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Discipline and Surveillance: Adolescent Girls talk about Body and Sexuality: A Case Study from Kolkata, India

By Piyali Sur¹

Abstract

Adolescent girls are inundated with contradictory messages on sexuality. Adolescence is socially constructed as being controlled by “raging hormones” but ‘good girls’ are asexual, devoid of any desire or passion. Schools discipline students’ bodies to prohibit any spilling over of sexuality that may pollute the educational environment. At the same time girls are also exposed through the internet to ‘girl power’ culture speaking of freedom, autonomy and choice in matters of sexuality. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 25 adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 years belonging to the middle class, going to reputed English medium private schools in Kolkata, a city in India, this article explores how adolescent girls speak of denial of their sexual subjectivity and disciplining of their bodies through surveillance in schools.

Keywords: Adolescent girls, Body, Sexuality, Kolkata, hormones, Indian adolescents, reputation, women’s sexuality

Introduction

One constant message that adolescent girls receive in many places worldwide, is that a woman’s reputation is linked to her sexual character. A ‘good girl’ is seen to be devoid of any passion and desire, has to be sexually unknowing, and in no way signals sexual availability. Adolescent girls are constantly reminded not to dress provocatively, keep themselves away from strangers, and not to venture outside protected zones. Young women’s sexuality is policed by their families and schools, there is hardly any conversation on sexuality, and any kind of adolescent sexual activity is constructed as a crime.

Girls in families and schools are taught to live up to the ideal of purity, engage in abstinence and concentrate on studies but at the same time they are inundated with overt sexual messages. Sexuality is there all over the media, repetitively performed in popular culture and in markets. Girls are under contradictory influences: schools “operate as a space of hypersexual regulation and bastion of desexualizing, heteronormative principles” (Ringrose & Renold, 2014: 337); parents engage in surveillance, but girls are also exposed through internet to ‘girl power’ culture speaking of freedom, autonomy and choice in matters of sexuality (Gill and Schraff, 2011). Girls are aware that they are subject to sexist social and cultural values, that their bodies are linked to morality and that there is objectification of their bodies. Under the contradictory influences this article reflects on how middle-class adolescent girls living in Kolkata reflect on issues of body and sexuality

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within the context of school and how schools² police and regulate students' bodies in general and their sexuality and sexual expression in particular often rendering them in Foucauldian sense as 'docile bodies'. The article is divided into three parts. In the first part, I discuss what girls feel about the kind of sex education given in their schools and what would constitute effective sex education; the second part deals with regulation of sexual expression of students by schools and in the end, I examine how schools reinforce sexist social and cultural values through regulation of sexuality of girls.

Methodology

This article is part of a larger research investigating how parents construct their adolescent daughters' sexuality and how the adolescents describe their experiences of sexuality in different contexts. In this article I situate adolescent girls' perspective of how schools impart sex education and deal with students' sexuality and sexual cultures, thereby reinforcing sexist social and cultural values. They narrate how schools refuse to acknowledge student sexuality and exclude sexuality education from the curriculum. This paper is based on in-depth interviews with 25 adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 years belonging to the middle class, going to reputed English medium private schools and living in South Kolkata. Kolkata is the capital of India's West Bengal state and is located in the eastern part of India. It is the cultural and intellectual capital of India due to its expansive history and rich traditions. It was India's capital under the British Raj from 1773 to 1911. The middle class in Bengal that is understood today was created by the British Raj and the East India Company to help them in their administration and would be similar to them in taste and intellect. Termed '*bhadralok*' or 'respectable', they were Bengalis³, largely Hindu and from upper castes and were in salaried professions distinguishing themselves as educated intellectuals disassociated from the affluence of the rich. After independence, the middle class comprised of government workers who served the nation by working for it. With economic liberalization in the 1990s, a new middle class emerged engaging in a global economy of work and consumption. This "new" middle class is most often described as consisting of those who are employed in high end service sector jobs, an education-oriented class, stresses the importance of higher education to acquire good jobs and holds to specific ideas of tradition and modernity. The Bengali middle class is strongly associated with education and culture. The stress given on academic excellence by the middle class makes the parents enroll their children in reputed private English medium schools that offer a variety of co-curricular activities with quality education. Majority of these schools have a high fee structure beyond the reach of the poor. The aspirations of middle-class parents and the fear of falling from middle class positions make them invest in schooling. The girls interviewed study in the elite English medium schools of Kolkata. The girls live in south Kolkata, a less congested part of the city and more modern than rest of the city.

Majority of the girls were self-identified heterosexuals except two who identified as lesbians. Exploratory methods were employed to collect data ranging from individual in-depth interviews to focus groups.

