

## Role of Missions in the Education of Girls

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Despite the government's steady efforts to ensure schooling for all, 11.9 million children between the ages of six and thirteen remain out of school. Most of these children are from marginalised communities. In the Muslim community, girls have not had enough opportunities for education, for the most part, due to their restricted geographic mobility, although this pattern is changing owing to a shift in the attitude of parents. Having realised the benefits of education, such as better marriage prospects for girls and an increased likelihood that the next generation will, in turn, be educated, parents are now willing to pay a price for quality education. The poor quality of public education has given rise to a private market where residential institutes, called missions, offer a solution to the challenges associated with girls' mobility.

Khadijatul Kubra Girls' Mission (KKGM) is one such institute that caters exclusively to girls, many of who may have otherwise dropped out. What differentiates KKGM is its ability to provide everything under one roof, as the students put it. A nominal monthly fee covers tuition, food and lodging. Besides the regular curriculum, KKGM also strives to make use of digital technology to enhance students' experience. It partners with a non-profit organisation, the Ann Foundation, to facilitate virtual English classes over Skype. Volunteer tutors at the Foundation conduct classes comprising a host of reading, writing and conversational exercises to improve the girls' employability. Regular interactions with tutors offer the girls a window to the outside world, expanding their horizons.

### Why are private missions so popular?

The Right to Education (RTE) Act has been instrumental in reducing the number of out of school children, particularly those up to 14 years of age. In 2014, 6.4% of primary-school-age children and 5.7% of lower secondary school-age children were out of school. Despite substantial progress in securing schooling for all, these figures add up to 11.9 million children who are out of school (ages 6 to 13) due to the large population size.<sup>i</sup>

School exclusion is considerably more prevalent among Muslim children, with exclusion rates for both age groups, being far higher than children from other religions. The exclusion rate is 9.1% among lower secondary age children, far higher than the national average. Financial burden plays a primary role — the cost of education, coupled with the opportunity cost of not working, often forces these students out of school.

Historically, girls have tended to have higher dropout rates than boys, which increase after the primary level. In addition to the financial burden, a few other factors tend to impact girls disproportionately. Muslim neighbourhoods tend to have fewer schools than others. While boys can travel further to seek out the education they desire, girls are unable to do so. Even when schools are accessible, poor infrastructure is often a deterrent — a third of rural schools do not have girls' toilets, while over a quarter, lack usable toilets of any kind.<sup>ii</sup>

The problem extends beyond just access to schools. To supplement their school learning, students who can afford it flock to local private tuition classes. For the same reason that Muslim-dominated neighbourhoods may lack schools, these areas also lack private tutors — a generally low level of education in the community. Again, while Muslim boys can travel far to find a tutor, girls enjoy much less geographical mobility.

But the gender gap has been decreasing, owing mainly to a changing attitude among parents. They are now eager to educate their girls as it improves their marriage prospects, increases the chances of imparting education to future generations and creates a sense of independence in case of widowhood.<sup>iii</sup> Parents are willing to pay a price for quality education and where public schools are lacking, a private market emerges. For example, in West Bengal, despite the government's best efforts to provide free education, private institutes or missions, providing education at a price and with teachers far less qualified than those in government schools, have sprung up. These institutes are not registered with any educational board and hence, cannot conduct examinations. Students might be enrolled with a registered neighbouring school, but attend classes and reside at the mission, visiting the registered school only to write their board examinations.

Some of these missions, like KKGM, cater exclusively to Muslim girls, many of who may have otherwise dropped out.

### Our experience

Situated in the Bainan village in the Howrah district in West Bengal, KKGM was founded in 2014 and is funded primarily by the Khadijatul Kubra Education Trust. The school has some 500-odd students in classes 6-12, most of who are from low-income families. A few are orphans. Students hail from various districts across West Bengal and are admitted through an admission test; their performance on the test along with their financial status decides the subsequent schooling fee. Students who can afford it, pay a monthly fee of INR 4000, which covers tuition, food and lodging. For needy students, and there are many, this fee is subsidised or waived. Donations from certain educationists, philanthropists and other wellwishers make this possible.

