

# Gender Inequalities : A Reflection on the Indian Education System

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## Abstract

Education is an important way to empower people socially, economically, politically, and culturally. By acknowledging this fact, various educational systems and policies have been implemented by the Government of India since independence. The changing trends in focusing on primary, secondary, and higher education since the colonial period are clearly visible in the implementations of different policies and programmes from time to time. India, being a democratic country, a good deal of attention and importance have been given to all forms of education for promoting the welfare of the citizens of the country. Thus, education became a pre-requisite for the acquisition of knowledge, enhancement of skills, development of attitudes and values, and so forth. However, still there is an urgent need to make education accessible to all the citizens of the country. It is mainly because big gender inequalities in all stages of education in terms of the gross enrollment ratio ; gender differentiation in terms of educational literacy; big gender gap in enrolment in Science and Arts subjects; poor enrollment of girls in higher education; gender bias in curriculum and self-learning material ; appointment in certain positions in schools and school committees as well as in higher educational institutes and so on, have adversely affected the Indian education system. This situation has made accessibility, equity, and quality in education almost a far cry. However, India being a democratic country, demands actual democratization of education so that each individual of this country can access quality education in an equal manner. This paper attempted to analyze the gender inequalities prevalent in the Indian education system, and proposed measures on how accessibility, equity, and quality education can be ensured to the citizens of this nation.

**Keywords:** gender, education, access, equity, inequality and quality

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Education is a life-long process. Educated people can adopt essential skills and techniques which are very useful for their day to day life. Therefore, in order to make a country developed, each member of that country should be educationally competent and efficient. Education is the vital way to make people empowered socially, economically, politically, culturally and so on. Thus, education is a pre-requisite for the acquisition of knowledge, enhancement of skills, development of attitudes and values etc. As human beings, we need education because it provides the required knowledge and skills to lead a meaningful life. By acknowledging this fact, in the different states of India, various educational systems and policies have been implemented from time to time. There is a changing trend in focusing on primary, secondary, and higher education from the colonial period to the present time. But after independence, India being a democratic country, a good deal of attention and importance was given to all forms of education for promoting the welfare of the citizens of the country. Since that time, there has been a realization of an urgent need to make education accessible to all the citizens of India.

Keeping the importance and value of education in mind, the Government of India has made education a

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fundamental right, and thus, it has become a birth right for every one living in the country. In a democratic country like ours, we have access to human rights guaranteed by the Constitution. Elementary education is a ladder, on the basis of which learners are able to attain Secondary and Higher education. Secondary and Higher education are the platforms from which knowledge and information are disseminated to the learners for developing their functional skills and making them efficient for future living. But unfortunately, the fruits of the opportunity are not equal for all. There is big gender gap in all stages of education, gender differentiation in terms of educational literacy, big gender gap in the enrolment of Science and Arts subjects, poor enrolment of girls in higher educational level and so on.

Another important point to be noticed is the fact that the traditional male and female stereotypes have long been a dominant feature of the reading materials used in school classrooms. For example, words like actress, heroine etc. are frequently used in place of actor and hero. Boys are generally expected to read, learn new skills, show initiative and be successful in the stories of text books and school curriculum. Mothers, as well as girls are domesticated, and in the stories, they are invariably shown as exclusively concerned with domestic activity. The use of generic 'he' and 'his' is still widespread. This may be objectionable because of its tendency to marginalize girls or make them less visible. In the pattern of question setting for the examination which is used for assessment, the gender bias is a serious concern. For instance, in the examination papers, there is excessive use of sexist language, gender imbalance and stereotyped words where a woman is shown to be subordinate to men. Even in the question papers of different science subjects, only masculine examples are provided which further intensifies the gender problems.

Educational publishers today in general are much more sensitive to these matters, not necessarily because of any commitment to equal opportunities to be enjoyed by both the sexes, but because of the changing social climate. The buyers of books and other educational materials and the other local educational authorities should also make such formal commitments to equal opportunities and policies for maintaining neutrality in the use of language. So, it is a long way to go for achieving the equal treatment of the two genders in the textbooks and the curriculum.

Apart from having gender bias in curriculum and self learning materials, appointments in certain positions in schools, school committees, and other governing committees in higher educational institutes, it has been deemed as a serious matter of concern because of rampant gender differences. In some higher positions, such as principal of a school, president of a school committee, principal of a college, vice-chancellor of a university etc., it is generally the male members and not their female counterparts who are considered and selected for appointment. Besides, women have to stay in the positions of assistants mainly because of the consideration that a man is well-acquainted with sufficient skills and managing capacities compared to a woman (NCERT, 2006).