² I have focused on schools as after family, girls spend most of their time in schools. Schools reconfirm the conventional gender identities.

³ Bengali is the majority population of Bengal and speak the language.

Sexuality in Schools

Schools, then, are important sites in which meanings about young people's sexuality are constituted and circulated. However, these meanings do not exist in isolation from wider social discourses of youthful sexuality. (Allen, 2005: 390)

My theme of exploration is what girls think about how their schools construct adolescent sexuality. In the first part they have been asked about the nature of sex education given in their schools. What they would like to know and what is delivered in the programmes is the focus. In the second part I have interrogated them on how schools regulate sexual expressions. It has been noted by academic scholars that sex education given in schools is "de-eroticized" focusing on what society constructs as 'problems' like how to curb unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (Allen 2004; Fine 1988). Allen's (2004) work has made an important contribution by claiming that it is important to acknowledge young people as sexual subjects with sexual desire. He holds that curriculum on sexuality education should include the relevant information that speaks of sexual pleasure and desire along with messages on unintended consequences of sexual activity. There are not many studies in the global North on what young people think about the nature of sexuality education given in schools and how it can be made more effective. In India, even any mention of the words, 'sex', 'sexuality', and 'sexual desire' is prohibited, let alone a discussion or education on them. Parents panic that sex education may corrupt their 'innocent' children and encourage them to engage in it. Sexuality education has met with a lot of resistance, the strongest argument being it is against Indian culture and values. In India, pre-marital sex is a taboo, the honour of families and communities are placed on women's sexuality. Women are supposed to be passive in matters of sex and are mostly deprived of any information about their bodies and sex till marriage. Due to the social uneasiness surrounding it, there is dearth of scholarship on sexuality education or for that matter on adolescent girls' sexuality.

Most girls deny having sex education in their schools. They state that there is "not a single topic or talk on sex education." By denying sex education, schools construct young people as non-sexual subjects whose innocence has to be protected. Education on sex is limited to biological reproduction as given in biology textbooks and there is no exclusive time allotted to sex education. The approach is "scientific" distant from what students like to know. The pictures of 'reproductive organs' that are in biology textbooks are diagrams, dissected emphasizing the internal picture of the organs and is 'desexualized and desensitized' (Allen, 2004). Allen (2004) claims that the medicalized images of the genitalia focus on their functions and desexualize and desensitize the body, disassociating the body from sensuality, desire and pleasure. The focus is on reproductive aspects of sexuality.

A recurring theme in this research is the need for sex education. Any policy on sex education should keep in mind the social world that this generation inhabits is changing. Girls not only want more discussion on issues surrounding sex and sexuality in schools but want a control on issues to be discussed. Girls want to know both about the risks, dangers as well as desires and pleasures in sexual intimacies as well as the continuum of sexualities that exist. The very few schools of Kolkata offering sex education, as is narrated, concentrate only on the dangers and risks like sexually transmissible infections, 'unplanned' pregnancies, sexual abuse and on the reproductive aspect of sexuality. A girl reports how speakers from non-governmental organizations when invited to provide information on sex were abruptly stopped from giving more detailed information on sex by principals. The girls were then told to search the internet for more

information. By concentrating only on negative aspects of sexuality, schools fail to cover all aspects of experiences of young girls that may be relevant to them.

The girls feel sex education like information on menstruation should start at a primary level, in classes four and five and in co-educational schools' boys as well as girls should know about menstruation. Schools should teach menstruation in a way that does not disable women and that girls do not see their bodies as troublesome. A concern among the girls is that menstruation should be portrayed in a positive manner and not characterised by feelings of body shame. It is well expressed in the following narrative that adolescent girls should not have a disabling sense of their bodies, and not perceive their bodies as troublesome to themselves during menstruation.

I think all should be made aware of periods. It is not that during menstruation you should not play sports. There are girls who are into sports, run or swim during periods, these facts should be taught. (17 years old, Girls' school).

The narrative of this young girl sends a strong message that discussion on menstruation has so far taught the girls that their bodies are a source of stress, discomfort and this public discourse has to be resisted with more positive accounts of menstruation.

One of the most-taboo topics is menstruation. Menstruation is believed to be known only to the girls and not to the boys, which is wrong, it should be known to everyone. Because of this misconception, it is not only lack of knowledge, but at some point, it became a point of bullying as well. Just because certain topics do not get clear without sex education, they remain a point of bully. (19 years old, Co-ed school).

