



WOMEN ACCESS TO EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

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Abstract

'You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women'

- Jawaharlal Nehru

The Indian government has expressed a strong commitment towards education for all, however, India still has one of the lowest female literacy rates in Asia. Keeping in view the above saying, the paper examines the issue of women's access to education in India. Drawing on existing literature and various statistics concerning women's education, the paper provides an overview of the state of education with respect to women and highlights some of the issues and barriers to women's education. Based on an analysis of emergent issues, some recommendations and suggestions are offered in terms of grassroots level interventions, strategic initiatives and enabling policy framework, towards improving women's access to education. In this way, my focus in the paper would be on proper implementation of the National Policy on Education, which was updated in 1992, and the 1992 Program of Action both reaffirmed the government's commitment to improving literacy levels, by providing special attention to girls and children from scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.



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Introduction:

Free and compulsory education to all children between the ages of 6 and 14 is a fundamental right of citizens under the 86th Amendment to the Constitution of India. Yet, the state of education of women in India is far from 'free' or as totalizing and encompassing as the right appears to guarantee. Although the government, through its various initiatives such as the SIRVA Shish Bahaman (aimed at providing primary education especially to girl children from disadvantaged rural areas), attempts to improve the education of women, the barrier to educating women is not always monetary and within the purview of the state. Post independence there has been a concerted attempt to improve literacy levels of the population in India. Many schemes have been introduced to increase the access, expand coverage and improve the quality of education. Amongst them the universalization of elementary education, incentive schemes for retention and non-formal education for adults are

noteworthy for their scope and intent. Special attention has been given to the education of women in all of the schemes. However, despite the varied attempts of the government and various NGOs operating in the field of education, the statistics for women's education leaves a lot to be desired.

According to the 2001 census data (Census Report, 2011), national literacy rate stands at 73.00%. While male literacy was noted as 80.90%, female literacy lags behind at 64.60%. A more recent government report on education statistics (2008), notes that the literacy rates for women in India has steadily increased from 8.9% in 1951 to around 57% in 2004. Although substantial progress has been achieved since India won its independence when less than 8% of females were literate, the gains have not been rapid enough to keep pace with population growth. Although there has been marked improvement over the years, there is still much wanting in terms of women's literacy. The problem is further compounded if we look at the male-female gap in literacy rates. This has almost always been more than 20% over the years.

Education in India:

The issues concerning women's access to education are not uniform across different stages, professions or geographical spread. A brief look at the education landscape with respect to women's education is provided here.

Primary and Secondary Education:

Under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education, government has made education free for children of 6-14 years of age. One would expect that with this promise of free education, there would be an equal number of girls enrolling in primary education. However, in reality the picture looks much different. According to a 2008 government report, educational statistics indicate that the number of girls per 100 boys is around 80% for classes up to the VIII and a little over 70% for secondary higher education that covers classes up to XII. Secondary education generally covers children in the age group of 14-18 years.

Higher Education:

India's higher education system is the third largest in the world, after China and the United States. As of 2009, India has 20 central universities, 217 state universities, 106 deemed universities, 5 institutions established and functioning under the State Act, and various institutes which are of national importance, such as the IITs, IIMs and universities such as JNU. Other institutions include 16000 colleges, including 1800 exclusive women's colleges, functioning under various universities and institutions (Government Report, 2009). Despite these exceptional numbers and acknowledged quality of many institutions, it is surprising that women record a lower presence across most institutions of higher education.

Significant male-female disparities exist in the enrolment of women in higher education. Gender disparity in enrolment ratio is also because of visible differences in rural areas.

Geographical Differences:

Female literacy amongst the four large northern states - Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Jharkhand - is lower than the national average (64.60%), while states such as Kerala, Goa and Mizoram record comparatively higher literacy rates for women (Census,2011). The discrepancy between male and female literacy rates is also higher for states such as Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. The differences in literacy rate for women also vary across urban and rural areas. The access level of education for women in rural areas is almost three times lower than that of urban areas. There is also considerable inter-state variation in education access, as can be inferred from the 2011 Census data. While the GER at the aggregate level is about 13%, it is more than the national average in states such as Kerala, Goa, Nagaland and Manipur and substantially lower in states such as Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh.