## **Objectives of the Study**

Through this paper, some basic challenges are sought to be looked into:

- ✧ To study the gender inequalities prevalent in the Indian education system namely - primary, secondary and higher education.
- ✧ To propose measures on how accessibility, equity, and quality in education can be ensured to all the citizens of this nation.

## **Methodology**

The method of the paper is purely descriptive. It is analytical in nature based on the extraction of the data from the

secondary source of information such as Government Reports of MHRD 2012-13, Census of India 2011, All India Survey of Educational Statistics, NUEPA 2013, and HDR, 2013, UNDP.

## **The Present Educational Status of India : A Brief Overview**

India has the largest education system in the world as reflected through the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan for universalization of elementary education. India is also the third largest country in the world in terms of higher education after USA and China. At present, India has 1448712 elementary educational institutions. For the secondary level, there are 226613 secondary schools and 103569 higher secondary schools in India as on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2013 (NUEPA, 2013).

Regarding higher education at present, there are 659 universities in India which include 45 Central Universities, 312 State Universities, 129 Deemed Universities, and 173 Private Universities. Apart from these, there are 16 Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), 30 National Institutes of Technology (NITs), 13 Indian Institute of Management (IIMs), 4 Indian Institutes of Information Technology (IIITs), and 5 Indian Institutes of Science and Research Council of national importance. Apart from these, there are around 33,623 colleges including 1800 women colleges imparting higher education in India. Besides the traditional universities, there are 14 open universities out of which one is a central university and others are state open universities; and about 200 Directorates of Distance Education (MHRD, 2012-13).

## **Gender Inequalities in Society**

Society is a form of various groups of people with distinct castes and classes that determine the role and the norms of the people in society. Therefore, a society is considered to be a mirror where the faces of the masses are reflected. Thus, a society is also considered an identity of the people living in that society. The so-called norms and the roles prevailing in a society demarcate the responsibility and the power among the members of the community or the society. Thus, it creates differentiations among the members, and influences processes of gender division, exploitations, haves and have-nots etc.

Gender division is concerned in terms of the demarcations of responsibilities and powers, gender division of labour, physical strength and fitness, gender biasness in all fields i.e. economic, education, social, cultural, political and so on. Masculinity and femininity are the two determining concepts to suggest the varied role for men and women, as if the duty of a man should be related to war, while the duty of a woman should be restricted to the four walls of a household. Even in our traditional male dominated society, a father or brother is considered the lord, master, owner or provider; while a daughter or a wife is a commodity or a possession. Such roles relegate a woman to the position of a devout wife and doting mother. In every aspects of a family, particularly in the decision making process, a woman has to stay subordinated to a man or the head of the household (male-headed family) who entirely controls each and every decision of the family and other social activities of the family. Thus, gender and femininity should be discussed in order to ensure equality and empowerment particularly of women that will create a positive environment of distributive justice among the members of a society.

In a patriarchal society, social constructs like masculinity and femininity determine the power relationships that form inequality among the members across all classes, castes and communities. The structural pattern of a society is constructed to make unequal relations between male and female that creates the undue pressure on boys and girls, male and female to live up to the established 'norms' of masculinity and femininity. While girls endure unwarranted social control, discrimination and domination, boys too suffer from different sorts of stereotyping that exist in a patriarchal culture. Eventually, such norms also make a girl emotional, fearful and weak. While the norms of masculinity make boys and men aggressive and dominant, the norms of femininity make girls and women submissive and surrendered in every aspect for the sake of the patriarchal norms of the society.

Even, the value and significance of a woman are always neglected in the day-to-day life of a family, as they do not extend their helping hand to their education and better future. There are many proverbs that prevail in our society regarding the status and the position of a girl and a woman. Please have a look at the following utterances:

☞ *Lau jimanei dangor nahauk sadai paator talat* (in Assamese) meaning - Although a woman is efficient enough, she is always under the footing of a man.

☞ A man is an earner (bread winner) and a woman is a house keeper (home makers).

☞ Women are ordained to do housework/women look nice only when working within the house.

☞ A girl is a liability for a family.

☞ She is a girl, what will she do with education ?

☞ A girl does not need education, as she is not going to work.

These types of proverbs and utterances help in shaping the mindset of the people in placing the girls and women of our society in secondary positions in the family and society. These may be the cause for which the child sex ratio all over India went down from 927 in 2001 to 914, according to 2011 Census (Census, 2011) . This shows that the Indian families still give preference to the boy child than the girl child.

