POLICY BRIEF ON
GIRLS' EDUCATION

The Right to Education Act in India was a major turning point for school education, it made education a fundamental right for children in the age group 6 to 14. The Act brought positive changes in the school education system which also benefitted girls. Through Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the umbrella scheme for implementation of RTE Act, critical barriers like access and inclusion were addressed to a large extent, this led to increase in enrolment at both the primary and upper primary level. Along with this, schemes like Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan and National Scheme of Incentives to Girls for Secondary Education emphasized secondary education of girls through scholarships, subsidies and incentives. With the introduction of Beti Bachao Beti Padhao in 2014 a renewed emphasis was given to education of girls. However, girls' participation in secondary and higher secondary education, stark regional and social group disparities remain areas of grave concern
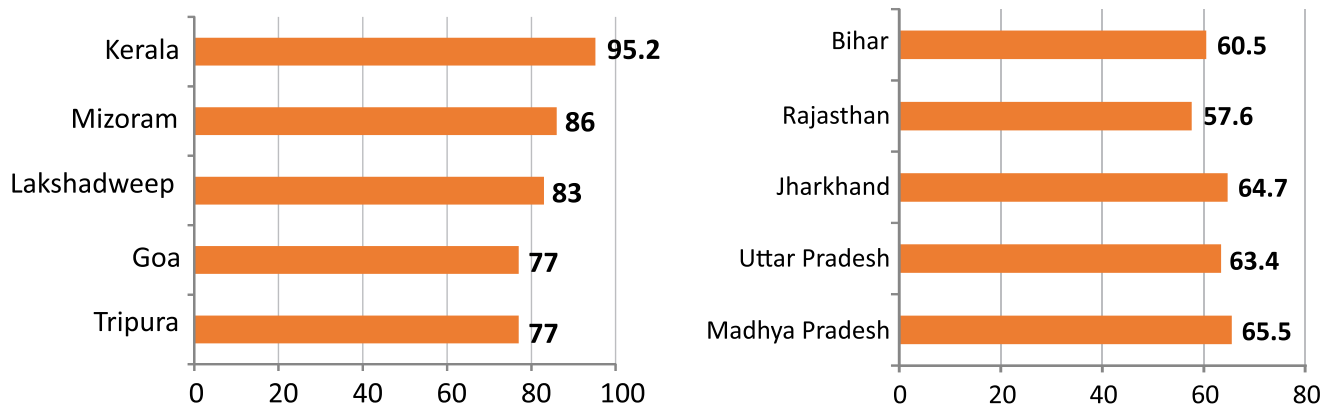
CRITICAL STATISTICS ON GIRLS' EDUCATION

Fewer girls in Secondary and Higher Secondary Schools

- At least **1.6 MILLION GIRLS** in India remain out of school[1]. Report by NCPCR (2018) suggests that **39.4% GIRLS** between 15-18 years of age are out of school[2].

- **57% GIRLS** drop-out upon reaching the 11th grade[3].

- Distance to school act as significant roadblock: For every hundred elementary schools (classes I to VIII) in rural India, there were only fourteen offering secondary (classes IX-X) and only six offering higher secondary grades (classes XI-XII).[4]

Education of girls from SC, ST and Muslim Communities: Enrolment reduces drastically for SC, ST females in secondary and higher secondary level:

- Enrolment is 19.34 % at the elementary level which becomes 18.6% at the secondary level and 17.3 at the higher secondary level for SC girls.

- For ST girls it is worse at 10.35% at elementary level, which falls to 8.6% and eventually to 6.8% at the higher secondary level.

- There is also a significant gender gap in accessing private schools: More girls are attending government schools at the elementary level (75% at primary level and 77.3% at the upper primary level) and 19.2 % of total girls are attending private school at the primary level and 15.6 at the upper primary level which remains almost the same at the secondary and higher secondary level)[7].

