

Education: Ground Reality versus Policy

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Abstract

Education is one of the primary needs that serve the holistic development of each individual and the society as a whole. Despite the significance of education, the status of girls' education in India is not satisfactory; still wide gap persists between male-female literacy rates (Census, 2011). Gender disparity remains a major issue in India's goal of achieving universal elementary education. To address gender disparity and develop appropriate interventions, it is necessary to understand the nature and extent of the problem comprehensively. The paper aims at identifying the socioeconomic factors that constrain girls' education, appraise government policies in the educational sector, and suggest ways to ensure that education remains both affordable and accessible to all. The study location is a "backward" district, Nuh of Haryana, where the majority of the populace lives in rural areas, with their ethnic identity being Meo Muslim. Women in this community remain under a strict patriarchal structure. Girls are often not allowed to pursue higher studies. The female literacy rate is very low and stands at 36 percent (Census, 2011). The study found that socio-cultural and economic factors are responsible for gender inequality in the education sector. Qualitative findings suggested that one of the reasons for not sending daughters to schools was long travel distances and their safety. Although the government and NGOs are working toward narrowing gender inequality, there is still a need for concerted efforts.

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1. Introduction

Education is one of the primary needs that serve the holistic development of each individual and the society. Education is considered as both an objective and a component of development, as well as "fundamental to the broader notion of expanded

human capabilities that lie at the heart of the meaning of development" (Todaro and Smith, 2011). India is well aware of the importance of education, even though education is not yet accessible to all children. Per the National Sample Survey (NSS) 71st round report, overall, 76 percent of males and 62 percent of females are literate; in rural India, the figures stand at 72 percent for males and 57 percent for females; whereas in urban India, 84 percent of males and 75 percent of females are literate. The number of children who do not receive education, especially in rural areas is still high. A gender gap in the literacy rate is clearly visible. Gender disparity is one of the crucial issues in India's goal of achieving universal elementary education. To address gender disparity and develop appropriate interventions, it is necessary to understand the nature and extent of the problem comprehensively.

One of the prominent reasons for this gap is "social exclusion." Rene Lenoir is given the credit of authorship for the expression. The concept covers a wide range of social and economic problems. Lenoir used this term in the context of a section of the French population, which included mentally and physically handicapped people, suicidal people, aged invalids, abused children, substance abusers, delinquents, single parents, multi-problem households, marginal and asocial persons, as well as other social "misfits" (Silver, 1995). Thereafter, literature has included lots of other categories, and the list has expanded. In simple terms, social exclusion can be defined as "individuals or groups who are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society within which they live" (European Foundation, 1995). Briefly, social exclusion is an umbrella under which many factors combine like gender, caste, creed, and class, etc., which act as barriers to participation in the society as a whole on a common platform, which includes socio-cultural and economic aspects.

Gender disparity is one of the main obstacles to achieve a universal literacy rate. A wide gap in the gender ratio has been one of the most significant characteristics of India throughout the twentieth century. Remarkably, the gender ratio has almost continuously declined

from 972 females (per thousand males) in 1901 to 940 females in 2011. An extensive gender gap in educational sectors is a significant problem in the development of the nation. According to Todaro and Smith, women carry a disproportionate burden of poverty, which can be reduced through significant improvements in their roles and status via education. Female education has strong correlations with other dimensions of social development. As Mehrotra notes, low levels of education significantly affect the health and nutritional status of women. Despite that, in rural India, girls continuously face gender-specific barriers including social, cultural, economic, and infrastructural restrictions leading to a high dropout rate.

2. Education Policy in India

After India's independence, it was realized that in order to have an enlightened citizenry the country had to have an educated population, especially the youth. The education of adults became imperative as the literacy rate was just 12 percent at the time. This resulted in the evolution of the concept of "social education," which emphasized literacy, health, hygiene, and economic improvement.