The school uses Bengali as its medium of learning and follows both Madhyamik and Madrasah curricula, including religious studies. Besides regular classes, KKGGM also provides remedial classes for students struggling to cope. On completing the class X board exams, it encourages its students to continue secondary studies at the institute, effectively curbing dropout rates at the secondary level.

The school is as well-equipped as any other, boasting of classrooms, science and computer laboratories, a library, a prayer room and a small field for sports. Large, nondescript rooms form the dormitories, where the girls reside nearly thirty to a room. Food is served four times a day. Namaz is performed five times a day. The girls are visited by their families once a week. They are not allowed mobile phones on campus.

What makes these institutes so popular is their residential facility that helps overcome many of the challenges arising from the restricted geographical mobility of girls. These schools also tend to have a high proportion of female teachers, making them more girlfriendly. Constraints on the mobility of women across localities, and barriers to participation in occupations other than education and health, create a locally available pool of educated women in pockets that have girls' secondary-level schools (Andrabi, Das and Khwaja, 2013). The same principle applies here. While some female teachers reside on campus, others come from the adjoining neighbourhoods. Consequently, absenteeism among teachers, a critical contributor to the poor quality of education in public schools, is virtually nil here. Most students at KKGGM, in turn, aspire to become teachers, a phenomenon we hope will play no small part in establishing more private schools in Muslim communities.

## **Other features**

### *Extracurricular support*

To provide a holistic learning experience to its students, KKGGM includes various activities alongside the curriculum. Computer classes help train the girls in basic operations like typing on Word, creating PowerPoint presentations and emailing. Regular physical training classes are conducted in which the girls either play badminton or kabaddi or learn yoga. The institute also has an annual sports' day where various races and sports are conducted. Arts and crafts are encouraged, with painting, sewing and crocheting classes being offered to those interested. Occasionally, the school invites local healthcare workers who train the girls in first aid and basic nursing skills.

Some of these activities also serve to keep the students engaged in the evenings once classes conclude. The library, which boasts of 1500+ books, is open at all times. The collection includes a mix of textbooks and novels or short stories, mostly in Bengali. English books account for about 200 of these. In the absence of televisions, mobiles and other engagements, students often spend their evenings, leisure reading or studying.

Digital technology is being widely explored to improve the quality of education in India; KKGGM does not fall very far behind. Despite its humble infrastructure, KKGGM strives to augment its regular curriculum through virtual English classes. Though the school teaches English as a second language, the students are not comfortable using it. The role of teachers and educated local women, who were themselves introduced to English through rote learning, is significant here.

### *The Ann Foundation*

Acknowledging this shortcoming in its own system and recognising the importance of English fluency for employability, KKGGM partners with the Ann Foundation, a non-profit organisation, to bridge the gap. The Foundation provides online English and computer classes to disadvantaged children and youth in schools and orphanages globally. Successful young professionals are increasingly becoming aware of the roles they can play in giving back to society, but often struggle to act on this desire owing to time or geographical constraints. The Ann Foundation effectively dismantles these roadblocks. It finds a keen volunteer anywhere in the world and connects him/her virtually to one of its partner entities.

At KKGGM, the Foundation runs one-hour classes every day for different grades. The class strength of a typical grade in KKGGM is about 50; each grade is split into smaller groups of 10-12 and a volunteer is assigned. The volunteers, mostly women well-versed in Bengali, are located across the world, including the US, UK, Germany, Canada and Bangladesh. Each group is taught for an hour on two consecutive days of the week, including weekends. The classes are conducted in the evenings so that they do not interfere with their regular studies. Classes are conducted over Skype, with a sole laptop facing a dozen girls at KKGGM. A teacher at KKGGM helps facilitate the class from their side. When a tutor is unavailable to take a class, she is required to inform the programme coordinator at the Anne Foundation so that they may arrange for a substitute tutor. The tutors also maintain a repository of documentaries or short films for times when substitutes are unavailable. In such a scenario, the facilitator at KKGGM is informed and the link to the video shared so they can show it to the class.