It is felt that correct information on physical changes after puberty will lessen bullying in schools or ridiculing of girls. Diorio and Munro in their research on menstruation express how teaching about menstruation gives opportunities to boys "to practise male power by ridiculing women" (2000:351).

Girls perceive that curriculum on sexuality education should include information about the bodily changes that occur during puberty. The information has an impact on how young people understand themselves and others. It has been found by Lee (1994) that both breast development and menstruation have been fraught with anxiety and are centred on how bodies are perceived and interpreted by others.

After puberty, there is enhancement of the size of the breasts, growth of body hair. And honestly, such changes occur to boys as well, and there have been bullying of the boys from the girls' side as well. And the whole thing comes out of not having enough and right information. Body image issue is very much connected to the mental state. And it comes more or less from the lack of information. (19 years old, Co-ed school).

Girls also want to know about the risks and dangers of sexuality as sexual abuse is a part of their lived realities. Lewis and Allen (2013) opine that the challenge of sex education is to discuss issues of rape and sexual violence without perpetuating notions of self-blame and hegemonic masculinity.

Feminist research has observed that sex education does not construct young people as sexual subjects (Jackson, 1978; Fine, 1988). Fine (1988) has made a significant contribution in her work on “missing discourse of desire” by documenting the need to acknowledge women’s sexual desires in sex education to make them feel positive about their experiences. Allen (2004) argues incorporating sexual desire in sex education legitimates young peoples’ sexual desires, deems it common and is necessary for their well-being. The need to claim young people as sexual subjects who can experience sexual desire is articulated in the following narrative:

To have sexual desires is normal in adolescence. I have heard some of my friends who went according to their physical desires- hold hands, kissed, or even got squeezing hugs with their intimate ones. And later repenting for that by saying that she is having guilty feelings, she should not have done that. (18-year-old, girl’s school).

Inclusion of information on range of sexualities is another aspect that must be covered by sex education is felt by girls. Schools have been described as hetero-normative spaces. It is felt that inclusion of information on sexual diversity will lessen discrimination, marginalization and bullying of sexual minorities.

I think it was important for teachers to tell us that all kinds of sexualities exist. I remember one of my seniors who was a bisexual had committed suicide because people came to know that she was attracted to both the sexes, and everybody in school and her family demonized her. I believe actual sex education would teach people not to demonize people who do not fall into hetero-normative matrix. (18 years old, Girls’ school).

There should be sex education for those who identify as LGBTQ. It is important that a student who is aware of his/her sexuality should get to know how they would have sex with their significant other. (16-year-old, Co-ed school).

In whatever limited form sex education is given in schools, ‘heteronormalizing techniques’ (Allen, 2004) are used, rendering heterosexuality as the norm and homosexuality a deviance. The pervasive force of heteronormativity in schools is documented in this narrative:

The principal sends all the suspected homosexuals to the counsellor. What she does? She just throws the bible and states there is nothing called homosexuality and she wants to convert us, if she couldn’t then she would call the parents and ask the parents to take their children to a psychiatrist! And our principal is openly homophobic, she has declared it in the Chapel meeting that it’s not Adam and Steve, but it is Adam and Eve! So she doesn’t believe in homosexuality! (17 years old, girls’ school)

The principal of a school, as the girl, narrates holds the view that homosexuality is not normal or is biologically unnatural. Committed to religious views she claims homosexuality is a sin and imposes her view on the students.

Girls turn to pornographic material to acquire sexual knowledge when information is either not coming from schools or parents, but they are largely aware of their distortions or misconceptions.

All sex education that we received was from the biology classes. We mostly got to know from pornography, but it's all fabricated in porn, and so most of the things we got to know were wrong. (18 years old, Girls' school).

Most English medium private schools in Kolkata attended by the girls educate them on sexuality hurriedly with no sustained discussion on it and even if sex is discussed the risks and dangers associated with adolescent and pre-marital sex are covered. This section depicts how girls want more elaborate discussions on body changes, bodily pleasures and with nothing to fall back to turn to pornography as a source of knowledge about sex.

Regulating Sexual Expression Through Disciplining of the Body

On the whole, one can have the impression that sex is hardly spoken of at all in these institutions. But one only has to glance over the architectural layout, the rules of discipline, and their whole internal organization: the question of sex was a constant preoccupation. (Foucault, 1978: 27)

This section documents the ways in which issues of sexuality feature in interactions within schools and how schools through disciplining of the body regulate or monitor any kind of sexual expression. Physical bodies are subjugated through disciplinary power and subjects learn to constrain themselves and behave in expected ways. Schools want students to be ideally non-sexual, "schools are fundamentally modernist institutions which privilege rationality and the mind and marginalise the body and its desires" (Allen, 2007: 223). The top priority in schools is academic learning, students with top academic grades are favoured by teachers but there is a constant anxiety that issues of sexuality will disrupt the smooth process of learning. Schools discipline students' bodies, their sexuality and sexual expression to keep out academics from getting contaminated. Students are embodied beings, specifically in adolescence aware of their sexualities, consequently their bodies have to be disciplined, policed to erase any possibility of sexual expression.

