

# NATIONAL GIRL CHILD DAY

COMMITTEE FOR MANAGING GENDER ISSUES

Initiated by the Ministry of Women and Child Development in 2008, National Girl Child Day is observed every year on the 24th of January. It aims to highlight inequalities faced by girl children and promote awareness on the importance of ensuring the fulfilment of basic rights in the areas of education, health and nutrition.

In the following piece, **Bhargav**, a Research Assistant at IIMA, draws from his personal experience and writes on how the love girl children receive can be different.



## WHERE BELL HOOKS 'SPEAKS' TO MY MOTHER

Let me begin by telling you the tale of my mother's birth. Somewhere in rural Andhra, my grandmother was in labour in the government hospital and my grandfather was with her in anticipation of their fourth child. My grandfather's mother had come from her village to look after the other three children, who were all girls. She was in the middle of cooking a meal on a kerosene stove when the news arrived; it was a girl. In a fit of rage, as she was entitled to feel, why not, she got up and walked back to her village. My aunt was clueless now as she found herself in a predicament. She thought she would have to finish cooking the meal or they would have to miss lunch. She had hoped this 'wonderful' opportunity would only come much later in her life. She turned off the gas, went over to the neighbour's house and explained the issue at hand. Thankfully the neighbour came in and finished cooking the meal so the three girls could eat.

I have heard this story many times, my aunt often laughing while narrating it as my mother looks on with a sheepish grin. I have experienced a lot of emotions while listening to this over the years—I have laughed, got offended and been bemused. I have also wondered if the memory would have been the same for my aunts had it been a male family member in the place of my great-grandmother. Would they still find it funny? I am not so sure. For a moment, let's set aside what I feel or think. Let's go back to the protagonist of the tale, my mother. As the fourth daughter in a family with no sons, she has had to live with the reality of 'what could have been'. No matter. She has shown great capacity to adapt and learn every day of her life, but she did not have to have been put in a position where she had to display such resilience

I do not narrate this story to garner sympathy for my mother or direct your sympathy towards women around you. It is an illustration of how girls, unless they are tremendously lucky to be born into extremely progressive families, are usually born into debt. They and the family owe a debt. Those around are 'entitled' to extract that debt. My mother owed a debt to her grandmother the second the umbilical cord was cut. This is a story that has ended up as a nostalgic piece of memory, which is actually a great privilege.

I invoke the late Gloria Jean Watkins (better known by her pen name bell hooks) as I recently finished reading her book 'all about love'. In it, she details how love in a patriarchal society affects men and women differently. She laments the general public's loss of faith in love due to a vast majority of adults being born into dysfunctional families where lovelessness is the norm. According to her, "when we love children we acknowledge by our every action that they are not property, that they have rights - that we respect and uphold their rights. Without justice there can be no love". This, she says, is central to any child's upbringing irrespective of gender. However, what happens is that families indulge and provide for boys while neglecting and abandoning girls. Hence, men grow up expecting to receive love and women grow up expecting to always give and provide. What we know in reality is that basic things like kindness, care and empathy are all learned behavioural traits. It is not natural to either sex, not innate. We teach our children different things, creating a binary of those who give and receive. When this happens, it creates disproportionate labour. Love is effort, an effort made by parents towards their children, by children towards their friends, and by adults for each other. Unfortunately, we are complicit in these efforts. We push half of our children into convincing them that they owe a debt and we forget to teach the other half what it means to be fully human. Men end up seldom knowing how to love and women are often found chasing the love they have sought since childhood.

There is much truth in bell hooks' thesis. While we may think it is only a mere 'role assignment' in a society where people perform different roles so that an imaginary equilibrium is achieved in nature, many adults are left reeling in unhappy and loveless circumstances. Every social institution reinforces the binary and deprives girls of the much needed affirmation and love they need. I use both the particular example of my mother (although there are several others in my own family and I am sure millions of others outside of it) and the general (which may seem simplistic or reductive, but also maybe is a reflection of our own understanding of what different genders can be) to show how we have essentialised the social construct of gender that erases any room for difference. We do not acknowledge the plurality of possibilities and that, to me, presents a concern.