Passing the Right to Education (RTE) Act had various positive social and economic implications. Free and compulsory education has resulted in increased enrollment in schools. The Act has provisions where the state has to provide amenities like uniforms, textbooks, and writing materials. RTE also mandates all schools to have a kitchen within its premises. The Mid-Day Meal (MDM) scheme, started in 1995, was implemented to provide nutritional meals to all students enrolled in government and government-aided schools. The purpose is to make sure that enrolled students are able to attain basic nutrition in their meals during school hours. The government has invaded with several steps to ensure food safety and testing of meals and issued some basic minimal standards pertaining to cleanliness of the kitchen, utensils, and food storage. The MDM, infrastructure, and other facilities attract parents from lower economic backgrounds to enroll their children in these schools. Even though the act envisions a universal retention of education, dropouts persist, which questions the effectiveness of the education policy. Various social reasons result in dropouts. A wide number of females drop out after the completion of the eighth grade, especially in rural areas.

Marriage is one societal norm that compels the girl child to dropout from school. Furthermore, parents from poor backgrounds feel that, after receiving basic education, girls do not need further education and household chores are delegated to them. The educational level of parents has a significant impact on the child's education; educated parents prefer their children to study more, as compared to illiterate parents (UNESCO, 2010). Colclough argues that the income generation factor, post schooling, workout less favorably for girls than for boys (Colclough et al. 2010). The general perception is that even though the government provides free education and financial assistance, it is not equivalent to foregone earnings, or urban-oriented high-cost education. Other reasons for dropouts include poverty, lack of teachers, school quality, distance to schools, and gender-based violence; these factors influence gender disparity as regards to access to school.

The Government of India has taken different initiatives to facilitate improvements in providing universal education. Among education initiatives, Article 45 in the Constitution is very important. Article 45 has made a provision for free and compulsory education for all children up to age fourteen. States are directed to provide early childcare and education for all children until they complete age six.

2.1 Initiatives for girl-child education

To address the huge gender disparity in the education system, the Government of India has come up with various schemes and initiatives, which are majorly focused on girls' education. The first step was the National Policy on Education, 1986. Its key objective was the removal of disparities and equal education for women, scheduled tribe (ST) and scheduled caste (SC) communities.

The National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL) was launched in 2003, with an overarching goal of reaching the "hardest to reach girls," especially those not in schools. Under NPEGEL, "model schools" have been setup to provide better opportunities to girls.

Saakshar Bharat: The National Literacy Mission was re-casted into the *Saakshar Bharat* program launched in 2009. It aims to accelerate adult education, especially for women (age fifteen years and above) who have no access to formal education, targeting female literacy as a critical instrument for women's empowerment. This has led to an increase in literacy

among women from 54 percent (Census 2001) to 65 percent (Census 2011). For the first time, of the total of 217.70 million literates added during the decade, women (110.07 million) outnumbered men (107.63 million).

Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (BBBP): To address the alarming decline in the child gender ratio, Government of India introduced the BBBP program in 2015 with an overall goal to celebrate the girl child and enable her education.

As discussed above, it is clear that the Government of India has taken many initiatives for the improvement of the girl child's education. Despite this, the level of girls' education has not met expectations. This could attribute to the fact that initiatives have not reached the grassroots level, making it imperative for the Government of India to take responsibility for the implementation of these schemes and provisions at the grassroots level.

The government and NGOs are working toward narrowing gender inequality, but there still stands a need to intensify efforts. The government tries to regulate and encourage the right to free and compulsory education for all children through programs such as the District Primary Education Program (DPEP), *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA), *Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan* (RMSA) and the Mid-Day Meal Program. However, the gap still persists. In a recently launched report by *NITI Ayog*, district Mewat (now Nuh) ranks 99th out of the 101 most "backward" districts in India in the education sector. The education sector comprises 30 percent of the overall index, which is based on eight indicators focusing on learning outcomes (transition rate from primary to upper primary, and subsequently to secondary schooling; average scores in mathematics and language, etc.), as well as infrastructural (toilet access for girls, drinking water, electricity supply), and institutional indicators (RTE mandated pupil/teacher ratio, timely delivery of textbooks, etc.).

