

Girls' education in India

The leaders of our freedom movement realized the importance of girls' education and had put it as a prime agenda for national development. However, when India attained independence some 60 years ago, it was a formidable challenge that the new government had to face. The national female literacy rate was an alarmingly low 8.9 per cent, Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for girls was 24.8 per cent at primary level and 4.6 per cent at the upper primary level (in the 11 – 14 years age group). Social and cultural barriers to education of women and lack of access to organized schooling, had to be addressed immediately.

Access To Schooling Improved

Education administrators gave high priority on reducing the infrastructure/access deficiency. Focused attention on this need has resulted in establishing a network of 7,67,520 schools at the primary level and 2,74,731 schools at the upper primary level by 2004-05 from just 2,09,671 primary and 13,596 upper primary schools in 1950-51. A large majority (87%) of these are rural schools. Today 98 per cent of India's rural population has access to primary schools within a kilometer of the habitation.

Greater access to schooling is, however, not enough. Special measures are called for to help girls join the schools. These include setting up of girls toilets and providing separate girls' schools at upper primary level to counter community resistance to girls' studying in co-educational schools. Some schools are residential ones – the recent addition to residential schools being the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas that target the most disadvantaged girls at the upper primary stage.

The Government continues to be the major provider of elementary education with 90.2 per cent primary and 72.2 per cent upper primary schools managed either by Government or by local bodies. Annual maintenance grants and school improvement grants are being provided to each school at the elementary level.

Upswing In Girls' Enrolment

Growth in access to schooling has been matched by a steady increase in enrolment with the most dramatic upswing since 1990s in girls participation levels. From 13.8 million boys and 5.4 million girls enrolled at the primary level in 1950-51, the number rose to 69.7 million boys and 61.1 million girls in 2004-05. At the upper primary level, the enrolment increased from 2.6 million boys and 0.5 million girls to 28.5 million boys and 22.7 million girls.

The proportion of girls in the total enrolment has also been growing. Girls' enrolment at the primary stage increased from 28.1% in 1950-51 to 46.7% in 2004-05. At the upper primary stage, girls' enrolment rose from 16.1% in 1950-51 to 44.4% in 2004-05. The overall improvement in girls' enrolment with respect to total population of girls clearly shows that there is a near universal enrolment at primary level. The gap and challenge exists now at upper primary stage, but there too the gap is narrowing steadily.

Enrolment of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe girls poses a greater challenge to India's education administrators. Survey data, however, revealed that the participation of these disadvantaged girls in basic education, has grown steadily over the years. G.E.R. for SC girls at primary level have climbed up from 64.8% in 1986-87 to 106.6% in 2004-05 and at upper primary stage, from as low as 26.6% in 1986-87 to 61.5% in 2004-05. In the case of ST girls, the GER at primary level have gone up from 68% in 1986-87 to 115.5% by 2004-05 and from 21.9% in 1986-87 to 59.5% in 2004-05 for upper primary level.

The overall gender gap in enrolment at the primary stage has dropped to 4.6 percentage points and that at the upper primary level has reduced to 8.0 percentage points in 2005. There are only 48 districts out of a total of 600 districts in India, with a gender gap above 10 percentage points at the primary stage. Focused attention is being targeted to these districts by education policy planners, in order to address the barriers in specific terms.

Declining Drop Out Rates And Out Of School Girls

Providing access and enrolment to schooling facilities are only a part of the story. Our aim is also to help the students to continue their studies. Although the phenomenon of drop outs continue to be a serious problem in India's education scenario, the drop out rates in elementary education have been on the decline, more sharply so for girls. Girls drop out rate in 2004-05 was lower than for boys, at primary level *i.e* 25.42% compared to 31.81% for boys. Since 2000, girls drop out rates have fallen by 16.5% points in just four years, compared to a reduction of only 4.1% points over the entire last decade (1990-2000).

With respect to the situation inside the school it is found that the repetition rates have been fast declining for girls. Two clear messages that underlie this trend are: one, that girls who enter the school system do not leave easily and two, school efficiency is gradually improving with girls completing the elementary cycle of education in lesser time.

The number of out of school children have also been declining rapidly, from 32 million in 2001-02 to 7.5 million in 2006-07. Of the total age cohort of girls in the 6-14 years age group, 3.9% are reportedly out of school. In the 6-11 years age group, out of school girls are 3.34 percent and in the 11-14 years age group they are 5.3 percent. The inclusion of these 'hard to reach' and older girls, who have remained excluded from the education net is being addressed through context specific strategies and interventions presently.

More Girls Move To Upper Primary

The trends in transition rates from Primary to Upper Primary are also positive. The transition rate has improved from 71.98 in 2003 to 80.64 in 2005. The gains in the transition rates of girls (8.6 percentage points) have been higher than that of boys (7.65 percentage points). This has led to sharper decline in the gender gap in transition rates from 4.03 percentage points to 3.02 percentage points.

In the case of SC girls, the transition rate has increased from 80 percent in 2004-05 to 83 percent in 2005-06 leaving a gender gap of 3 percentage points. The picture is comparable in the case of ST girls for whom the transition rate has increased from 85 percent in 2004-05 to 88 percent in 2005-06 leaving a gender gap of 2 percentage points.

Constitutional And Policy Framework

The Constitution of India in Article 15(1) on right to equality, provides the basic policy framework that enshrines the vision of girls' education and the spirit in which their education is to be provided.

Until 1976, education was a State subject. Since its transfer to the Concurrent List by the 42nd Constitutional Amendment in 1976, the Central Government has played a more proactive role in the sector through several centrally sponsored schemes that had a distinct bearing on promoting education for girls.

A new thrust was provided to girls' education in the National Policy on Education 1986, (as modified in 1992) which provided a holistic vision for the education of women and girls and recognized the cross cutting issues that inhibited the realization of this goal. It aims at using Education as an agent of basic change in the status of women in society.

The 86th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2002 has made elementary education a Fundamental Right for children in the age group of 6-14 years by providing that *"the State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of*

six to fourteen years in such manner as the State may, by law, determine". This has been a path breaking legislation in India, where such a major commitment to the cause of elementary education has bound governments, community based organizations and civil society into a common resolve to achieve universal elementary education.

Drawing upon the Constitution and other policy statements articulated in the years that followed, the Government of India in partnership with State Governments has designed different strategies, interventions, schemes and programmes with specific objectives that impinge on girls' education (HRD Ministry, Govt of India, 7-9-2011).