

BRIDGING THE GENDER GAP IN EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Among other things, the Millennium Declaration reiterated the commitment of the signatories to promote gender equality and also the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease and to achieve a truly sustainable development. In India traditionally girls had been discriminated in favour of boys since their birth. The girl child also confronts similar discrimination in the sphere of education. However the great emphasis given to primary education by the state over the years has yielded fruit which was revealed by the persistent correction of the gender gap in the GER rates. The spectacular gains made in the GER by India are neutralised by its high dropout rates. However from the gender perspective encouraging trends are observed where the adverse gender disparity in the dropout rates have corrected over the years and had even become marginally favourable for girls in primary education. It is also gratifying to note that females have a higher success rate at all levels of examination. However given the abysmal educational infrastructure, both physical and human, the quality of education provided remains very poor. This is reflected in the level of academic attainment which on the average remains much below the average global attainment.

Keywords: Education, Gender Gap, Empowerment

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations General Assembly on 18th September 2000, adopted the United Nations Millennium Declaration in its 55th session where the signatories reiterated their commitments to the principles of the UN Charter as well as articulated six fundamental values, comprising of freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature, and shared responsibility that would be essential to achieve successful international relations in the twenty-first century.

Among other things, the Millennium Declaration focuses on education where it asserts its commitment to ensure that by the year 2015 children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling and that girls and boys will have equal access to all levels of education (UN General Assembly, 2000).

In the same section the document reiterates the commitment of the signatories to promote gender equality and also the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease and to achieve a truly sustainable development.

This paper seeks to delve into the existing educational setup in India so as to get a perspective of the county's attainments in the context of the UN Millennium Declaration. While doing so attempts to identify existing gender gaps in the educational system and also make an appraisal of the progress made by the country in its efforts to bridge it.

Bridging Gender Gaps

The Millennium Declaration explicitly calls for full course of primary schooling for all boys and girls. Besides it seeks to provide equal access to all levels of education to both boys and girls by 2015. The UN General Assembly (2000) believes that by bridging the gender gap and thus empowering women, the fight against poverty, hunger and disease would become easier as would be, the aim to usher in sustainable growth.

In India traditionally girls had been discriminated in favour of boys since their birth. In the past, occurrences of female infanticide were common in some very conservative and chauvinistic communities. In recent years although cases of deliberate female infanticide is rare however in many instances the unwanted female child is neglected to death. Besides, advances in technology have replaced female infanticide with the equally abhorrent practice of female foeticide. Again, the institution of early marriage, repeated pregnancies and nutritional deficiencies have kept maternal mortality high which have an bearing on the higher female mortality rate in India as in its adverse sex ratio.

The girl child had to confront similar discrimination in the sphere of education which was reflected in the low GER of 21.8 at the primary level in 1950-51 (Table-1). The gender disparity is evident relative to the GER of boys which was 2.44 times higher at the same level. The enrolment ratio deteriorated in the upper primary level both for boys and girls, but the gender disparity increased with the GER of boys turning into 4.48 times that of girls. The sharp drop in the female GER at the upper primary level had been largely attributed to parochial mindset of the larger Indian society which disapproved of girls venturing out to school after a certain age. It also was a reflection of the attitude of the society towards its girl child who was expected to stay home to assist in the household chores and also to look after their siblings. The responsibilities of the parents were considered to be completed with the marriage of the girl-child which effectively nullified any possibilities of emancipation of the victim to fulfil her potential.

However the great emphasis given to primary education by the state over the years has yielded fruit which was revealed by the continuously improving GER for both boys and girls. But the point of gratification was in the persistent correction of the gender gap in the GER rates. This was evident in 2005-06 where the GER at primary level of girls at 105.8 had crept up close to that of boys which was pegged at 112.8. The same trend was observed for GER at the overall elementary level where the GER of boys was only 1.08 times higher than that of girls.

The changing pattern in the GER generates guarded optimism as it indicates the changing mindset in the greater Indian society in regards to the indispensability of education for the girl child and the importance of making her empowered. This provides encouragement as

well as incentive to the state and other stakeholders to pursue the exalted objective of universal primary education for the girl child.