## Gender Inequalities in Education

Besides having a large number of educational institutions and directorates, still the progress, expansion, equity, quality and excellence in Indian education as a whole, are yet to be harnessed. India as a developing country ranks 132 out of 146 countries on the Gender Inequality Index (GII), better only than Afghanistan, where all the countries in the region of South Asia were ranked higher on Gender Inequality Index (Human Development Report, 2013, UNDP). The Gender Inequality Index measures the inequalities in terms of achievements between male and female in three main aspects namely - education, health and share in the labour market. If we particularly focus on gender inequality in education, it seems that still there are rampant gender differences in all stages of education, although several major initiatives and programmes for ensuring equality and quality education to all have been implemented.

If we look at the literacy rate among the male and female in India, it seems that the literacy rate among women has increased far more than among men. For instance, the literacy percentage of men increased from 75.85% in 2001 to 82.14%, in 2011 with a rise of 6.29%. In the same frame, the literacy rate among women increased from 54.16% to 65.46%, with a rise of 11.3%. However, till 2011, women were still significantly less likely to be literate than men. In the Census of 2011, the literacy rate of Men is 82.14%, and women 65.46% with the gap of 16.68% (Census, 2011). This posed a challenge to the country for taking immediate action for ensuring equal opportunities of education in order to enable the economic mobility of the country. Thus, gender equality becomes the prime concern in a democratic country like India.

In the elementary level, the share of girls enrolment in school education in India was nearly 47.04% in the year of 2012-13 and in terms of Gender Parity Index, it was 0.93 from classes I-V and 0.95 from classes VI-VIII in the year 2013-14 due to the current scheme of “universalization of elementary education for all” under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan Mission. In fact, in the elementary level, the trend of enrolment of girls as well as the ratio of girls to boys enrolment has gradually increased. Besides, at the same time, it has been seen that the rate of drop outs of girls is gradually decreasing compared to that of boys in the elementary level. In 2009-10, the dropout rate of boys has been 30.25%, whereas the dropout rate of girls has been nearly 29% in the classes from I to V. But, in the year of 2012-13, it is observed that the rate of drop out has decreased massively as girls dropout percentage was 4.66% and boys was 4.68% in lower the primary level. In the upper primary level, the dropout rate was 2.30%

for boys and 4.01% for girls. But, still there are dropouts in the elementary level in both the sexes, although many attempts are made to ensure the universal retention in schools (NUEPA, 2013).

Like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), the Department of School Education and Literacy of the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), Government of India, has also made an attempt to launch *Rastriya Madhyamic Shiksha Abhiyan* (RMSA) with an aim to achieve Universal Access and Quality Secondary Education under the zero rejection policy, where nobody will be excluded from the access to secondary education in India. Though the enrolment ratio among girls in schools is rising in both the urban and rural areas, high rate of drop outs still continue to be a major problem among the girls in the secondary level. This rate is even higher at 10 and 10 Plus stage. In the lower secondary and higher secondary levels, the number of enrolments and dropouts are comparatively poor in case of girls unlike boys. For instance, in the year 2007-08, the percentage of enrolment of boys was 56.39%, whereas the enrolment of girls was 43.60% in the total enrolment in classes IX to X. Again, in 2013, it was seen that the percentage of enrolment of boys was 48.12% and girls 51.87% in the total enrolment in classes VII-X. In the Higher Secondary level, the total enrolment of girls was 54% whereas the total enrolment of boys was 56% (NUEPA, 2013). Early marriage, poverty, conservative outlook of the parents, unwillingness to get educated under male teachers, lack of proper security measures of girls in schools, involvement of girls in the household works are the major causes for the big gender gap mostly in the secondary schools.

The Gross Enrolment Ratio in Higher Education is still a big challenge for India. The current enrolment ratio in India is less than the average of the lower middle income countries in the world. Although India has huge potential to improve demographically, it has 20.8% GER for the 18-23 years of age group, where the male GER was 22.1% and the female GER was 19.4% (All India Survey on Higher Education, MHRD, 2011-12) which is comparatively poor against the increasing population. While India has set the target to meet 30% GER by 2020, the average high income countries have a ratio above 60%. For instance, the corresponding ratio is above 80% in the USA, above 70% in Sweden, Norway, New Zealand, above 60% in the UK and Australia, above 40% in several European countries, and more than 20% in many developed and developing countries such as Mexico, Malaysia, Thailand, Chile, and Brazil. There is, again, an inter-state variation in the development of higher education in India in terms of enrolment ratio. Some Indian states have expanded their higher education system fast, but many are still lagging behind. For example, the enrolment ratio is as high as 32.9% in Tamil Nadu, but less than 11% percent in Bihar (10.5%). Even within the North eastern regions of India there is a wide range of variation in terms of GER at higher stage. In the North East, Assam has the lowest numbers of GER, that is, 13.4 % compared to the other states followed by Tripura (13.6%) (MHRD, 2012-13). Besides, it has been observed that there is less number of female GER compared to men in India and other states of North East except Meghalaya.

