

## ***Barriers to Girls' Education at the Elementary Level in India***

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The European Conference on Education 2020  
Official Conference Proceedings

### **Abstract**

Gender inequality in India has remained a subject of considerable interest among the researchers. With about one-third population comprising of the youth, India has tried to improve access and quality of education to reap benefits of this demographic dividend. Despite its sustained efforts, studies have found that girls in India still face disadvantage in access to basic education as compared to their male counterparts. Both domestic and international studies point out many lacunae which ail girl education in India. This paper analyses the obstacles faced by girls in completing their education at elementary level. These factors arise out of social, economic, cultural and gender-based discrimination in society. This paper points out various aspects related to financial challenges, lack of gender-sensitive environment, security and safety issues, patriarchal mindset of society and low level of expenditure on girl education by the government. While there is no dearth of literature available on each of these issues individually, this paper presents a holistic picture of the challenges and issues faced by girls at school level, which is captured using qualitative data analysis. India has come a long way in achieving the goal of gender equality, yet its future course demands a re-look of the traditional methods being followed. Therefore, universalizing elementary education with gender equity requires addressing existing gender norms so that girls get equal access to the benefits of education.

Keywords: India, Girl Education, Women Empowerment, Gender Inequality, Elementary Education

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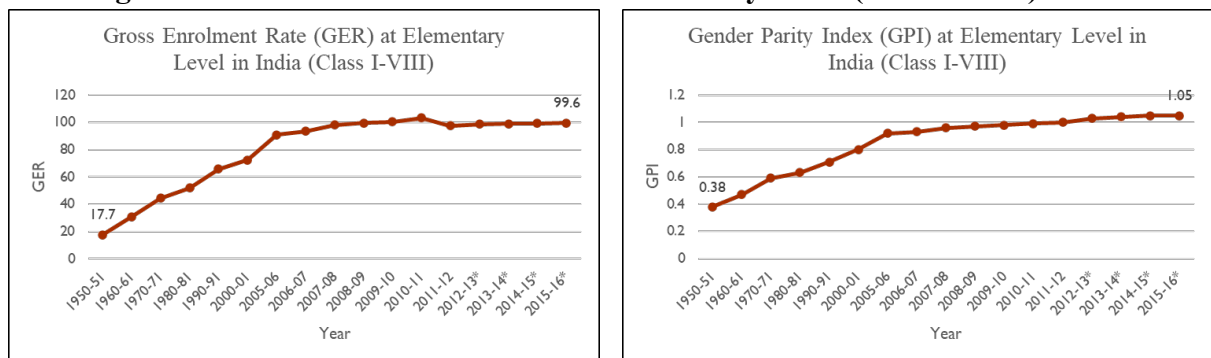
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## 1. Introduction

Access to education is considered to be a vital issue for increasing women empowerment. Over the past decades, many adjectives like quality, inclusive, equitable, etc. have been added to the term education to make it easier for the policy makers for drafting policies, which properly encapsulate the ambition of making a gender-equal society. India has come a long way in improving the education status of both men and women. The remarkable economic growth of India post-1990 reforms has helped it to improve the quality of life of the people also. When it comes to girl education, sustained efforts have been made to prioritize it since gender inequality has remained a widespread feature of Indian society. Not only in the jobs sector, girls face discrimination right from the initial stages of their life and education is one of the main areas, which has to bear the brunt. This paper discusses the important barriers that girls face at the elementary level of education i.e. classes I to VIII. Using a variety of secondary sources, a holistic picture is drawn about various social, cultural, economic, and infrastructural challenges faced by girls in completing their education at elementary level. An analysis of issues pertaining to this age group is necessary as it lays the foundation for the future of girls and any weakness at this level can significantly alter their life-choices.

From implementing The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (hereafter RTE) (which made free education a fundamental right) to designing national policies like *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA) (or Campaign for Universal Education), Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) and National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary level (NPEGEL) (now subsumed into *Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan*), India has taken many substantial steps in the direction of improving girl education. At the elementary level, these efforts have resulted in reducing the drop-out rate of girls, increasing the enrolment rates, pass percentages, improvement in basic infrastructure and other related parameters (Draboo, 2020). This can also be seen from the Figure 1 below, which shows the trend in Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) and Gender Parity Index (GPI) for females at the elementary level.