3. Objectives

The paper aims to identify the socioeconomic factors that constrain the education of the girl child, appraise government policies in the education sector, and suggest ways to ensure that education remains both affordable and accessible to all.

4. Methodology

A mixed-method approach was used, where data was collected concurrently from both secondary and

primary sources. To gain an overall understanding, and for the purpose of triangulation, a desk review of available documents and relevant literature was done. The paper explores the major challenges faced in girl-child education, and factors inhibiting the effective implementation of education policies. This paper also emphasizes on issues related to access, equity, and quality of education in Nuh, and subsequently offer a possible way forward. To meet particular objectives, the study covered 200 households from ten villages of Nuh district using lot quality assurance sampling (Lot quality assurance sampling (LQAS) methodology was developed in industry for quality control and allows the use of small sample sizes when surveying small geographical or population-based areas). Data from households and other stakeholders were collected using qualitative and quantitative tools. Twenty households with school-going children were randomly surveyed from each village, and two teachers from each school were interviewed. Focused group discussions were carried out, and interview guides were administered with different stakeholders including teachers, girls, and other key persons in the village.

5. Findings

This section initially discusses the community perceptions of the reasons for school dropouts and the relevance of policies in overcoming the barriers to girls' education, and subsequently provides broad recommendations for improving girl-child education. Of the total respondents, 82 percent are Muslims. Haryana has the lowest gender ratio in India, with 879 females per 1,000 males in the population. There is no major country in the world with such a low ratio. Males are the sole decision-makers in a patriarchal society. Considered as heirs of the household, sons are preferred over daughters, resulting in social evils such as female feticide and infanticide. The average number of children (under age eighteen) per family stands at five, of which three are daughters, and two are sons.

Literacy of household heads is one of the major factors influencing girl-child education. Three-fourths of the population of Haryana over age seven is literate. Among them, 66 percent of females are literate while 84 percent of males are literate. Nuh has a male literacy rate of 70 percent against the abysmally poor 37 percent female literacy. Haryana ranks 22nd of the thirty-five states and union territories in the literacy

rate. In male and female literacy, Haryana ranks 19th and 24th respectively. In Nuh, it is the perception of parents that school teachers do not impart any education, therefore they opt for religious study and send their children to *madrassa*.

Despite various government efforts to provide equal access to education for boys and girls, the latter are still disadvantaged for various reasons such as socioeconomic, socio-cultural, and school-based factors. Here the concerning issue is the dropout rate of girls. Many factors account for the discontinuation of the education of girls, especially after the primary level.

5.1 Perception of parents on acquiring school education

Education seems to be a key factor, which can only initiate a chain of advantages for females. However, access to education is perceived differently for males and females. Figure 1 shows the perception of parents on acquiring school education. The majority of parents (44 percent) wanted their sons to pursue and graduate from higher studies without consideration for distance between the education institute and home, whereas distance is a major issue for the dropout of girls. Thirty-seven percent of parents said that boys should study up to the level they desired, while only 13 percent of parents shared this opinion for girl-child education. Discussions with parents revealed that they did not feel comfortable sending their daughters to school if the school were remotely located, as it was unsafe for girls. Contrastingly, parents wanted their sons to study outside the village. The major responsibility of girls is to do household chores, while for boys it is income generation. According to parents education will help their son to gain good income.

