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# TACKLING GENDER DISPARITY IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

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## INTRODUCTION

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India witnessed her freedom in August 1947, and with the dawn of liberation and march towards modernity, people expected that all deep rooted conservative mind sets and social irrational prejudices, among which gender discrimination occupies a major area, would slowly recede and eventually disappear, beginning a new era. In actuality, entering into her 60<sup>th</sup> year of independence, the country is not free from multifarious problems of which the plight of the girl child is a serious socio-cultural concern. Among the many development indexes used as a yardstick for measuring societal growth, the most important is education. Even today, 68% of girls are still illiterate as discrimination against them plagues the country and extreme patriarchy has robbed women of justice and equality, which only education and enlightenment can secure. Society's history of denying opportunities for women to seek knowledge has obstructed their path to empowerment.

It is needless to acknowledge that women's literacy and educational levels help secure social equality and human development, higher economic productivity and a tolerant democratic society, which The National Policy on Education and Empowerment has identified as a challenge. Equality and equity in education is directly related to democratic development and the establishment of an egalitarian society, where the purpose of education is to produce knowledge makers with the capacity of making the most profitable use and dissemination of the acquired knowledge. As civil society agents we have a definite role to play in promoting gender-sensitive rather than gender-blind policies and attitudes.

The National and International Community, having realized the importance of education for individual and collective well being, organized an International Conference on Population Development (ICPD - 1994) to eliminate gender any bias in educational materials that enforces or reinforces inequalities between men and women. The World Conferences culminated in the Fourth Summit at Beijing (1995) to reaffirm Governments' commitments to intensify efforts guaranteeing gender free education and universal access to the tools of knowledge. The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979); The Copenhagen Declaration (1995) and The Millennium Goals (2000) have formulated Action Programs to establish gender equality in education to empower women for social justice and to accelerate better social transformation. The National Education system will be a form of social engineering to eliminate sex-stereotyping in primary and secondary education. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights stands for guaranteeing:

1. Free and compulsory education at least in the elementary and fundamental stages;
2. Education directed to the full development of the human personality for respecting the human rights and fundamental freedom.

In India too, the Constitution has made provisions for free and compulsory education for children between the ages of 6-14 years with special reference to the girl child's need of education, but much is left to be realized.

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## RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT

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The concept of women's empowerment was introduced at the International Women's Conference in Nairobi in 1985 where Empowerment was stated to be '***a distribution of social power and center of resources in favour of women***'. The persistent low educational participation of girls till recently has had adverse impact on women's quality of life and empowerment. This educational backwardness has cost both the individual and national advancement, producing a skewed national progress. Education will lead to empowerment securing the means of creating a social environment in which one can make decisions for social and individual transformation. It strengthens innate ability through knowledge, power and experience enabling an individual to think, act and control human, intellectual and financial resources. It develops intrinsic capacity, inner transformation of one's consciousness to overcome barriers, access resources and change traditional ideologies. Empowerment therefore is possible only with access to education as a fundamental right.

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## FEMALE LITERACY AND THE STATUS OF INDIA

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With all its promises, India has failed to provide universalisation of education as it remains under the stranglehold of major stratifications leading to discrimination. Early marriage, social prejudices and absence of educational infrastructure have led to 60 million girl children lacking access to primary education and the gender gap remains a problem with the country. The Indian government having expressed a strong commitment towards education for all, but still projects one of the lowest female literacy rates in Asia as there are almost 300 million illiterate women in India. Gender disparities persist, as social and legal institutions do not guarantee women equality in basic human rights. It is a major area of concern at the school level and the literacy question remains the largest juggernaut in the Indian management of education. Research studies were conducted:

1. To locate the gaps and possibilities in girls' education;
2. To establish the link existing between education and women's quality of life;
3. To propose and execute policy measures to enhance girls' education at all levels.

To set right the imbalance of relationship in a male centered and dominated society, education and economic independence is imperative. Quantitative and qualitative evidence reflects acute gender bias, confirming discrimination in educational status. Women's ability for independent thinking and her participation at par with men will confirm Gender Equality and comply with the targets of the Millennium Development Goals. The Indian Government needs to identify those geographical locations and culture patterns contributing towards gender disparity in education. The gap between male and female literacy is a sensitive indicator of social discrimination.