School uniforms are part of "regimes of appearances" that "regulate bodies through clothes" (Dussel, 2004: 92). Majority schools of Kolkata have a compulsory uniform and considerable attention is given to appearance in schools. It is through school uniforms that disciplined, docile bodies are produced with complete erasure of sexuality.

The young girls describe how school uniforms are restrictive. They narrate on the regulations of skirt length, the way hair has to be tied, and certain mandatory regulations regarding appearance.

It is a skirt, with a white blouse and a tie. And the dress should be worn appropriately. The length of the skirt is below the knee. Your tie should be attached to your neck and you have to keep the whole shirt buttoned. Your shirt should be tucked inside. If it is tucked out, you will be brought out of the line and made to

wear it in a proper way. The hair has to be two ponytails. No extra things like jewellery in the body. There are some restrictions regarding inner garments as well. It has to be appropriate. Like if it is printed and visible then you cannot continue with it. (16-year-old, Co-ed school)

My uniform is a maroon skirt compulsory of knee length. We have a white collared blouse or shirt with the elbow length sleeves. We are not allowed to wear any colour stockings except skin colour even in winter. And we have to keep our hair clean and proper. If the hair length exceeds the collar of our shirt, then we have to make ponytails. And if it goes a little longer, then we have to make it into braids. Even if it is such a cut that you cannot make braids, you have to. In a convent girls' school, your dress is your character or identity. You should always wear dresses that define your modesty. The reason why it is not okay to wear our skirts above our knees! If your hair is not okay, or your dress is not proper, they used to ask us why do not you get enough time to make yourself represent-able and come to school? If we have long nails, they provide us nail cutter and we trim it then and there. But big nails on finger make your finger look good. And then you have to pay a 30/- fine. (17 years old, Girls' convent school).

The skirt should be below the knee. The socks should be of a proper length which is quite high. The shirt should be tucked in the skirt properly so that even if I put up my hand, it does not get loose. The tie should be tied properly, it should not wave much. It should be pressed properly. If a girl's nails are a little bit longer than the usual, she is sent to the Principal's room. The principal either sends her home, and let her come next day with her nails properly cut. Or she is made to stay the whole day in the Principal's room and cut the nails. She is barred from attending the classes for the day for just this little thing. It could have been let her allow to cut the nails and come back to her class, but it is not allowed. Once you do a mistake, you are punished for throughout the day. Even her attendance is cancelled for the day as well which becomes a major problem. (18 years old, Girls' convent school).

Rules and regulations regarding school uniform attempts to prohibit bodies from drawing attention to themselves, desexualizes them and disciplines them. The explicit message to girls is that they should not sexualize themselves or think about their appearance. Paechter (2010) claims that this policing is done to render bodies docile, "to the extent that they disappear" (p. 314). The mandatory skirt length, total ban on adornment, the compulsory rules of tying up hair indicate the intention to erase out all sexualized aspects of children's bodies. Any fashionable haircut triggers comments from teachers like school is not a place for fashion. Girls are often judged by comparing their grades with their appearance. This is done to discourage girls from concentrating on bodily appearance and take interest in developing the mind.

In this research girls express the concern that they are subjected to restrictions qualitatively different from boys. "With boys it is the neatness of the uniform and not the restrictions on length or something" comments a few girls from co-ed schools. Very few schools that do not have school uniforms permit boys to wear shorts but not to girls. Girls feel that school rules are lenient for the boys and not related to their modesty. The whole range of rules and social prescriptions sometimes

made girls feel uncomfortable. Girls said that in winter wearing stockings are not allowed in schools no matter how cold or sick the students feel. Girls who want to wear full sleeve shirts in winter are not allowed. Schools are not bothered about their comfort. A 17-year-old girl from girls' convent school said:

Girls wearing full shirt is not considered to be womanly, and then girls' shirt have collars which are not like the hard collars that men have, they are the soft ones, they are comfortable but they are again left to be soft because women are not supposed to be hard.

