieve the objective of enhancing girls' access to education. A major challenge, however, is in what manner this finding will be shared with the state and the community? Discussions of sexuality cannot be directly articulated, or raised as a challenge to parents, the community, teachers or even policymakers as this may result in even greater restrictions of mobility and access to schooling, and even more stringent protectiveness.

3.   Key to achieving the objective of quality in education with respect to equality and social justice is recognising and addressing heteronormativity, a system which seeks to perpetuate existing, unjust power relations in society. This engagement with heteronormativity entails identifying the sites where it is constructed and examining the implications for the lives of students.

4.   The sites in which heteronormativity is constructed in schools include not only the curriculum and pedagogy but also out-of-class interactions with teachers and physical spaces such as playgrounds. A holistic approach to education must encompass the experience of the school as whole. In analysing and addressing sexuality and gender norms, these sites must also be considered. Constructs such as 'the good student' which are strongly but not visibly related to sexuality are important ways in which heteronormativity is sustained, not through external policing, but through young people's internalisation of sexual and gender norms.

5. Heteronormativity hurts because it has the potential to disrupt relations between peers and friendships.

6. Heteronormativity harms because it inculcates shame related to the body both with respect to teachers and students. Teachers are unable to give information related to sex, sexuality or even menstruation. For students shame also means emotional stress related to bodily changes during adolescence as well as inhibitions in reporting health-related issues and sexual abuse. Unless heteronormativity is addressed, students' right to wellbeing and bodily integrity cannot be secured.

7. The objective of equity cannot be met unless the experiences of transgender students are recognised and addressed. One of the dangers of equating gender with girls is that transgender young people are rendered invisible, even though the violations they face are gender inspired. Such violations need to be included within the notion of gender-based discrimination in schools.

8. Young people's school experiences are replete with discrimination, be it on the basis of gender, sexuality, caste, etc. The RMSA needs to identify areas of discrimination related to access as well as experiences within the school system and to address these.

9. The nature of ground-level realities is such that the RMSA will need to adopt an approach of intersectionality and recognise the ways in which the different axes of marginalisation, such as gender, sexuality and caste, cut across each other.

10. This audit shows that despite the strength of gender and sexuality norms, young people are often aware of their needs and desire and do also challenge these norms. The school can provide them with the space to be themselves in a way that sometimes their homes cannot. This necessitates a positive view of young people, rather than seeing them as victims and and their lives as crisis-ridden.

11. This audit has enabled, for the first time, the accumulation of evidence related to sexuality as a barrier to girls' education and it has contributed to the very recent but highly significant efforts to raise the issue of transgender young people within the discourse of education.

5.2 Reflections related to methodology

Evoking responses related to sexuality at the community level as well as with the young women was highly challenging. We used strategies, both planned and spontaneous, which we would like to share here and to reflect on other strategies that we might have used. We begin with the survey with parents and then move to the FGD with young women.

With the parents, what worked and what could have been done differently:

- Questions that built on what the parents were able to articulate worked. For example, when someone said that they could not send their daughters to school because they were now *sayani* or mature, we challenged this asking asked whether maturity was not a reason to 'allow' the girls to travel to school on their own. This created the space for parents to speak about their sexuality-related fears.
- Generalised questions worked as this allowed parents to speak in broader ways and not in relation to their own daughter's sexuality.
- We should have interviewed the daughters separately since they had important counter views and arguments to those of their parents. We should also have spoken in greater depth about the reasons for which boys continue (or discontinue) their education.

With respect to working with young women, the lessons learned were as follows:

- Showing films was useful to create a more relaxed atmosphere in which to be able to talk about issues of sexuality .
- Individual interviews might have been better in a context in which the participants did not have reason to trust the facilitators.
- In both the survey and the FGD, we drew upon our skills related to communicating and evoking responses on sexuality, gender, caste, etc. as trainers and practitioners. For researchers undertaking heteronormativity audits, capacity-building related to understanding concepts of sexuality, gender, intersectionality and the local context as well as skills to evoke sexuality-related responses are critical.
- The FGD with members of Nirantar about their experiences of school is one that we highly recommend for other heteronormativity audits. This tool provides a space for researchers to feel a sense of connection with the issue they are investigating. With issues like gender, which have been mainstreamed so that they seem to apply exclusively to those being studied rather than to the researchers themselves, this can lead to mechanical ways of engaging with the issue that are also unlikely to yield in-depth insights. This is particularly important to counter when entering into a judgmental, moralistic, or victim- narrative research context. When one recalls one's own experience, the issues are fore-grounded in way that makes researchers better listeners. The style of facilitation in such a tool needs to be 'light' in order to evoke in-depth personal sharing. One also needs to be cognisant of the danger of assuming that others' experiences are like ours. For example, we could not directly transpose the themes raised in Nirantar's FGD into the FGD with young women, although both FGDs were about girls' experiences in schools.
- The one-to-one interviews with transgender people were ideally suited to capture the reality of being stigmatised on the basis of sexuality and gender.
- Several gaps were identified on a reading of the RMSA document, based on the knowledge of Nirantar, the organisation undertaking the research. There was little in terms of existing research that could be drawn upon. The audit therefore proceeded to study ground-level realities as they related to these gaps. This methodological issue is likely to arise in other heteronormativity audits, where the process might be different from an open-ended inquiry. The fact that sexuality was a barrier to girls' access to education was not initially apparent in this audit, but it was hypothesised as a possible factor by practitioners in the field and was then studied and assessed.
- The methodology used demonstrates that it is possible to undertake a heteronormativity audit of a development policy or programme which does not even mention the word sexuality. There are assumptions made about sexuality that are inherent, and which need to be decoded. Also the silences and gaps need to be, and can be, highlighted by evidence related to ground-level realities.

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