Besides, the total percentage of population in higher education of scheduled tribes in the rural areas is 1.6 %, of which the male population constitutes 2.2% and the female 0.9%. The same in the category of scheduled caste is 3.4 %. Again, the percentage of students from SC, ST, and OBC category occupy 12.2%, 4.5%, and 30.1 % , respectively in the total number of enrolment of students in Indian higher education (All India Survey on Higher Education, 2011-12). Thus, such situations posed a challenge in front of the entire higher education system in India as a whole.

Apart from these, if we go through the figures of enrolment in higher education and the share of Girls' Enrolment, it has been found that in India, the total enrolment in higher education is 29.2 million, and from them, 13 million girl students were enrolled in the year 2011-12 (All India Survey on Higher Education, 2011-12). This reveals that the overall inclusion of girls and women in higher education is poor compared to boys and men. Regarding the share of girl's enrolment in various subjects and streams, the following table shows the percentage of the share.

From the Table 1, it can be inferred that the share of girls' enrolment in various courses has varied from time to time. In courses like PG and Ph.D, graduation, B.Ed., and MBBS programmes, the share of the women's enrolment increased, ranging from above 22% to nearly 48% from the year of 1970-71 to 2005-06. But in courses



**Table 1. Share of Women's Enrolment (in %)**

Year	PG & Ph.D	Graduation	B.E.	B.Ed.	MBBS	Total
1970-71	25.8	24.4	1.0	37.3	22.4	23.6
1980-81	31.7	27.8	3.6	40.9	24.3	27.5
1990-91	32.2	34.7	10.9	44.2	34.3	33.2
2000-01	36.7	37.4	22.3	42.8	40.6	36.8
2002-03	42.3	42.0	22.6	52.0	41.6	40.1
2003-04	42.8	41.5	23.8	49.9	42.0	45.3
2004-05	44.2	41.2	26.4	36.5	36.5	40.1
2005-06	33.6	41.9	26.0	43.7	47.5	38.5

Source: Prakash (2008) based on selected educational statistics (various years), MHRD & Status of Education in India: National Report (2008), National University of Educational Planning and Administration, Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India.

like B.E., still the share of the enrolment is less than 30 percent. For instance, in BE course, in 1970-71, the share of the enrolment of the girls was 1%, and in 2005-06, it was 26%. It means that the girl's enrolment in various courses has to be achieved up to 50%. Even in some professional and technical courses, the share of the girl's enrolment is poor compared to boys (Prakash, 2008).

Subsidy in education is another option to ensure equity in education. Subsidy, in terms of Indian Education System is not only confined to basic education but it also includes higher, technical, and professional education in order to bring the welfare and equity in the context of developed market economics. The positive externalities of public subsidies in education include improvement in health, reduction in the growth of population, improvement in income distribution, reduction in poverty and crime, rapid adoption of new technologies, strengthening of democracy which are responsible for technical progress and economic growth (Tilak, 2014). Therefore, at the present moment, one may raise this question - what does India need at this stage to make room for more educational avenues at cheaper cost and with faster access? Until and unless there is marked reform in the educational system and its various sectors, the uplift of the social and economic conditions of this country will remain an unfulfilled dream. Thus, now in India, there is to be seen a great demand for well-managed educational institutions and infrastructure, so that the dream of building a knowledge-based society soon becomes a reality.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

In a democratic country like ours, everyone has the right to enjoy certain rights and opportunities constitutionally guaranteed to all. The implementation of the rights under the social sectors such as Right to Education, Right of Social Justice, Right to Employment, Right to Equal Pay for Equal Work, Right to Health Services, the Right to Participate in the Political Life of One's Community, Right of Access to Health Services have been launched for bringing the necessary upward mobility of different sections of the people in our country.

It has been realized that for the long term benefit as well as the development of a country, the economic security of each member of the country is very essential. For meeting the challenges like 'inclusive growth', formation of 'Human Capital', and achieving the 'Millennium Development Goals' etc, it is high time for our country as a whole to adopt a rationalized approach towards the fact of gender discrimination. Hence, measures should be taken for reducing the factors of social exclusion of girls and women in education. To make women empowered is the practical way for boosting up the status of women in the society. Education is an important way that can supply the much needed skilled manpower for generating development in a nation. Education develops the human being in

the true sense of the term, developing all potentialities as well as capabilities through which a nation can benefit in its development. Hence, we need such an institution or a mode of education through which education can be made accessible to all without any discrimination. *Life skills Education* is a practical way for developing the competence of women, and thus, it can make women empowered in their day-to-day life. Therefore, for disseminating information or knowledge in order to develop capacity building specifically for women, there is a need to explore the various modes of education.