**Figure 1: GER and GPI of females at Elementary Level (Class I-VIII)**



Source: Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India; National Institute of Educational, Planning & Administration, New Delhi [as cited in (Educational Statistics at a glance, 2018)]

\* Figures are provisional

The figure above shows that both GER and GPI have seen a gradual increase since the past decades. GPI figure of 1.05 in FY 2015-16 is even more impressive, which means that for every one boy enrolled in school at the elementary level, there are 1.05

girls enrolled at the same level. Although, this points to the overall increasing parity between girls and boys, things change when a deeper analysis is conducted. For instance, a comparison of GPI of government schools and private schools show that while it is higher for the former, it doesn't hold true for girls. This means that parents show a preference to send boys to private schools (more expensive but better education), which indicates a deeper bias against girls in the society (Government of India [GOI], 2018). There are more such barriers which a girl faces in the area of education as analyzed in detail in the next section.

## **2. Barriers to Girl Education**

As mentioned above, the barriers to girls' education at elementary level exists in various forms such as social, cultural, financial, and infrastructural challenges. These issues are discussed as under:

### **2.1 Gender Inequality in India**

One of the major barriers to girls' education in India at the elementary level is the widespread gender inequality. "Women and girls experience inequalities in access to healthcare, education, nutrition, employment, and asset ownership" (NITI Aayog, 2018, p. 65). Despite the fact that government and civil society has been trying very hard to send the message of equality of boys and girls, India still ranked 129th out of 189 countries in Gender Inequality Index (GII) (UNDP, 2019). Historically, this is not a problem in India alone, rather most of the Asian countries seem to be affected by gender-stereotypes, which limit girl's access to education (Jayaweera, 1987). However, considering that India has a significantly huge population of youth, out of which females have an equal share, the magnitude of problem for India increases. One of the primary reasons for gender inequality in India is the general preference of parents of having a male child as opposed to a girl child (Bose, 2012). While there are many sociological reasons for this preference, what it means for a girl child is that she gets disadvantaged when it comes to education, nutrition, health, or other resources. It also means that girls are more likely to be withdrawn from school earlier so that they can take care of household chores or because of the poor financial status of families, which cannot afford to educate both son and daughter. There is enough evidence to show that in case of affirmative policies where both men and women can equally apply, it is mostly the males who get most of the benefits (Cassan, 2018; Draboo & Naaz, 2020).

A survey conducted by the NITI Aayog (which is the national think tank of the government) in 2018 showed that most States in India had a poor Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Index Score (less than 50) for the gender equality parameter. This gets corroborated with other reports also, which present a similar picture, such as India's current rank of 115 in the global SDG Index (Sachs, Schmidt-Traub, Kroll, Lafortune, & Fuller, 2019, p. 21). At the elementary level, efforts have been made to provide targeted facilities like residential schools, girl's hostels, vocational trainings, free uniforms, mid-day meals, and scholarships to incentivize the parents to send their daughters to schools. The vision of the government is to educate each and every girl student and provide her with quality education (Panmei & Kumar, 2018). However, the challenge of changing the mindset of the people still exist. The skewed sex ratio, which actually declined to 896 in 2015-17 from 900 in 2013-15,

shows that the bias against girl child are not so easy to remove in India (Tripathi, 2019).

## **2.2 Financial Barriers**

Inadequate financial resources allocated by the Government to education sector create another barrier for girls' education. As percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), India has one of the lowest expenditures on education around the world, which is less than 4 percent. This is even lower than many other similar economies like Malaysia, Brazil and South Africa, which spend more on primary education (World Bank, 2017). Although, the data shows that the share of spending on primary education is about 42 percent of the total education budget, it still falls short as the size of the pie is small. While India has committed itself to achieve SDGs by 2030, a study has found that there is a shortfall of at least USD 740 billion in the allocated budget with respect to SDG Goal 4 of providing quality education (Bhamra, Shanker, & Niazi, 2015). Thus, even though the government claims to accord highest priority to girl education, it does not get reflected in the numbers.