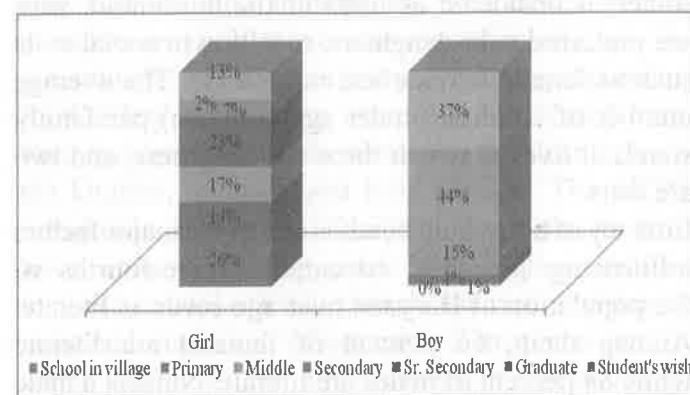


Figure 1. Perception of parents on acquiring school education

5.2 Factors for parents' perception

Evidently, gender differentiation prevails in the Indian society; as a result, distinct gender roles exist. The society does not give much importance to women's education, predominantly in rural India. It is evident in Figure 2 that a wide range of factors, including poverty, quality of infrastructure at schools, distance of the school, and gender-based violence, influence gender equality as far as access to a school and studying in a school are concerned. During the study, we found that even though schooling is free, there are costs, such as uniforms and books, which some parents have to bear before the entitlements reach the students after one third of the session is over. Other factors pertaining to lack of interest in studies stem from reasons that range from a disabling study environment at home, lack of facilities in schools, and irregularity of teachers to the low social status of some children and their families within the community, which lead to harassment in school. For girls, along with the cost of education, their efficacy and support in household chores were given as reasons for being out of school. Girls contribute to household chores so that their mothers can work in agricultural fields.

A majority of the rural community perceived educating girls as unnecessary, though they place a high value on the education of boys. Most rural households shared concerns over school distances/safety and cited them as the most critical barrier in girls' education. Some factors that constrain girls from going to school are cultural, including restrictions posed after girls reach puberty. It is likely that when children drop out of school, they are engaged in some useful activity at home in order to contribute to the household income. In the case of rural girls, a small percentage also reported a lack of proper school facilities and marriage as reasons for dropping out of school. Having identified impediments in the education of girls, what remains is the discussion of three major issues in detail.

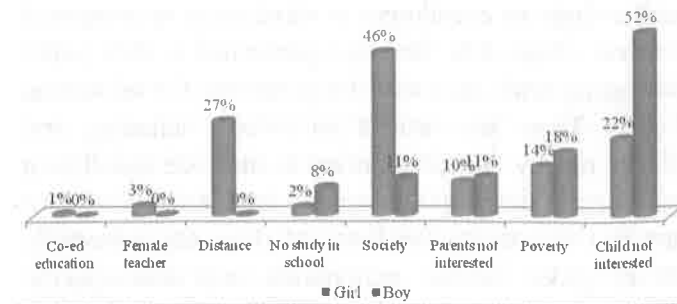


Figure 2: Factors accounting for parents' perceptions

5.2.1 Society and Culture

Social norms define the roles that women and men have in the family and community. They create powerful incentives that guide people's attitudes and behaviors; behaviors outside the accepted social boundaries can unleash the systems of social sanction. Traditional cultural practices and beliefs of a particular religion or community massively affect the education of girls, especially in male-dominated societies. Often there is a fundamental gender bias in community attitude that plays a critical role in girl-child education. In a consensus among respondents, 46 percent in total, that lack of community support and cultural beliefs serve as obstacles in the education of girls. Only 10 percent agreed that community attitudes played a significant role in accessing the education of boys.

The role of society is one of the biggest hurdles in female education. A nation's educational progress and development relies on the positive attitude of society. Discussions revealed that the community does not like to send girls to school as, according to them, it would not reap any monetary benefit. Parents do not understand the value of educating a daughter who would get married and remain a housewife. Since parents cannot see any direct relationship between education and economic betterment, they have very little motivation to send their daughters to school. The definite connection between education, good motherhood, and efficient house management is unrealized. According to Odomore, parents believe that Western education is occupation-driven, and therefore not appropriate for their daughters, who should attend Qur'anic schools instead because they believe their daughters will be married and would not need a job that Western education would provide. Under RTE, there is a provision for a School Management Committee; members of this committee are responsible for guiding the community and

mobilizing them. Capacity building of SMC members can lead to community mobilization; but this is not in process.