**(1)** Education is the only way to boost up the positive social transformation for the welfare of the country. Education is universally acknowledged as the way to benefit individuals and promote national development. Educating both the female and male members of our society produces similar increases in their subsequent earning and expands future opportunities and choices for both boys and girls. However, educating girls produces many additional socio-economic gains that benefit the entire society. These benefits include increased economic productivity, higher family incomes, reduced fertility rates, and improved health and survival rates for infants and children. Education is the only way that will help in making a welfare state in the true sense by creating the consciousness among the citizens of the state.

**(2)** In a democratic country, distributive justice and decentralization of power are to be maintained for all while allocating the rights and opportunities to all the citizens of the state. Even, for a better and welfare society, it is a necessary to have the inclusive growth where the basic motto is to bring the equal opportunities to all irrespective of any kind of discrimination. Therefore, it is an urgent need to reduce the gender inequality in every stages of education that will help the society to grow. Gender equality means that the male and female members of a society have equal opportunities to realize their human rights, and to help them contribute to and benefit from economic, social, cultural, and political development. Parity and equity are the building blocks of equality in education.

**(3)** Free and Quality education for all and the provision of accessible schools for girls in every corner of the country will ensure the girls to gain equal access to education. The infrastructure of schools and colleges and quality of teaching in government schools and higher educational institutions must be brought to the mark.

**(4)** Integrate Inputs of Women's Studies Research in Textbooks, Syllabi and Training: The NCERT, as well as the SCERTs in each state, should develop formal linkages with centres and schools of women's studies in universities, as well as with individual scholars and activists who have the experience of working on gender issues in different disciplines. Joint programmes, funded by the NCERT and SCERTs, should be set up with a view to deriving inputs from research done in the area of Women's Studies, and to jointly preparing material, for textbooks at the primary, middle and secondary, and higher levels. Women's Studies academics and researchers should also be invited to shape and form syllabi and content of different disciplines, as well as of teachers' training programmes. The experts and the eminent workers on various women centric issues can also contribute to the work on gender issues and curriculum review process in the school curriculum.

**(5)** Awareness for educating girls should be developed among the parents, especially the conservative ones. For this, the communication media or mass media can play the vital role for generating awareness of the people towards their girl child.

**(6)** Facilities like flexibility in the time table, provision of uniforms, midday meals, books, incentives and scholarships, means of transport should be provided at its best.

**(7)** Besides conventional learning, Open Schooling, Open Universities and other ODL institutions can play the

vital role for making education possible for all. Such educational institutes have emerged as effective means to bring education to the door steps of those who are deprived of the educational opportunities in the conventional mode or in the mainstream educational institutions. With the help of ICT (Information and Communication Technology), the system of ODL may motivate millions of underprivileged learners including the self-employed and housewives who desire for an enlightened and productive way of life. It is the ODL system through which a learner can take education irrespective of age, time, place etc, because ODL means to get education at anytime, anywhere and for anyone.

## Research and Social Implications

In this study, an attempt has been made to examine the present status of the education system in India in terms of primary, secondary and higher education systems, and how much of the prevailing gender inequalities in all the educational stages have been plaguing the idea of quality education. Moreover, it has been seen that the rampant gender inequalities in education have rendered an adverse impact in generating the knowledge economy as well as in bringing up the knowledge-enabled population of the country although population can be considered an asset for a developing country like ours. It will help the policy makers to grasp the reality about the prevailing gender differences in education and to examine how the society influences in creating gender differences in educational system and society at large. It also helps the policy makers, stakeholders to make themselves conscious and help them to raise their voice against these practices in our society as well as in our educational institutions. Reducing gender inequality may help in promoting the welfare of all in the true sense. Gender equality opens the way to develop the human development indices of our country in terms of education, health and employment.

## Limitations of the Study and Scope for Further Research

This paper is purely based on Secondary sources only. This paper addresses the gender disparity inherent in the primary, secondary and higher education system in India. This paper is thus delimited by a focus on some general facts prevalent in the Indian education system. However, there is enough scope to conduct different empirical studies in terms of the reasons behind gender inequalities, both region wise and state wise, in order to throw light on the stark reality behind the current educational policies of India.

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