## SEX-WISE LITERACY RATE FROM 1971–2001

| Year | % Literate | Male    | Female | M/F Literacy Gap |
|------|------------|---------|--------|------------------|
| 1971 | 34.45.     | 45.96 m | 21.98  | 23.98            |
| 1981 | 43.57      | 56.37   | 29.75  | 26.62            |
| 1991 | 52.21      | 64.13   | 39.29  | 24.84            |
| 2001 | 65.38      | 75.85   | 54.16. | 21.69            |

Research findings explain that an essentially patriarchal society like India confers less importance on girls' education. From the socio-cultural perspective, demand for girls' education is considerably low. A family considers a girl's education as a financial liability. Early marriage, religious and cultural strictures, conservative ideology of traditional submissive domestic role of women, superstitions, male preference as future assets, infrastructure failure, derecognizing women as potential developers of society form key factors hindering girls' education. Added to this the presence of exclusively male teachers, distance to schools (especially in rural India), unhealthy sanitation, absence of midday meals and acute poverty were diagnosed as potential factors of a very high drop-out rate for the girl child. Special mention needs to be made with reference to Muslim women where the 'purdah system' as a religious measure compels the girl child to abstain from the formal education system. There is evidence of focusing resources to facilitate boy's education. The regimented thought process of the male dominated society fails to give cognizance to women's capacity as Nation builders. The noticeable picture of wastage and stagnation at primary and secondary stages is appalling.

## STATISTICAL DATA OF FEMALE LITERACY: PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

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Extensive surveys and research findings highlighted the crucial factors of gender disparity in primary and secondary education. It was found that girls from lower economic strata remained outside school, helping their parents in domestic work. They left school at 8/9 years to look after siblings while the boys continued with their schooling. Labour in the agricultural fields and non-availability of nutritious food led to malnutrition, resulting in long stretches of sickness and absenteeism from school. Marriage and frequent child birth resulted in high mortality rate amongst school age girls. With National Policies and Education Commissions coming into execution, in the age group of 6-11 boys' enrolment rose sharply from 1987 to the 1990s but the corresponding figures for girls were still dismal. Even though the general education status of children rose up to 71% in 2005-2006, the flip side shows that, years after the first deadline to make education universal for every child, this remains a distant dream, something all the more true for girls. The accepted notion is that a son's education is imperative for a job, whereas a girl will obviously get married and be bound to stereotyped domesticated roles and functions.

The improvement status from 1990 was negligible for girls' education. For every 125 enrolled at the primary level, 80% dropped out before reaching class V, a further 1/3<sup>rd</sup> dropped out before reaching class VIII, and a paltry figure of 10–12% completes schooling. The National Sample Survey on Status of Education in India (2005) showed that 50% in rural India, and 20% in urban India do not have even one literate girl child in their families above the age of 15. Economists confirm a direct relationship between family income and the expenses towards girls' education. Census figures projected during 1991–2001 (Selected Educational Statistics Primary Education 1999–2001 MHRD, Govt. of India) show male literacy to be 63.86% and 75.85% against female

literacy of 39.42% and 54.16%. Out of 13,459,734 dropouts from Secondary schooling, 6.08% are males and 7.98% are females. India enters her new Millennium with two thirds of women still illiterate despite the commitment to eradicate girls' illiteracy by 2005. Educational statistics of 2002–2003 show the overall gender gap and the low enrolment as late as 1996 to 2002.

**PERCENTAGE OF ENROLMENT IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY STAGE  
2002- 2003**

| Year      | Primary Education |       | Secondary Education |       |
|-----------|-------------------|-------|---------------------|-------|
|           | BOYS              | GIRLS | BOYS                | GIRLS |
| 1997 - 98 | 62.3              | 48.0  | 23.6                | 15.9  |
| 1998 - 99 | 62.7              | 48.2  | 24.0                | 16.3  |
| 1999 - 00 | 64.1              | 49.5  | 25.1                | 17.1  |
| 2001 - 02 | 63.6              | 50.3  | 26.1                | 18.7  |

Though primary and secondary enrolment has increased in many regions, India witnesses an alarming statistics of out-of-school children who have not had the chance to enroll, owing primarily to factors like negligence or poverty on the part of their parents. The policy makers attribute the ignorance and apathy of the parents to absence of exposure through televised and printed media, more especially in the rural and remote parts of the country. The National Commission for Women, considering it to be their responsibility, have introduced measures of dissemination of information regarding the need to educate the girl child for national, social and global progress. First generation educated children hardly received any educational or moral support from their parents to continue. The mindset transformation of the parents has become a Herculean task for the policy makers as the rigid confirmation of girls' accepted status is firmly embedded in an understanding system where the Millennium Development Goals will find it difficult to uproot the existing and introduce the new. For this reason, apart from sudden discontinuation of education, the country is also losing girl children who would definitely be assets. The Indian Snapshot Table projects a picture of them.

**NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF OUT OF SCHOOL CHILDREN  
AGED 6 - 13 YEARS IN INDIA**

| Total Population | Out Of School Children | Percentage |
|------------------|------------------------|------------|
| 194028643        | 13459734               | 6.94       |
| 109619053        | 6772506                | 6.18       |
| 84409590         | 6687228                | 7.93       |

Considering the deplorable condition of girls' education, the Government of India has suggested some valid measures – amongst others:

- a) To study the problems of women's education by a system of survey and data by the institutes of Education in different States and coordinated at the National Level.
- b) A target of a primary school within walking distance of a child's home.
- c) Public opinion in favour of girls' education to be generated.
- d) Awarding of scholarships which serve as compensation to parents should be given. This will ensure reduction of wastage and stagnation.

- e) Incentives to women teachers in the form of facilities and infrastructure support to be provided.

## MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS: PROMISES, FAILURES AND CHALLENGES

The present era is one of meeting challenges and seeking equal opportunities, the future will be women's rendering of writing her own history, the geography of her personal and public sphere, the sociology of her status, the culture of the quality of her life and her educational attainments. The Millennium agenda is both visionary and pragmatic in reducing poverty and universalizing education as connected to the well being of the children.

In April 1990, The World Conference on Education For All in Jomtein identified improving access to quality education for girls and women as a 'most urgent priority'. At the Dakar World Education Forum in April 2000, participants from 164 countries reaffirmed their commitment to ensuring education of all children. The Millennium Summit of 2000 gave birth to the MDGoals, upholding and stressing the importance of gender equality. The aims of the Millennium Development Goals include: To Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women; To achieve universal primary education; To eradicate extreme hunger and poverty. Freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance and respect for humanity became the pillars of the MDGs to be achieved by 2015, with special emphasis on girls' position. The Challenge of the Millennium Development Goals was to provide children with access to primary education either through formal or informal systems, and to reduce differences in enrolment, drop out rates and mainstream a gender perspective in the development process. Special measures needed to be adopted to eradicate discrimination at the primary and secondary stages, universalization of education and creation of a gender sensitive education system.

In 2002, the MDG Roadmap presented to the General Assembly showed that out of 113 million children not going to school, 68 million were girls. Gender equality became a global agenda in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In India, despite all the promises of the MDGs, 46% of general class and 86% of scheduled caste women are illiterate, 81.2% girls engaged in agriculture and domestic chores according to the drop out rate from 1990–2001. According to Selected Educational Statistics (2002–2003) the drop out rate has reduced from 78.3% in 1960-61 to 52.8% in 2002–03, but that still does not justify universalisation of education as girl child status is still demoralizing, as the 2001 census shows the literacy rate for women being 53.7% as against 75.3% for men.

### DROP OUT RATE FOR GIRLS AT PRIMARY AND LOWER SECONDARY 1990 - 2001

|           | Primary<br>1-V |       |       | Lower Secondary<br>VI-VIII |       |       |
|-----------|----------------|-------|-------|----------------------------|-------|-------|
|           | Boys           | Girls | Total | Boys                       | Girls | Total |
| 1990-1991 | 40.1           | 46.0  | 42.6  | 59.1                       | 65.0  | 60.9  |
| 1999-2000 | 38.67          | 42.28 | 40.25 | 51.96                      | 58.0  | 54.5  |
| 2000-2001 | NA             | 41.9  | 40.79 | NA                         | 57.0  | 53.7  |

Recognizing girl's education as the most sensitive index of social and national development, the MDG's felt that for sustainable development, social justice needed to be guaranteed by sanctioning gender sensitive education and the mainstreaming of girls' education within national education systems. India, agreeing in the EFA declaration, promised to undertake policies for universal retention by 2010 and elementary and secondary gender free education by 2015.