In co-educational schools there are regulations on physical intimacy to 'stem inappropriate and unwanted touching' (Allen, 2009). Holding hands, patting, tickling, putting arms around shoulder or waist would lead to scolding from teachers. Schools have CCTVs in classrooms, corridors, corners as well as guards to keep a watch over students. Students are under the constant glare of CCTVs in classrooms, corridors and playgrounds and girls feel that through the surveillance technology their bodies are disciplined. To keep a tag on students' sexuality, teachers go for a stroll during the recess time to have an eye on everything. No student is allowed to be alone in the classroom during the recess time, like one has to be either on the field or in the canteen, because everyone is there. The rules are for regulating students' sexuality which is constructed as unruly. In the narrative below, a girl describes how no kind of touching is allowed between boys and girls.

Nothing, nothing at all. You cannot even hold hands with each other. So if you are walking in the corridor, of course you can be friends with a male friend. So, in that case, you cannot even hold hands, or put your hand around the shoulder of that person. If you are dating, there is a famous corner in our school known as the 'loving place'. The teachers 'raid' the place, and if they find a girl and a boy standing there without maintaining the minimum distance between them, then the teacher directly scolds them and tells them to go to their classes instantly. (18 years old, Co-ed school).

The 'no touch' policy between girls and boys in schools renders all kinds of physical touching as sexual and potentially dangerous (Allen, 2009). A girl claimed that in Christian coeducational schools it is taught that girls must be a reflection of Virgin Mary and even if she has a boyfriend, she should not have any desires. It is the girl who is humiliated if any boy hovers around her. Another girl from a missionary coeducation school expresses that "during the time of concerts a team of 5 to 6 girls are supervised by three teachers to keep eyes on the girls' behaviour." There is circulation of messages how girls should be in the institution where they spend a considerable part of their lives. Girls also engage in self-regulation, conforming and checking their behaviour and in the words of a participant "majority of the girls confirm as there is no scope for deviance."

Sexualization of Girls in Schools: Reinforcing the Sexist Social and Cultural Values

This section discusses how young girls are expected to behave by teachers and male peers and are judged according to the social construct of "nice girls". They are expected to be passive,

innocent, well-behaved, hardworking and asexual. In no way a girl's physical appearance, bodily gestures and actions should be interpreted as promiscuous and potentially dangerous. The concern of schools with young girls' 'sexual reputation' indicates schools reinforce commonly held gendered notions of girls' sexuality.

Women are identified with the body and schools transmit the message that the body has to be subjected to the mind. Girls' character is closely linked to their sexual behaviour. Reputation in schools depends on whether the girl has a boyfriend. A girl mentions "Like having boyfriend is the last priority of the good girls and the first priority of the bad girls." Girls who are rebellious and engage in non-conformist behaviour like folding up of skirts get the label of 'sexy babes'. They enjoy popularity for acting deviant but are most gossiped about. Boys feel "they are girlfriend material, but they say they are not wife materials...I don't know from where they got that idea" claims an 18-year-old girl studying in a co-ed school. Her statement reflects that boys in schools have the regulatory power to characterize girls as sexually available or not. Making skirts shorter by folding them is judged as not conforming to appropriate femininity and thereby girls signal their sexual availability to boys and are consequently perceived as not 'respectable' enough to become wives. A girl's reputation becomes smeared by how she wears her uniform and this reflects the Madonna/slut dichotomy. As stereotypes of conventional morality prevail even in schools, girls have to be cautious and vigilant about their reputation.

Girls' reputation in schools is also judged by whether they are dating. Dating in schools risks reputation of girls, teachers disapprove dating and use abusive words to describe the activity of 'going out with boys' like "*chelebaajikorche*"⁴. For the boys it is being mischievous and some boys pride themselves for having many girlfriends and being a "casanova". Girls having more than one boyfriend are looked upon as "easy targets" and are criticized by both girls and boys though boys want to date them. One of the girls said, "You cannot test relationships or people. Then you become a promiscuous lady, with very down morals." According to Jackson "a girl has nothing to gain and her reputation to lose if she is too sexually active" (1999: 41). For boys, girls maintain, having many girlfriends is being cool and girls though feeling that the boys are untrustworthy, nevertheless are attracted towards him. Schools draw upon the gendered notion of girl's reputation to regulate behaviour of adolescent girls and girls deviating from the conservative ideal are subject to social sanctions in ways boys are not. Peers reinforce the double standard as they have the same attitude towards sexuality.