Stark disparities in female literacy rates: most populous states have female literacy below the national average

State	Female Literacy Rate
Kerala	95.2
Mizoram	86
Lakshadweep	83
Goa	77
Tripura	77

State	Female Literacy Rate
Bihar	60.5
Rajasthan	57.6
Jharkhand	64.7
Uttar Pradesh	63.4
Madhya Pradesh	65.5

Girls face infrastructural barriers

- **54% schools** have functional WASH facilities (Toilet, Drinking Water and Handwashing facilities)[8]
- **35% schools** lack a boundary wall[9]
- There are **16.6 % secondary schools** in the country without female teachers[10]. Proportion of female teachers to total teachers is at 42.9%.[11]

More Girls Out of School

In India, more girls **(3.2%)** are out of school than boys **(2.7)** even today in the cohort of children below **15 years** of age

Girls more affected due to COVID-19

'It is estimated that nearly **10 million** secondary school girls in India could drop out of school due to the pandemic, putting them at risk of early marriage, early pregnancy, poverty, trafficking and violence.[12]
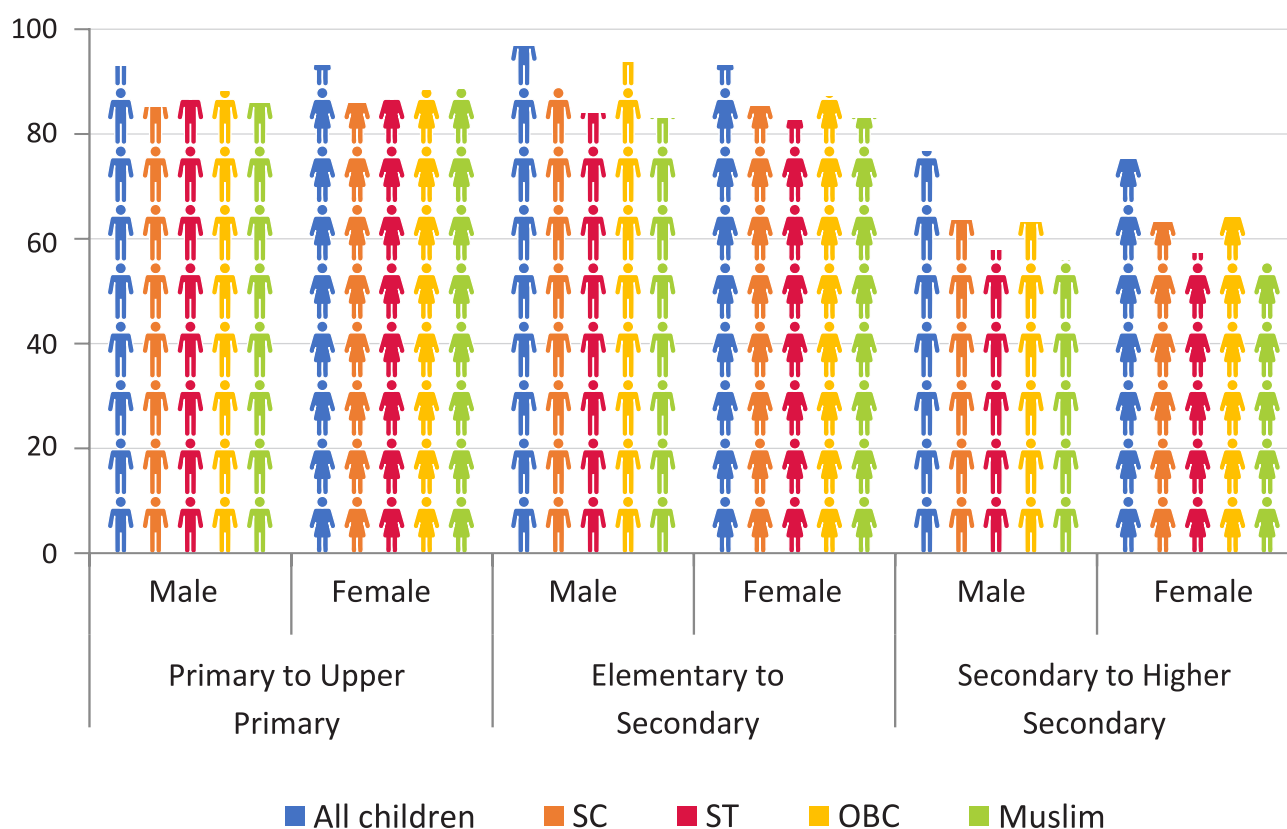
Girls lag behind in basic Mathematics

In the age group 14-16, there is a gender difference in basic math capability. All India, **50.1% of boys** in the age group 14-16 can do division. For girls, the figure is 44.1%.[13]

25 per cent of the youth in the age group of 14-18 cannot read a basic text fluently in their own language.[14]

Transition based on gender and social groups

Source: UDISE-2016-2017

UNDERLYING CAUSES

There is a need to understand the problem of girls' education and the underlying challenges of educating girls, especially those from marginalized communities. The section below highlights the problem and some of the key challenges.

