

Battling to give girls a future

Vomle Springford, Bangalore, Oct 10, 2014, Deccan Herald News Service (DHNS):

The odds are stacked against young girls getting an education, says the founder of a small trust attempting to stem the tide of female school dropouts in Bangalore.

“In Karnataka, there’s a natural break at the end of class seven, many girl students don’t carry on to class eight,” said Seema Nanda, the founder of Leora Trust, which pays the tuition fees for 53 girls from poor backgrounds, across six schools in the City.

She believes this happens because parents, often low-wage earners who work long hours, see their daughters as old enough to take care of the house and siblings, and opt to send their sons to school instead.

The trust, set up in 2012, has an overarching goal of empowering women through education but it's been a tough job, said Nanda, also a professor at the TIFR Centre for Applied Mathematics. She found it wasn't enough to throw money at the problem – they needed to see the girls progress – so last year started a pilot programme, mentoring 12 girls at RBANMs Bifurcated Girls High School in Ulsoor every week.

Nanda and her team of mentors were disheartened to discover some of the girls didn't even know their ABCs despite it being an English medium school. “We realised their education level was third to fourth grade, if that, and they are ninth grade. “Here we are trying to bridge a gap of six years of education in one year. “They have to read and study at home but many of them go home and cook and clean.”

The school's principal, Noor Abida, said the home environment was the main barrier for the girls. “There is no motivation at home, the mother is a maid... the parents are illiterate.” She said the mentors' dedication had resulted in gradual academic improvement but the biggest change was in the girls' attitudes. “The motivation is there, their confidence is up.”

Nanda said the trust's next step is to mentor even younger girls and to support girls in vocational training, even though it is looked down upon for a career. “Our goal now is if the mother makes Rs 6,000 to Rs 7,000 a month, maybe an achievable improvement [for the girl] would be to earn Rs 12,000-15,000 a month.”

“I would very much like to see some of these girls turn into electricians, for example. There are no women electricians as far as I know.” Nanda said the trust is always looking for mentors. Visit leoratrust.com for more information.