Girls are also oppressed in schools by appraising male gaze and comments. Male peers judge girls "against a scale of deficiency and perfection (Frost, 2001:132). Good looks of girls are defined by weight, height and girls who approximate the ideal are valued, and have higher status in schools than others. A girl narrates how she was called a *hijra* or eunuch as she had a husky voice, short hair and body hair. A girl confided saying that "one of the boys wrote a poem on how my breasts look...my god it was a trauma for me! I am still traumatised!" In mixed schools, boys address fat girls as "*o potejabe*" meaning she will be easily available as she is fat and unattractive and will not find any boy to date with. It is perceived that unattractive girls can engage in physical intimacy with any boy "because of the girl's perceived lack of opportunity" (Frost, 2001: 114). Fat girls, dark girls are made to believe that no boy will ever get attracted to them. A girl confesses about how it is ingrained in her friend that boys get drawn towards attractive girls.

⁴ The bengali word '*chelebaji*' implies trying to seduce the boys. Bengali is the language of the state of West Bengal, the capital being Kolkata.

And there was a friend of mine, who had a darker complexion and was short. And she was terribly bullied for being the way she looks. So there had been a notion that had been enrooted into her that no matter what, nothing sexual will ever happen to her life. She has been completely made it believe that, attractive people attract each other. And she is not attractive at all.

Girls lacking the ideal features feel inadequate and unaccepted. A girl continuously reminded of her bodily lack says:

I don't have such a good figure, I don't have a good facial structure, my eyes are very small. It is told to me that I have so small eyes and that the person does not understand whether I am sleeping or standing or awake. I have always been showed that I am inadequate. I have extremely beautiful friends, the beautiful figure, the good-looking face and everything—everything that a guy would want. So, there are times when they say to me to try things, but I never feel I need that. They are like, why do I not try to be thinner, why do not I try no make-up or light make-up. But what is wrong is to make people feel they are inferior, to make them aware that they are not worthy of getting love and all and just because of their numbers we put on them. It is not okay to make some people, or any people feel that just because of their looks, imperfections and any other external features, they are not capable of having sexual desire, wants. I have been told by a friend that- '*tor to biehobena, tuichesta o korisna*' (you will never get married and do not try it even). (18 years old, Co-d school).

Girls internalize how others appraise them and form conceptions of themselves according to judgement of others. If they fail to meet the societal standards of good looks, they suffer from feelings of body inferiority. Teachers too add up to negative feelings about one's body by calling them names like "*rosogolla*"⁵, "hippopotamus".

Girls have narrated that boys exercise control in relationships, dictating how girls should look and dress and their girlfriends remaining extremely cautious not to hurt masculine egos. This substantiates that girls do not subvert normative codes of femininity but collude with their male partners to produce male power. Gender hierarchy continues to organize adolescent heterosexual relationships.

In girls' missionary schools, girls are shamed for having a boyfriend by teachers. A girl narrates the ordeal that her friend had to undergo for bringing her boyfriend to the school concert.

She dared to bring her boyfriend in the school carnival. And she was dancing with her and nothing indecent happened or she did. It was on Saturday and the teacher noticed it. Then on Monday when she came, the entire 45 minutes class of that teacher was wasted on her being called slut for her activities and the whole class had to sit and listen to her shit. And the girl was so traumatized that she did not come to school for the next 2 days. (18 years old, Girls' school).

A girl from a missionary school spoke of the rules and regulations to abide by when attending fests in other schools, especially if it is a boy's school. "Before attending a fest, we are

⁵ Rosogolla is a small ball shaped spongy dessert soaked in sugar syrup. This term is often used on heavy persons.

taught beforehand not to talk to a boy unless it is necessary. We have teachers with us; like 4-5 teachers for just 2-3 girls. So, you can understand the level of surveillance we have while going to other boys or co-ed schools.” It is confessed by girls of single sex Christian missionary schools that they are afraid of their teachers to an extent that they fear to have boyfriends.

Resisting Restrictions on Sexual Expressions

Schools become sites of contestation where schools enforce their strict sexual regimes and girls find ways to evade the rules. This section documents that there is also resistance when girls strategize to evade the ‘gaze’ and break rules and sexualize their appearance. Hudson comments:

By their emphasis on dress, teachers deny girls’ success in maintaining this feminine appearance: one of the perennial battles in schools is over girls trying to sexualise their appearance by altering the way in which uniform is worn (changing the length of skirt, the heel height of plain lace-up shoes, the type of stockings) as well as drab, regulation clothes’ (1984: 39).

A few girls keep long nails and escape checking by rushing to the toilet or by keeping hands inside their skirt pockets, consequently running the risk of getting their marks deducted from answer scripts or getting fined. Wearing skirts one inch above the knee signifies rebelliousness and a few girls labelled as ‘sexy babes’ by their peers roll up their skirts immediately after stepping outside the school. The girls feel that girls should be allowed to wear trousers if length of the skirt is an issue in school. There are rules on how girls should sit. A few teachers loudly spell out the rule that girls should not sit exposing the inner part of their thighs. Others subtly remind the girls that ‘girls should behave like ladies’.