These classes comprise a host of reading, writing and conversational exercises which the volunteer tutors prepare beforehand. Experience has shown that the girls perform fairly well in reading and writing exercises, but struggle to converse fluently. The initial barrier is their shyness, stemming from a lack of confidence in speaking in English. To overcome this, they are often paired together and asked to speak in tandem. Once the tutor has spent enough time with the class to gauge each student's abilities, she often changes the pairs to team overachievers with weaker students. Evidence has shown that the weaker student improves considerably while the stronger one continues to perform well.

To further boost their confidence, tutors try to make them comfortable with normal, everyday conversations, such as introducing oneself to a new acquaintance or discussing one's hobbies or interests. They also practice scenario-based communication, such as expressing themselves when they visit a store or reporting a crime to the police. Watching videos of people engaging in clear dialogue has also proven fruitful. Performances are better when exercises are gamified or when they are graded regularly and the star performers applauded.

Indeed, there is more to these English classes than meets the eye. For the girls who are in confined and rigid circumstances, the classes allow them to break free for a couple of hours each week. They offer a window to the outside world and a starkly different one at that.

These tutors — successful young women — evoke a sense of hope among the girls, one that helps them aspire for new heights despite all adversity.

The environment may seem stifling to many, but the students at KKGGM enjoy themselves. Even though they must live away from their families and do all their chores, they enjoy being with their friends — a simple pleasure which probably would have been denied to them had they stayed home.

### Looking at the future

Since 2016, KKGGM has been seeing an increasing proportion of its graduating students pursuing higher education. A majority enrolls in the healthcare field — some study nursing in Kolkata and Bengaluru, a few pursue pharmacy and a small number pursues the MBBS degree. Other popular courses include law, engineering, management and various undergraduate courses in the sciences and the humanities. However, according to Mr Janab Ali Mollah, Director of KKGGM, currently, about 35% of graduating students are unable to enrol in college as they either lack the resources or are married off. About 5% of students drop-out during higher secondary. Acknowledging these limitations, KKGGM has started providing vocational classes, like computer studies and sewing, to help even those unable to continue higher studies become financially independent.

In 2020, KKGGM initiated its second venture, the Khadijatul Kubra Girls' Academy, to extend its support to graduating students. The Academy aims to offer vocational courses as well as coaching classes for those wishing to appear for competitive examinations, such as the Civil Services Examination, the Staff Selection Commission Examination, the Common Law Admission Test and the Joint Entrance Examination, among others. Now at a nascent stage, the Academy envisions a sponsorship programme to guarantee a secure future for more girls.

The holistic approach of KKGGM reinforces the belief that under the right circumstances every child can learn. While the residential facilities help attract and keep girls in school, remedial classes ensure that even the weakest students do not give up. Additional coaching classes by the Academy prepare the students for the outside world, while mitigating the roadblocks they might have faced in seeking training elsewhere. Finally, its futuristic approach to improving the students' English acumen acts as an additional hook for parents.

Financial conditions often put a limit on a student's education. KKGGM's financial support, not just at the school level but also in higher studies, ensures that girls who would have otherwise dropped out get a chance to pursue their education.

Finally, acknowledging that there will always be a certain section that is unable to continue further studies despite monetary help, the school provides vocational training that will help the girls be financially independent from within the confines of their homes. This stance underpins the notion that learning need not mean an advanced degree; by helping every student learn one skill or the other, KKGGM prepares every one of them for a brighter future.

### References

i United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), All Children in School by 2015: Global Initiative on Out-of-School Children. UNESCO Institute for Statistics, New Delhi, 2014

ii ASER 2018, Annual Status of Education Report (Rural): 'Young Children', ASER Centre, 2020

iii The Print, Muslim girls less likely to drop out of school than boys at higher education level, 22 October 2018

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