The lack of adequate financial budget affects all aspects of girl education. Low budget means that targeted programmes like KGBV and NPEGEL are not able to increase the unit cost per girl child, which remain quite low as of now. Similarly, salaries of teachers and vocational skill trainers are not as per the market rates. This results in teacher absenteeism and also prevents talented staff from joining the education sector. Various government committees like the Kothari Commission (1966) have recommended that government's expenditure on education should be at least 6 percent of the GDP. However, this has not happened even after half a century. "At the global level, India's spending on education is quite less than the OECD countries, which shows in its rank of 62 (total public expenditure on education per student) and a consequent negative impact on its world talent ranking where it ranks 59<sup>th</sup> among 63 countries (IMD, 2019)" (Draboo, 2020). Education figures in the concurrent list i.e. both Central and State government have the obligation to take steps for its improvement. However, just like the Central Government, even the State Governments have not shown any inclination to increase the spending on girl's education. Mate, et al. (2018) found out that the expenditure on health and education increased only in 9 out of 28 States in India since 1990s.

## **2.3 Safety and Infrastructure Challenges**

Besides the above two barriers, girls at elementary level also face issues related to safety and infrastructure. Many studies have found that the scheme provisions related to girl education often fall short in critical infrastructure at many places (see for example, Evaluation Study on KGBV, 2015; Report of National Evaluation of KGBV and NPEGEL, 2008). For instance, many residential schools and day-schools set-up in educationally backwards blocks under KGBV and NPEGEL respectively did not have adequate boundary walls. Similarly, night guards were not available in many residential schools. These are safety concerns for the girl students and their parents, which prevents them from getting enrolled in such schools. The quality of infrastructure is also a problem, as proper toilets and provisions of safe drinking water is not available everywhere, and even if it exists, their maintenance is poor rendering them unusable. These are compounded by cross-linked issues like poor early-

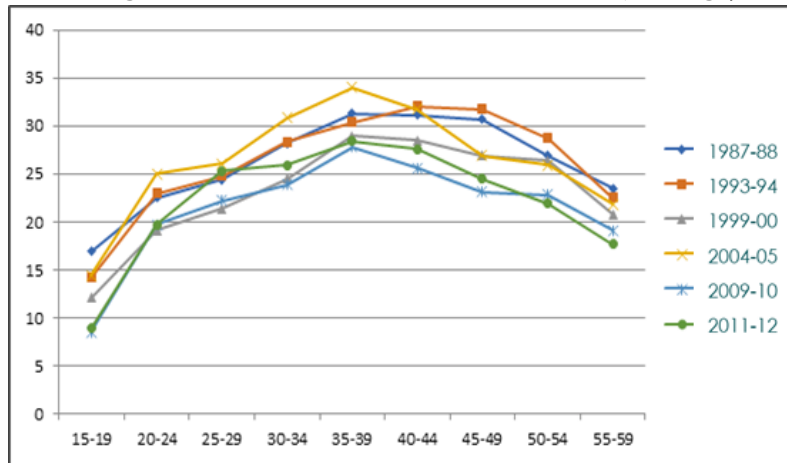
childhood care and malnutrition in children. India ranked 102 out of 117 countries in the Global Hunger Index (GHI, 2019), which means that the lack of proper nutrition will adversely impact girls' education also.

Bose, Sardana, & Ghosh (2017) conducted a study of 12 States to analyze the quality of infrastructure available in schools. They found that all the sample schools required more classrooms ranging from 15 percent to 75 percent. Further, they also found that most sample schools lacked adequate number of trained teachers, hence, increasing the Pupil-to-Teacher (PTR) ratio. The country statistics show that PTR ratio at primary and upper primary level was 23 and 17 respectively in 2015-16 (GOI, 2018). A bigger matter of concern is the lesser number of female teachers at the upper primary level, which is just 83 per hundred male teachers as per the same report. In a patriarchal society like India, non-availability of female teachers is one of the reasons for drop-out of girls at elementary level.