On the one hand schools go to great lengths to forbid expressions of sexuality by both children and teachers. This can be seen in a range of rules, particularly those about self-presentation. On the other hand, and perhaps as a consequence, expressions of sexuality provide a major currency and resource in the everyday exchanges of school life (Epstein and Johnson, 1998: 108).

The establishment of rigid boundaries to control students from expressing themselves sexually leads to the possibility of multiple transgressions where girls resist the dominant values of the school. Girls have aspirations as well as pressures to have boyfriends in school, they acquire status if they have boyfriends and attracting the other sex is considered a skill. Alternatively, not being able to attract the other sex It causes despair, sense of lack and feelings of inferiority in girls. A girl without a boyfriend in or outside school expresses:

So, if I have a boyfriend, then I am a real woman, I can make a guy be attracted towards me, I am pretty cool. I can upload pictures and get many likes, upload statuses- show people how happy I am. We tell each other that they made boyfriends and we do nothing, a statement of despair, somewhere there are things that get deeply rooted that if I am single and my friend is not, then there is something wrong in me. That is pretty evident in the peer groups. (18 years old, Co-ed school).

If you have a school boyfriend, it means you sit on the upper seat into the friend group hierarchy. (18 years old, Co-ed school).

The narratives adequately depict that having a boyfriend is perceived as an achievement for girls. Within co-ed schools there are discussions of who liked or loved who, the love letters received, the breakups and the patch ups with some acquiring the celebrity couple status among peers. Girls speak of how they get attracted towards rebellious guys, their crush on senior boys, how looks and coolness in boys are the seducing factors. Frequently girls speak of their attraction to rebellious boys. This is a trend said a girl, “girls are more into dating rebellious guys...those who get suspended...those who don’t come to class...or may be those whom their family will never accept. So its security and adventure.”

Sparshi: People with good sense of humor, But I also like rebellious guys

Asavari: Yes, the rebellious ones are verrrrrry attractive

Sparshi: We both like bad boys...like most other girls

Researcher: Who are bad boys?

Sparshi: The ones who do not follow the rules, the rebellious ones who has reputation of being outspoken.

Rashi: There is always one senior guy on whom we all had crushes. But the discussions are more on how handsome the boys were, it is never about their looks but the coolness, not obeying the rules, the teachers are one thing that make them cool. Then again, their looks help them to be tagged as cool boys. The attitude that I don’t care the teachers, it is okay kind of people are the cool boys.

Girls’ admiration for the “bad boy”, one that is outside the norm is also a kind of rebellion against social constructs of ‘good boy’. From the narratives it may also be observed that girls find the confidence of rebellious boys very appealing, their courage and spirit to break the norms of the school. Girls speak of how couples secure spots in schools to get physically intimate and track down desolate spaces like the space behind the pillar in school fields, in empty classrooms of schools, on the steps of school laboratory, out of view corridors. Holding hands and lip to lip kissing is the extent of sexual activity in schools witnessed and participated though there are sometimes rumours of more intimate sexual encounters.

People find spots to be intimate, in our school in the field there are pillars and behind the pillar is the “blind spot” which falls beyond the gaze of cctv. (18 years old, Co-education school)

Students always find a way to escape the surveillance, this way or the other. The blind spots—where camera cannot cover are the places where they used to go and be intimate. Holding hands, hugging, cuddling, kissing, were very much normalized in school. Especially in the ground, everyone can hold everyone’s hand. Like, you can hold your significant other’s hand and sit or walk or be surrounded by your friends. (18 years old, Co-ed school).

The girls offer insights of the sexual culture in schools and Kehily claims “Within this disempowering environment of educational imperative and external control, student sexual cultures become imbued with significance as adult-free and education-free zones where students collectively negotiate what is acceptable/desirable and what is “too much.” (2004: 214). The search for spaces to be intimate, the physical intimacies that follow is an indicator of how girls resist schools’ construction of pupils as asexual and are ways of expressing their autonomy and agency within confined school spaces. Girls also narrate the punishments that follow after being caught unaware.

Yes, dating is very prevalent, but the teachers try to portray it as a very bad thing and as we are giving boards we should study and don’t do thing like dating and all. And I was dating my friend from class nine and class nine and ten was a horror for us. Every time he used to get close to me, even if it is just to sit next to me or to hold my hand our class teacher would personally call us and bash us...that is she used to insult us. But class nine and ten was real bad, and I was caught three times holding my boyfriend’s hand, and my parents were called, I was not allowed admission in my own school after class 10. Because my boyfriend’s mother told my principal that I was responsible for the relationship. And my principal said to my father, that she comes to school to lure boys and I was so traumatized that I had to seek counselling. (19 years old, Co-ed school).