## POLICIES ADOPTED IN THE FIVE YEAR PLANS.

India's administrative measures listed plans to accelerate equality and justice in imparting gender free education. The First Five Year Plan (1951-56) held that 'women have the same opportunities as men for taking all kinds of work, and this presupposes that they get equal facilities, so their entry into the professions and public services is in no way prejudiced'. The Second, Third and Fourth Five Year Plans (1956-1961; 1966-1969; 1969-1974) considered the need for increasing the proportion of women into secondary and higher education. The Fifth Year Plan (1974-1979) prioritized free and compulsory education along with free uniforms, books and scholarship as incentives. The Sixth Year Plan (1980-1985) emphasized the need of universalisation of elementary education by promoting Balwadis to the girl child. In the Seventh and Eighth Five Year Plan (1986-1991 and 1992-1997), flexible school times to help girls were introduced. The National Policy on Education undertook redesigning curricula and textbooks to suit the girl child and eradication of illiteracy, strengthening vocational education and relating it to the needs of emerging urban and rural settings. Hundred percent central grants were disbursed to set up Non-Formal Education Centres for girls. The Ninth Year Plan (1997-2002) conceptualized Empowerment of Women by converging existing services available in both women-specific and women-related sectors.

The Tenth Plan (2002-2007) witnessed the Government embarking on strategies to reduce the gender divide in primary and secondary education by setting the goal of 'Education for Women's Equality' as advocated in the National Policy of Education. Yet, in spite of all this the 2005-2006 census projects the retention for girls in the primary and secondary level to be 47% and 46% against 52% for boys respectively. Quantitative and qualitative strategies through enrolment and retention and through substantive contents and teaching methods were adopted to help girls' achievement. Voluntary agencies and The Integrated Child Development Programme have made plans for furtherance of education. The NGO, Community Welfare Centres, complements girls' education with scholarships, and makes available pre-school education for girls. Girls belonging to the segment of disabled, ethnic minorities, or underprivileged are brought under the scheme of Inclusive Education in (2006-07).

The Mahila Samakhya and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) plan to provide quality education for girls between 6-14 years has increased the literacy rate of girls from 15.35% in 1971 to 54.16% in 2001. In the past two decades, women's participation in primary, middle and secondary level has increased considerably. The District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) of the Central Government has reduced drop out rates to less than 10% and reduced gender gaps to less than 5%. One of the main objectives of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (2001) is to bridge gender gaps in primary and secondary education by 2010. Since even after secondary education girls may not continue, 'Extension Education', a policy providing job related knowledge, was introduced for those unable to proceed with formal secondary level. The National Literacy Mission (NLM) was set up in 1988 aimed to mobilize drop outs, introduce mass and functional literacy and involve the community in educating women to the Secondary level.

The Siksha Karmi (1987) sees education as a challenge in the extremely low literary blocks. At the grass root level it works through the Panchayet Samities and the village communities to ensure enrolment and retention of the girl child in the primary level. The Saraswati Yojana (1995) focuses on local women who have passed class VIII, for them to be given training and financial assistance to run courtyard schools in their homes. The Lok Jumbish project has set up Women's Education Centres and the Women Teachers' Forum to provide gender training to teachers to handle women of the backward and poor areas.

The government's policy measures have helped raise the female literacy rate from 39.29% in 1991 to 54.16% in 2001, reducing the gender gap from 24.84% in 1991 to 21.70%. Additional investments for promotion of girls' education in 1064 clusters of 58 educationally backward blocks in 10 districts were set up. 59 residential schools for girls at primary and secondary level with 75% seats for minorities and other backward classes were organized in the 2006-07 scheme. In 1995, The Mid - Day Meals Scheme was launched to boost the lower secondary and universalisation of primary education by impacting upon attendance, retention and nutritional needs of children. Even with all these policies, the goals of MDG's are not fully realized when records project that 70.38% girls are child labourers with no schooling, 27.33% girls suffer from malnutrition and 70% are victims of child abuse. The censuses of 1991 and 2001 clearly project the existence of gender disparity in the Urban versus Rural scenario, which if not dealt with by measures of control will contribute to the failure of the Millennium Development Goals

#### RURAL - URBAN LITERACY IN INDIA (%): 1991 - 2001

| Population | 1991  |        |       | 2001  |        |       |
|------------|-------|--------|-------|-------|--------|-------|
|            | Male  | Female | Total | Male  | Female | Total |
| Rural      | 57.90 | 30.60  | 44.70 | 71.40 | 46.70  | 59.40 |
| Urban      | 81.10 | 64.00  | 73.10 | 86.70 | 73.20  | 80.30 |
| Total      | 64.13 | 39.29  | 52.21 | 75.85 | 54.16  | 65.38 |