### **3. Other Barriers and their manifestation**

Apart from the barriers discussed above, there are other barriers which girls face at elementary level in India. An analysis of the major reasons for drop-out among female students show that 29.7 percent mentioned 'engaged in domestic work', 15 percent of the girls mentioned 'Not interested in studies', 15 percent mentioned 'financial constraints and 13.9 percent mentioned 'marriage' (NSSO, as cited in GOI, 2018). The other reasons included engaged in economic activities (4.9 percent), school is far off (3.4 percent), unable to cope-up with studies (4.6 percent), completed desired level/ class (6.5 percent) and other reasons (6.20 percent) (such as institution not suitable, language/medium of instruction used unfamiliar, inadequate number of teachers, quality of teachers not satisfactory, unfriendly atmosphere at school, preparation for competitive examination, etc.) These reasons show that improving the financial status and availability of infrastructure are not necessarily enough to attract girls to attain education. Rather there are host of other factors which need to be taken care of. The most important one being gender-specific roles of girls where they are expected to take care of households. This social norm gets reflected in the later life of women also. For instance, when it comes to employment of women, the female Labor Force Participation Rates (LFPR) has been declining since 1987-88. The Labor Bureau Employment and Unemployment Survey records that female labor force participation has fallen to about 27.4 per hundred in 2015–16, which is one of the lowest in the world (GOI, 2019). Further a study by McKinsey Global Institute (2018) found that India did not score well in three areas – work, legal and politics and physical security. Figure 2 shows the historical trend of female LFPR rates in India.

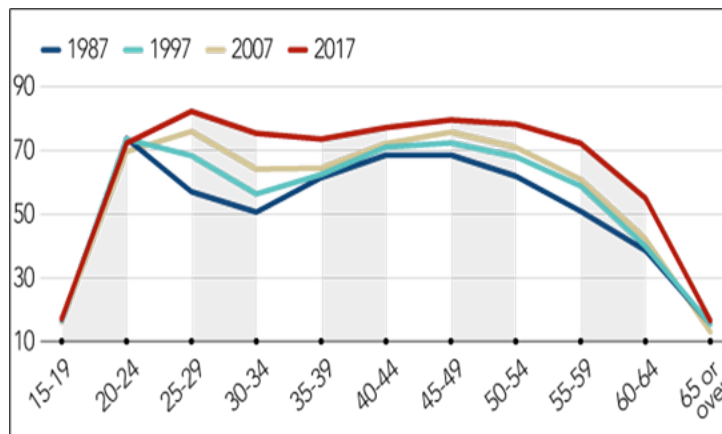
**Fig 2: LFPRs for Urban Women in India (in %age)**



Source: Various NSSO reports, GOI [as cited in Menon, 2019]

The figure above shows that the female workforce in India has been declining, which is quite worrisome as far as women empowerment is concerned. Infact between 2012 and 2018, the size of the female labor force (actual workers, not potential workers) fell by an estimated 21.8 million. Things are better put in perspective if a comparison is drawn with another country like Japan, which has also witnessed gender inequality in their society. Figure 3 shows the trend of female labor participation in Japan.

**Figure 3: Female labor participation in Japan (in %age)**



Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan.

From the above figure, it can be seen that in the case of Japan, even though the curve is 'M' shaped, however, there has been an overall increase the female labor participation since 1987. This is in contrast to India, where the LFPR has decreased since 1987. Thus, there is scope for India to learn from Japan. In 2013, Japan adopted "Womenomics" as a core pillar of the nation's growth strategy. It comprised of many comprehensive measures to increase the educational attainment levels of girls, employment opportunities for women, provide post-natal care facilities, increase gender equality, etc. Although Japan still faces many issues related to women in workforce and the progress has been slow, however, things are slowly changing for the better. India has also taken many steps in this direction but it needs to expand the coverage and penetration.

#### **4. Conclusion and Suggestions**

This paper analyses the most important barriers faced by girl students at elementary level in India. Despite improvements in education, health, and overall economic growth, gender inequality exists in the society and gets manifested in the educational attainment of girls. These early life challenges impact the life-choices of women at a later stage also as seen from the analysis of female labor force participation rates in India discussed above. Considering these dimensions, it is necessary that Government takes concerted efforts to make education for girls more accessible and affordable. The financial and infrastructural challenges should be addressed by increasing the financial allocation on education. Gender-sensitive infrastructure needs to be created which will enable girls to easily the resources. This includes creating schools for girls, toilet and drinking water facilities at workplace, safe transportation, etc. Further, livelihood opportunities for women need to be increased so that parents see the utility of getting their daughters educated. As long as the opportunity cost of getting a girl educated is higher than involving her in household chores, the situation is not going to change drastically. In addition to this, health and hygiene are an important part of women empowerment. Government must focus on these cross-linked issues also and increase information awareness among families about key issues that concern girls. With almost half of the total population being women, India cannot afford to ignore these barriers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century if it really wants to become a developed nation with high growth rates.

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