Our school had two shifts, morning and afternoon. I have been put in the morning shift while my boyfriend continues in the afternoon shift. (18 years old, Co-ed school).

The punishments indicate that female sexuality is always constructed as culpable and has the “power to disrupt the rational educative process” (Kehily, 2004: 214). Hence the girl gets suspended from school and not her boyfriend while another is shifted to the morning shift while the boy continues in the afternoon one. Strikingly all girls going to co-ed schools “positioned themselves within heterosexual relations of desire (Renold, 2005: 99) and same-sex sexual practices are reported mostly in girls’ schools. Girls narrate that junior girls date senior girls and washroom cubicles are spaces to be intimate. Surveillance by teachers is constant and students are called upon “to keep a watch on what homosexuals are doing”.

Concluding Notes

Adolescent young girls in India uniformly are expected not to show any interest in sex but at the same time are seen as sexual when they develop the contours of a woman’s body. It is felt that any information on sex will make adolescents promiscuous as they are perceived to be under the influence of “raging hormones”. The age of consent in India is 18 years, hence leaving adolescents out of any conversations on consensual acts of pleasure. While there is evidence of sexuality in school bathrooms in the form of grapphiti, schools are reluctant to provide sex education to protect the children from acquiring any kind of sexual knowledge as well as teachers feel embarrassed to make any conversations on sex with students. West Bengal Board of Secondary Education had introduced sex education in schools with a neutral name Life-Style Education Programme that became defunct after 2007 due to the resistance given by parents and

teachers. The implementation of sex education is obstructed by the debates surrounding it that it is alien to Indian culture, undermine family values and will encourage adolescent sexual behaviour. A few schools that provide sex education emphasize on the physical and emotional risks of sexual intimacy before marriage, the diseases associated with it and encourage abstinence. Sex education then is all about teaching women from a young age about the danger, risk and vulnerability in having pre-marital sex and never about positive experiences. Since the 1990s, Indian government in collaboration with other non-government agencies have made attempts to introduce sexuality education in the school curriculum. The National Educational Policy draft that was given to Human Resource Development Minister in May 2019 states that sex education will be included in secondary curriculum on topics like consent, harassment, safety for women, family planning and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases. What knowledge is to be disseminated in sex education is always from the perspective of adults with no acknowledgement given to what adolescents want to know. The issue is that adolescents live in a hyper-sexualized culture of internet sites and Bollywood item songs with information on sex just a click away, and there are changes in the beliefs about sexuality especially among the youth, it is time for an open and direct discussion on sexuality. This article documents that girls without any access to information on sex occasionally fall back on pornography though realizing that most of the acts are non-consensual and propagate body types that are highly uncomfortable for the girls.

In India, though there is considerable social support for double standards of morality which requires wives to be virgins at the time of marriage though men can be sexually experienced, there is an increasing change in urban areas on attitudes towards sex, global influences shaping girls' sexual subjectivities. Adolescent girls are crafting their sexual lives within the context of social constraints and entering into pre-marital sex than a decade before. It is time that sexuality education acknowledges young people as sexual subjects and provides relevant information for safe sex practices rather than having the approach of abstinence till marriage as the primary way of practising safe sex.

The second section of the article examines the premise that school has an 'asexual environment'. It is observed that sexuality is not only present in schools but crucial to organization of schools. Schools communicate an ideal of non-sexual student or construct young people's sexuality negatively. The 'official school culture' around sexuality attempts to regulate any expression of sexuality in order not to disrupt academic purpose of learning. There are directives on school uniform, any expression of physical intimacy is censured, and schools enforce strict sexual regimes. Teachers propagate sexist notions of girls' sexuality, reinforcing gendered sexual stereotypes, focus on the importance of 'sexual reputation' of girls and punish girls for behaviour normalized in boys. Lack of attention is given in schools to sexual diversity, promoting homophobia and pupils may find it difficult to come out as lesbian, gay, bisexual in schools and may be in later lives.

The girls challenge the abstinence focused messages about sex in schools revealing they possess sexual agency. Despite restrictions imposed by schools, girls freely discuss about their desires, choice of partners and sexual intimacies in schools. They refuse "to be scripted by the dominant discourse and turn instead to subjugated knowledges to fashion alternative discourses of subjectivity" (Hekman, 1995: 84).

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