This calls for a more serious engagement than I am able to afford currently in this piece of writing. It is time we started thinking about how little kindness and care is directed towards girl children, that unless they do something so extraordinary while facing all the odds that are stacked against them, we do not think they are worthy of it. As bell hooks equates love to rights and justice, Dr. Ambedkar in the same vein speaks of equality (that although) "equality may be a fiction but nonetheless one must accept it as a governing principle". Just by virtue of them being human, they have rights - to justice, equality and more importantly, to be loved.

It must be mentioned that neither bell hooks nor I (who verbatim borrows from her ideas) speak of love in a narrow sentimental or patronising sense, as if it could resolve the pressing issues and structures of patriarchy, misogyny, and sexism. It is very much a serious political proposition and process, just as much as justice and equality are and I hope you see it that way. One could always read bell hooks, who engages in a much more serious scholarship around the question of love.

*I write this for Ashna Vishwanath, a dear friend.*



# A CASE FOR SCHEMES TARGETING GIRL CHILDREN

*Anandita Bhardia, Research Assistant at IIMA, writes on schemes that target the girl child and argues the need for them.*

A Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) is an intervention that is used widely in developing countries to alleviate poverty and achieve policy-related goals by the government (Fiszbein et al. 2009). Upon fulfilment of the prescribed conditionalities attached to each scheme, the beneficiaries are given either a direct transfer of money or an in-kind transfer of a good. CCTs play a considerable role in improving the utilisation of state-backed health and education services among economically weaker sections of society. Extending this argument, it can be a very useful tool in addressing the issues faced by female children in India.

South Asian countries like Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan have used CCTs to lift individuals out of poverty, empower women and develop human capital. In a study by Chaudhury and Parajuli (2010), findings suggest that there was a nine per cent increase in female enrolment in terms of relative change on account of a gender-targeted CCT which provided a direct stipend for female enrolments in Punjab, Pakistan.

In India, evidence from a study by Muralidharan and Prakash (2017) shows how an in-kind transfer in the form of cycles in Bihar led to an increase in the enrolment of girls in secondary-level classes and narrowed the gender gap in education. The cycles made school accessible and addressed safety concerns while commuting for girls. The Dhanalakshmi scheme was implemented in 2008 to promote the birth of girl children, encourage their education, and discourage early marriage. Cash transfers as part of the scheme were made conditional on achieving multiple targets such as registration after birth, immunisation, enrolment in school, completion of secondary school, and turning eighteen. Sinha and Yoong (2009) analyse the impact of a long-term financial incentive programme, Apni Beti Apna Dhan, to discourage son preference in Haryana. They find a positive effect on the sex ratio of living children. The Bhagya Lakshmi scheme is a conditional cash transfer under which the government issues a bond, subsequent to which the amount is deposited in the name of the eligible girl child from below poverty household. The assured maturity amount can be encashed when the girl child attains 18 years of age upon fulfilment of all the conditionalities, including getting vaccinated for immunity, enrolment in Anganwadi Centre (AWC), and taking admission in a school and completing education till class eight.

From the above example, it is understood that cash transfers induce and incentivise individuals to change their behaviour and use facilities provided by the government for the welfare of the girl child. The CCT schemes in India which target the marginalised and vulnerable communities with an aim to tackle social issues such as gender discrimination, illiteracy, poverty and inequality can aid in the transition from a male-dominated society. Research shows that they have a positive impact on the participation of girl children in educational spaces and thereby leading to access to opportunities. It is essential that we continue with such schemes and arrive at more sound policies targeting increased participation of girl children in the public sphere.

## REFERENCES

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The monthly newsletter from the [Committee for Managing Gender Issues \(CMGI\)](#) is an attempt to initiate conversations on discrimination, gender bias, sexual harassment, and related issues. We would love to have the community participate. Please reach out to Therese Abraham at [theresea@iima.ac.in](mailto:theresea@iima.ac.in) for submissions, queries, and/or feedback.

If you feel you have been subjected to sexual harassment or if you would like to make any suggestions regarding curbing sexual harassment or gender bias on campus, please reach out to us at:  
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