

GENDER GAPS IN ACCESS TO EDUCATION : WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO RURAL GIRLS OF PUNJAB

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Education is a critical input in human resource development and is essential for a country's economic and social development. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights issued by the United Nations (1948) declares literacy a basic human right. Planning Commission (2006) discussed literacy as a qualitative attribute of the population, one of the most important indicators of the socio-economic and political development of a society (<http://www.planningcommission.nic.in>). Kothari Commission (1964-66) opined that if social transformation and change on a grand scale are to be achieved without violent revolution, there is only one instrument that can be used, i.e. education

Though education system in India is one of the finest in the world, yet there are certain impediments that still hinder its move towards perfection. Despite all the efforts to develop the education system, access, equity and quality of education in India continue to haunt the policy makers till this date Although India has made tremendous progress in the field of education, gap in male-female literacy rate is becoming a constant issue of worry. This gap was 18.30% in 1951 and 26.62 in 1981. Acc. to the Census of India, 2001, male-female gap in literacy rate is still more than 21%.

Indian Government has made many policies and programmes to encourage female literacy, keeping in view that it has direct impact on several socio-economic indicators of

development, as, birth rate, infant mortality rate, health and nutritional status and age at marriage. The literacy rate of women was recorded as 54% in the Census of India 2001. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) has been increasing steadily from 32.1% in 1950-51 to 82.4% in 2001-02, and the gender gap in the enrolment ratio between boys and girls has been steadily decreasing. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the programme of the Department of Education, was launched after the 86th Constitutional Amendment, guaranteeing the right to education to all children. Due to these entire efforts; girl's enrolment has grown at the primary stage and upper primary stage. The rate of growth of enrolment of girls had been higher than that of boys but disparities still persist. The level of literacy of boys is still higher than that of girls.

On September 8, 2009 (International Literacy Day), the Prime Minister of India, Dr. Manmohan Singh launched "Saakshar Bharat" (Literacy India) with a goal to educate 70 million people, 60 million of them women, by 2012. The long-term goal is to take national literacy to 80 percent by 2017 and reduce the gender gap from 21 percent to 10 percent (male literacy is currently 75 percent). Dr. Singh believes that female literacy is "absolutely necessary to empower the Indian woman in her every day struggle in dealing with multiple deprivations on the basis of class, caste and gender." (The Tribune September 10, 2009).

But the prevailing prejudices, low enrolment of girl child in the schools, engagements of girl children in domestic works and high drop out rate are major obstacles in the path of making all Indian women educated. No less disturbing is the rural-urban disparity in literacy rates. While the male literacy rate in urban areas is about 86 percent, rural female literacy rate is just 46 percent (2001 census). Since the very beginning, the role of female is confined to domestic work and looking after children, the tradition of settling at husband's place after marriage, does not offer enough incentive to parents for spending on girls' education. A boy's education is far more important as it enhances the chances of his being employed. Another reason is the prevalent trend of early marriage in rural areas. In most villages, girls' education, rather than being seen an incentive is seen as a liability as it is difficult to find a groom for an educated girl.

The Punjab is considered a prosperous state economically, yet its social indicators give different picture indicated by the declining sex ratio and a huge gap between male-female literacy. The figures show that Punjab's performance on education sector calls for attention, particularly in terms of highly differential access to higher education between rural and urban areas as well as between the two genders. The gap between urban and rural literacy is 13.97% and gap between male and female literacy is 12.08%. As education is an indicator of social, economic, religious and mental development of a person, Punjab is lagging behind in all the fields except the economic.. Many factors are responsible for the low level of female literacy according to researchers. Some of these are problem of access, lack of motivation, gender bias, and negative parental attitudes towards female sex resulting in increasing number of dropouts (Dreze and Saran 1993 and Duraisamy 2002). Very often, the parents who are willing to educate their daughters are discouraged by the absence of school within the surrounding area and it is not considered safe to send girls to another village to study

Most of the girls do not attend schools or drop out after initial enrolment, because of lack of physical facilities and congenial environment in schools and colleges, particularly in case of co-educational institutions. Lack of proper place for girls' sitting in the class- rooms, non-availability of separate toilets for girls, absence of separate arrangements for games and sports, existence of unkind and discriminating attitude of teachers and male oriented atmosphere in the institutions affect adversely the enrolment rates of girls in schools and colleges. Gender stereotypes are reinforced through extra-curricular and curricular means, such as home science being offered exclusively to girls, and sports to boys. Teachers compound gender discrimination by asking girls to make tea, wash cups and sweep floor in the classroom, as well as by taunting them with statements like, "Why do you study? Anyway you will be sweeping floor and cleaning dishes!" Thus in our schools there is a 'hidden curriculum' perpetuating gendered stereotypes of 'strong, competitive male wage-earners' and 'docile, homely girls'

In the light of the above arguments, I would like to share some of the findings of my study on "Problems confronting rural youth of Punjab in attaining education". One of the objectives of this study was to identify the special problems faced by rural girls in reaching a certain level of education and then sustaining it. The area of the research

consists of degree colleges located in the city of Batala in Gurdaspur district of Punjab state. The number of sample is 180. While collecting data, both qualitative as well as quantitative methods of research, is used. Apart from the Interview Schedule, Focused Group Discussions and some case studies are conducted for arriving at meaningful inferences. The major findings are:

1. Girls are showing better results than boys as they have a fear that if they do not perform well, their parents will prefer marrying them off. Hence, they are more serious about their studies
2. Although education is important in the agenda of the parents, yet they are confused about the adjustment of their daughters in the husband future. They want them to be qualified, but ultimately they want them to settle down in their husband's house.
3. As most of the educational institutions are in urban areas, girls face a whole lot of problems on the way to their colleges. As reported by respondents buses are overcrowded, drivers and conductors are rude and they get late for their college due to poor bus services. Due to over crowded buses sometimes they have to stand near the gate, which they find very dangerous.
4. Eve teasing is very common in the buses and middle aged; mature and so-called sensible family men are the worst eve-teasers. They use obscene and vulgar language as well as gestures in front of young girls.
5. Rural girls have dual suffering. On the one hand they suffer because of financial, infrastructural, cultural and social constraints just like village boys, while on the other, they fight against the injustice and discrimination exercised on them because of their sex, they suffer a lot because of the traditional mindset of the society.
6. The issue of gender disparity is at the center of all the activities related to education. Whether it is a matter of giving girls liberty in the house or giving them opportunities outside their house, there are different hurdles in their way.
7. Marriage of girls remains the priority of majority of the parents. One of the aims of supporting education is also taken as a way to find good marriage partners for

the girls. Almost all the female students feel that education will help in getting good life partner.

8. If the family is financially weak and cannot afford to educate all the children, girls will be the first to suffer.
9. If parents find some NRI match for their girl, they even will not give second thought to the idea that the girl should discontinue her education and get married as early as possible.

Because of all these discriminations, there remains a huge gap between the literacy rate of girls and boys in India as well as in Punjab. The gap between the participation of boys and girls in education is in essence, the problem of the preference of boy child to the girl child particularly in the rural areas. So the solution of this problem does not lie entirely in the educational system, though education can certainly play a positive role of social engineering towards the improvement in the status of girls