Vocational and Technical Education:

Vocational education is a separate stream of higher education aimed at providing opportunities to students to choose programmes of study towards gainful employment. The total enrolment in over 8000 institutions spread across the country catering to technical vocational skill building such as the Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) and the Arts and Crafts schools is of the order of 1.4 million, of which women constitute less than 28% (UNESCO report, 1991). Of the 950 or so ITIs including government and private, 104 were set up exclusively for women giving training in areas such as receptionists, electronics, bookbinding and the like. Even considering technical education imparted through polytechnics, 35 of the 450 recognized ones have been exclusively set up for women, providing training in areas such as pharmacy, food technology, textile design, commercial art etc. Although the rate of participation is gradually increasing, women constitute, on an average, only about 10 percent of total enrolment in technical and vocational education at post-secondary level, and about 28 percent at secondary and post secondary levels, taken together. For more detailed education statistics.

Barriers to Women's Education:

Parental reluctance to educate girls is a huge factor inhibiting their access to education. There exist various factors that fuel the choices parents in Indian society make with regard to refusing or limiting the education of the girl child. The way a society views its women determines the roles it delegates to them and the choices made for them or those they are

allowed to make. When women are seen primarily as child bearers and readers, then education is sometimes viewed as an unnecessary and extravagant indulgence. A mindset that views education for girls as unlikely to reap any returns ascribes to the view that investing in the education of the male child is like an investment as the son is likely to be responsible for caring for aging parents, and women with largely a reproductive role in society have little need for education and any gains from it are anyway likely to accrue to the homes they go to after marriage. Economically poorer sections are often not in a position to send their children to school and are likely to invest in the male child than in the female child if they can for the above-mentioned reasons. The middle class too often does not consider education for women an important means for preparing them as individuals in their own right. Amongst the upper middle class, where education of women may not be encumbered by economic constraints, discriminatory stances, such as women's education having lower economic utility or at best being a secondary wage earner, do exist and are pervasive in the attitudes and norms prevalent in society.

Inadequate school facilities can sometimes serve as a deterrent for the girl child's participation in formal schooling. A report by the International Programs Centre for the U.S. Department of Commerce (Selloff, 1998) lists the chief barriers to women's education in India as inadequate sanitary facilities, shortage of female teachers and gender bias in curriculum. A BBC news report by Kashia Base (2004) notes that a study of 188 government-run primary schools found that 59% of the schools had no drinking water and 89% had no toilets. Another report in the Times of India (2005) cites a 2003/2004 data by National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration that reported only 3.5% of primary schools in Bihar and Chhattisgarh had toilets for girls. In Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh, the rates were 12-16%. Lack of toilets can be particularly detrimental to girl's school attendance, where the only option of attending to nature's call out in the open can pose both a physical as well as a psychological barrier.

Role of the State:

Being the largest machinery for dispensing and disseminating education, the role of the state in providing women access to education is most primal and influential. Over the years, the government's commitment to education articulated through the constitutional Act for Free and Compulsory Education until the age of 14, its National Policy on Education, or its various schemes and initiatives to promote the education of women all have been oriented towards enhancing women's access to education. The National Policy on Education 1986,

revised in 1992, was an important decision in the field of policy on women's education. It recognized for the first time the gender imbalances in educational access and achievement and also the need to redress them through enhancing infrastructure and the empowerment of women for their participation in the education process.

The Manila Samakhya programmed was launched in 1988 in pursuance of the goals of the New Education Policy for the education and empowerment of women in rural areas, particularly of women from socially and economically marginalized groups. Women from remote, underdeveloped areas or from weaker social groups across more than 21,000 villages fell under the Manila Samakhya Scheme. Apart from provisions for education the programmed also aims to raise awareness by holding meetings and seminars at rural levels.