5.2.2 Distance between home and school

A common theme of safety and sporadic transportation facilities emerged from the quantitative as well as qualitative phases. There was a consensus that safety concerns make distance an important obstacle in the enrollment of girls. Only 65 percent of villages have a secondary school within the official guideline of five kilometers. Beyond five kilometers, walking to school takes more than an hour, particularly without roads and transport facilities leading to a fall in enrollment or regular attendance. Twenty-seven percent of respondents considered safety as a critical reason for dropping out of school, while for boys, this is not an impediment. Qualitative findings suggest that the farther the school, the higher the chances are that a girl would be exposed to different threats or risks. Many girls desirous of pursuing education above middle level, facilities for which are available away from their homes, cannot avail these due to lack of transport facility. Education for adolescent girls is a constraint due to many factors; the most prominent of them is non-availability of infrastructure and schools. Secondly, the travel time taken to reach school, fear of crime, sexual harassment, and unknown eventualities would arise, therefore the need for exclusive transport facilities for the girl child. Furthermore, school safety includes safety within and around the school. To mitigate these risks, the qualitative data show that for families to assign a male relative to accompany the girls to school creates an added logistical and financial burden on the family. Therefore, school distance encompasses safety issues as well as financial (directly, or lost time) burdens on families. A conclusion related to this constraint is that it is important to focus on overall safety, including safe travel to and from school. Under RTE, there should be a provision for schools to be within a radius of 1-3 kms but, due to other constraints, schools are not available within this radius, which effects the education of girls.

5.2.3 Disinterest of the child

The interest of the child in education is an important factor for learning, which has been neglected for many years. The above factors were rated the highest and "lack of interest in studies" followed closely; the

latter deserves attention in the listing of prioritized barriers to education. The lack of interest of a child in education was rated as a major factor for boys, standing at 52 percent, while for girls it stood at 22 percent. This shows that most of the boys drop out due to their own reasons, one of which is lack of interest in education; while girls mostly drop out due to societal reasons, very few dropouts due to their own disinterest in studies. A considerable percentage of parents indicated the disinterest of children in going to school because they do not get them enrolled. The disinterest of children to go to school, coupled with a lack of motivation from parent's side to send their children to school, deprive a large chunk of children from education. This raises questions about the quality of instruction and about the school environment. The qualitative data revealed other supply-side barriers including a shortage of staff, absenteeism in teachers, teachers uninterested in teaching, overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, and teachers discriminating against certain social groups. The interest of parents, as well as the children, can be developed through mobilization, but this is not accounted for under the provisions of the RTE. There is already a provision for the SMC to sensitize the community regarding the importance of education. A bleak percentage of respondents noted the role of the SMC in improving enrollment. This trend is indicative of the lack of knowledge among community members regarding the roles and responsibilities of SMCs, which are responsible for improving enrollment in schools.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

Although more than 70 percent of the population of India lives in rural areas, rural enrollment accounts for

only half of the total enrollment. Girls account for a smaller share of enrollment in rural areas as compared to urban areas. The findings presented in this paper reverberate with reviewed literature on the education of girls. There are various provisions, schemes, and policies run by the government to increase enrollment and decrease the dropout rate, but there are still various gaps in overcoming the issue of dropouts, especially that of girls. Several nationwide and state-specific schemes pertaining to education are present in Nuh district, but they tend to be disconnected, resulting in numerous pitfalls in the education system. These pitfalls are decelerating the progress sought in the educational scenario. Participants reached a consensus on the major barriers in the education of girls as being distance, social norms, and the disinterest of the child as well as parents. These findings suggest a systematic policy approach to overcome these barriers and a prioritization of the provisions under existing schemes and policies. A majority of the rural population is illiterate. They are not even aware of the rights provisions under government schemes and policies. Instead of policies focusing on the supply side, such as increasing the number of schools, policies should focus on the demand side. They must focus on the ground realities of villages, mobilization, and behavior changes to break free from the patriarchal nature of society and the perceptions of parents and children. There is a need to guide the rural community, make them aware, and mobilize them in order to encourage active participation in changing the landscape pertaining to the education of girls.

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