### PROBABLE STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT

If education indicates national development it must also address and incorporate gender free education. The core issue for achieving Education For All is the critical issue of access and equity. It is now globally recognized that 5-8 years of education is imperative to control illiteracy and poverty. The World Bank supports educational projects like Alternate and Transitional Schools for different social groups. In India, the schools supply factors and Government intervention must be strengthened without any compromise to achieve comprehensive growth, better female conditions and strive to make The Millennium Development Goals successful. There is a need:

- a) To educate women for empowerment and poverty alleviation.
- b) To nurture communication between ministries to create new mechanisms, maximize the present potentials and foster a cohesive gender responsive approach.
- c) To build gender aware expertise, concurrent programmes, budget and assist managers in planning, implementing and monitoring the process.
- d) To ensure a synergistic partnership between formal and non-formal education.
- e) To promote public dialogue on the virtues of girls' education.
- f) To increase the time slot in television media for programmes related to education and awareness.

- g) To orientate the educational system to serve the objectives of equality for women and their empowerment.
- h) To intervene to provide equal educational opportunity to women and girls belonging to lower, ethnic and poorest section of the society.
- i) To teach society to value girls' education.
- j) To plan budgetary support from the Central and the State Government towards primary and secondary education.

The gender disparity at Secondary and Tertiary stages is mainly due to the existing gender bias at the entry stage to an educational institution. There has been a noticeable high enrolment and decline in the drop out rate from 1998 onwards, though girls' privilege of being educated is still 50% less than the boys. Girls' enrolment rise in the primary level has been from 28.1% to 43.7%, middle school from 16.1% to 40.9% and secondary from 13.30 to 38.6% (source; statistical year book and census of India: 2001). The challenge of the Millennium is to rectify the socio-economic factors leading to girls drop out and achieve their subsequent retention to the final year of the primary stage by setting up an increased outreach of both formal and non-formal variety of schooling systems. Interaction between education trusts and enlightened funders can assist to develop teaching-training and need based research institutes to invite and increase girls' educational participation.

## EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN THE ELEVENTH PLAN

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In response to the needs of women, the state initiates many piecemeal schemes, which are not often effective. For this some activists and scholars have formed a group called the 'Think Tank', with the aim of presenting to the Planning Commission a set of demands and reforms to be included in the Eleventh Plan. It proposed that the state must channel a higher percentage of national resources into primary and secondary education for girls. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan must be pushed forward in all regions with greater determination and stricter standards of service. Girls' education must be made a priority and made sensitive to local requirements. Panchayats must ensure that every girl child attends school, that teachers are regular and that the mid-day scheme is running properly. The policy makers must change their mindset and design future measures in a way to empower and accept women as independent identities living with dignity.

The Integrated Child Development Scheme, National Creche Fund, Balika Samriddhi Yojana, Short Stay Homes for Women and Girls and providing for Hostel facilities were also part of the Governments measures. Reducing distance to upper primary and secondary schools, providing incentives and counseling services to parents and children, planning a flexible school schedule, ensuring active participation of women members in village education committees and advocating social and economic benefits of girls' education, removing sex bias from curricula, and appointment of teachers with global perspective would help bridge the gender gap in education.

Promoting gender-sensitive teaching materials, by, *inter alia*, reviewing and revising school curricula and preparing formal and non-formal educational should receive priority. Monitoring and evaluating the extent to which the rules and plans are being implemented will ensure the success of any plan.



## CONCLUSION

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Massive educational deprivation of the girl child is a reality. It is crucial in regions where stubborn social norms of caste and patriarchy, along with poor governance, are rampant. The exclusivist state policy of control over curriculum choices, misappropriation of funds, non-implementation of education incentives and ideologically driven reforms and pedagogy are significant contributive factors. Education must be used as an agent of basic changes in the status of women. Education, being a public good, must include principles of non-discrimination, equity and justice. It cannot be a commodity for sale to those who can afford it. It must be an entitlement and a right that is guaranteed by the state. It should be visualized as a milestone for women's development, leading to National Development, enabling women to respond to challenges to secure better lives for them and for their children. These realities cannot be disassociated from the planning and implementation of educational policies. Therefore, in the absence of constructive, objective and progressive legislative reforms, which are mutually articulate and consistent, and can effectively address these facts and realities, the Goal of Millennium Development would remain an illusion. India is poised to become a super power; a developed country by 2020, and this aspect must be supported by ensuring universalized gender-free education. The UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) targets, through its MDGs, sustainable development of a country by eradicating hunger, poverty, child mortality, HIV/AIDS. All these aims require universalisation of education.

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