Another government initiative, the SIRVA Shish Bahaman (SSA), was started in 2001, with the intent to provide education to children between 6 and 14 years by 2010. The programmed focuses especially on girls and children with challenged social or financial backgrounds, charged with providing infrastructure and relevant resource material in the form of free textbooks to children in remote areas. The effectiveness of the programmed is yet to be measured.

Some Recommendations:

Grassroots Level Improvements: -Sensitization and awareness building for women's education: Although the government and various voluntary organizations engage in various attempts to sensitize the local population to the need for women's education, much needs to be done in this area. Unless parents of the girl child see value and merit in sending the girl child to school, they will resist doing so and instead prefer to use her help in household chores or agricultural activities. Institutes of higher education such as the IIMs and other management schools can lead the way by designing programmers using marketing and selling skills to facilitate dialogue and build greater awareness about the benefits of educating the girl child. Rural immersion programmers for management students, especially in regions where the participation rate in schools is particularly low will pave the way for better understanding and awareness of the differing needs and constraints of the intended beneficiaries. Parental reluctance can be targeted and stymied through such interaction, with a discussion of the various options and avenues that education can open up building awareness, and joint exploration facilitating alternate solutions keeping in mind the needs of the target population. Institutes of higher learning such as the IIMs, IITs, NITs, TISS, and JNU etc. can lead the way by partnering with the state governments in the region to spearhead such an initiative.

Strategic Initiatives:-Target segment and approaches: We need to move towards a segment-based and sector-wise approach to tackle the problem of poor access to education for women. In rural areas, where enrolment of women in education is rather low, mechanisms need to evolve such that the schools are more accessible for the girl child as well as the psychological and sociological barriers to sending the girl child to school are overcome. An approach that ensures the schools go to the girls instead of the girl child having to struggle to reach the school is one possible direction. For example, the concept of mobile schools in far-flung rural areas where the teacher and the classroom can be made mobile is likely to reach far more girl children and also effect parental sensitization for education of the girl child in the process. Similarly, other mediums can be explored such as video and tale schooling, imparting education through e-copulas and panchayats, and tie-ups with mobile health clinics to get the school to reach the girl child rather than have them labor to reach the schools. A segmented approach will have to consider how best to address the particular requirements and needs of the region, depending on the potential for tie-ups and alternative media that can be used to deliver education.

Enabling Policy Framework:-Reservation for women in education: The role of legislation and government intervention is one of the most powerful and effective tools to remedy systemic errors and imbalances prevalent in any society, which continue to be sustained over a period of time. A form of affirmative action, akin to other affirmative action's that provide for reservation to SC/ST and OBC in institutes of higher education, reservation for women in education can potentially reduce the disparity in education access and enrolment, and therefore opportunities made available to women. Although government intervention may not always be desirable, there is no denying that the reservation policy for 'backward castes' has benefited a section of the population and has been instrumental in correcting existing social imbalances. Extending the same logic, since women have continued to be inadequately represented across the education value chain, necessitating a certain percentage of women participation across various levels through required legislation and reservation will not only ensure fair representation but also encourage schools and institutes to actively devise means and programmes to attract women to their portals. Additional subsidies and incentives can further augment such structural mechanisms to ensure gender parity in education.

Conclusion: - One may ask why education of women is even important, or why the state ought to focus on it, beyond improving the numbers and statistics to reflect figures at par with the rest of the developed world. Is it a mere image building exercise in an attempt to stay on

top of the numbers? Although that may be equally important, there are more to accrue for the individual, family unit and ultimately the nation, with investment in education of its women. Neglecting the education of women, who constitute nearly half of the population, does not auger well for the development of any nation. Beyond the obvious imbalance in the labor pool, education for women is an important determinant of their enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence, helping to build a positive image, developing their ability to think critically, fostering better decision making and helping them make more informed choices about health, employment and even the education of their children. Education will not only ensure more participation in developmental processes but also enhance awareness of rights and entitlements in society, so that women can enhance their participation in society on an equal footing in all areas. The economic independence that education brings is an added incentive. Economic independence and awareness will help curtail the vicious cycle of reinforcing negative stereotypes and aid women in chartering paths as individuals in their own right, contributing to society, polity and the economy.

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