Table 1. Gross Enrolment Ratios in Elementary Education

Year	Primary (I-V)		Upper Primary (VI-VIII)		Elementary (I-VIII)	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
1950-51	60.6	24.8	20.6	4.6	46.4	17.7
2000-01	104.9	85.9	66.7	49.9	90.3	72.4
2005-6	112.8	105.8	75.2	66.4	98.5	91.0

Source: Ministry of Human Resource Development, Time Series Data, 2005-06

Table 2. Enrolment of Girls to Total Enrol

Year	Primary I-V	Upper Primary VI-VIII	Secondary/ Senior Secondary IX-XII	Higher Degree & Above
1950-51	28.1	16.1	13.3	10.0
2000-01	44.1	41.8	39.5	39.9
2005-06	46.6	44.7	42.0	38.3

Source: Ministry of Human Resource Development, Time Series Data, 2005-06

The closing gap in the enrolment among boys and girls is also evident in other parameters like the percentage enrolment of girls in the total enrolment (Table-2). In this case, female enrolment at the primary level increased from 28.1 percent in 1950-51 to 46.6 percent in 2005-06 indicating the relative correction of the gender disparity in female enrolment. In fact the relative enrolments of girls have increased in even greater proportion in upper primary, secondary & senior secondary and higher education reflecting changing perspective in the Indian society on the role of women in the society. The trend of more and more women coming out and enrolling in the educational system and remaining in it for longer period augers well for the attainment of equal opportunities for both boys and girls by 2015.

Inefficiency and Wastages

The spectacular gains made in the GER by India are neutralised by its high dropout rates. The appalling situation was evident in 1981 where 58.7 percent of the total enrols in primary level dropped out. The circumstances were worse at the elementary and secondary levels with dropout rates of 72.7 percent and 82.5 percent respectively. Although there had been improvement in the dropout rates in 2005-06 at the primary level (28.7%), the elementary level (48.8 %) and the secondary level (82.5 %), however retention of the children for the duration of the educational cycles still poses a great challenge. However from the gender perspective encouraging trends are observed where the adverse gender disparity in the dropout rates have corrected over the years and had even become marginally favourable for girls in primary education.

Table 3. Drop-Out Rates of All Categories of Students

Year	Primary (I-V)			Elementary (I-VIII)			Secondary (I-X)		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
1980-81	56.2	62.5	58.7	68.0	79.4	72.7	79.8	86.6	82.5
2000-01	39.7	41.9	40.7	50.3	57.7	53.7	66.4	71.5	68.6
2005-06	28.7	21.8	25.7	48.7	48.9	48.8	60.1	63.6	61.6

Source: Ministry of Human Resource Development, Time Series Data, 2005-06.

The success rate constitutes another criterion for efficiency in school education. A high proportion of failure in the relevant examination results in wastages in the education system but more importantly it leads to a loss in morale, self esteem and dignity of the unsuccessful student who is scarred for life. In fact one of the principal reasons for school dropout had been ascribed to failure in examination.

Taking 2006 as the sample year, it is observed that the success rate in the secondary examination was only 67.86 percent implying 32.14 percent of the students who take the examination experience failure. The number of unsuccessful students in the secondary level examination turns out to be colossal when the rates are expressed in absolute terms. Although the success rate is marginally higher at the senior secondary level however the overall high rates of failure in both levels of examination reflect great inefficiency in the school education system which results in so much trauma for so many students who access the system.

In this context, it is gratifying to note that females have a higher success rate for both levels of examination and across different social groups. This implies that the so called gender gap is absent in India, so far as success rate in examinations are concerned.

Table 4. Success Rates of Secondary & Senior Secondary Examinations (2006)

Examinations	Gender	All	SC	ST
Secondary Level	Male	66.3	59.07	53.75
	Female	70.26	63.29	53.45
	Total	67.86	60.38	53.04
Senior Secondary Level	Male	67.49	64.36	57.76
	Female	77.25	70.48	64.62
	Total	71.28	66.65	60.24

Source: Ministry of Human Resource Development, Time Series Data, 2005-06

CONCLUSION

Acknowledging the importance of Universalization of Elementary Education, India over the years, had initiated repeated state interventions to improve access to education for children in the age-group 6-14 especially through the ambitious Sarva Shiksha Abhiya and with the enactment of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009. While making these interventions, the country recognised the appalling gender gap in access

to education as well as in its absorption. Over the years significant attainments were made in bridging the gender gap in GER through a series of affirmative action, which had made elementary education nearly equally accessible to both boys and girls. This success has extended to the reduction of wastages in education where the success rate among girls has exceeded that of the boys. However given the abysmal educational infrastructure, both physical and human, the quality of education provided remains very poor. This is reflected in the level of academic attainment which on the average remains much below the average global attainment (Kingdon, 2007). The coming decades would require India to change focus from quantity to quality as the education sector prepares to face the onslaught from global competitors.

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