Poverty and Entrenched Patriarchy: Entrenched patriarchy and deep-rooted gender biases in society affects education of girls. Regressive gender norms places the unpaid care burden on girls with sibling care, household chores invariably been seen as their responsibility. Patriarchal social norms like child marriage, dowry, restrictions on mobility of girls act as barriers in education of girls. India witnesses the highest number of female infanticides and the discrimination persists in the form of poor nutrition, Gender-based violence (GBV) and early marriage.[15]

Poverty, disasters, rural and agricultural distress, economic, social and safety compulsions increase migrations and displacement in the country, 'the absolute number of internal migrants increased from 232.11 million in Census 1991, 314.54 million in 2001 to 455.78 million in 2011. More girls constitute child migrants (50.6 percent) compared to boys (Census 2011). Early marriage contributes to migration of girls 'Five out of 10 migrant girls constituting 6.39 million, in the age group 10-19 years, were reported to be married in Census 2011'[16]

"Investment in girls is seen as waste of money as they are considered as Paraya Dhan",

– Manisha, Rajasthan

"As opposed to fathers, it is the brothers who stop girls from continuing their education and BHAIGIRI becomes the major obstacle."

– Farida Bano, West Bengal

Safety and Security of Girls at home, school and community is a major issue. Entrenched patriarchy and unequal gender norms and power relations which drive violence against girls and manifest themselves as bullying and physical abuse, corporal punishment, sexual and verbal harassment, non-consensual touching and other forms of sexual assault.[17] At school, girls are very often exposed to wide-ranging safety concerns; these include issues of harassment on the way to school, violence and bullying, including online bullying in school, gender-based violence (GBV), and other discriminatory practices. Poor access to secondary schools magnifies the problem multi-fold. The shortage of secondary schools means that girls have to travel vast distances to avail education heightening the risk of sexual violence and abduction, often discouraging the parents from sending their girls to schools.

In the era of rapid digitization of education and the growing use of technology, girls are susceptible to cyber-crimes. The Global Youth Online Behaviour Survey conducted by Microsoft ranked India third in cyberbullying, with 53% of the respondents, mainly children, admitting having experienced online bullying.[18] Cases of cyberstalking or bullying of women and children increased by 36% from 542 in 2017 to 739 in 2018.[19]

Intersectionality of gender, region, social class and religion affects: Girls from Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) or Muslim communities are subject to multiple marginalization.[20] Patriarchy amplifies discriminatory practices rooted in prejudice against the marginalized communities, hence girls suffer doubly, because they are girls and more so because they are from an oppressed community. Several studies show how stereotypical gender roles are assigned in school reinforcing gender stereotypes and gender discrimination. Cleaning toilets, separate seats based on caste, tribe, religion are oft repeated discriminatory practices practiced in schools and also occasionally find reference in the textbooks. The marginalization deepens for girls with disabilities or those belonging to the LGBTQ community. Teachers are not sensitized and trained to the needs of LGBTQ children, and sometimes instead of taking an anti-bullying stance, they often are complicit in their harassment.[21]

Systemic Factors: Issues like lack of conducive infrastructure, poor quality of education, lack of women teachers, poor linkages to upper primary schools, lack of sensitised teachers, curriculum that is not gender-responsive often compel girls to either leave school or fail to attain the desired learning competencies. Lack of separate functional toilets for girls, as lack of proper infrastructure makes girls even more vulnerable. Lack of menstrual knowledge, along with a non-conducive school infrastructure and lack of sanitary products, often compel girls to remain at home.[22]

For enabling girls, it is important that life skills should be introduced early in school in an empowerment framework. 'Life skills: Refers to a large group of psychosocial and interpersonal

skills that can help people make informed decisions, communicate effectively, and develop coping and self-management skills that may help lead a healthy and productive life'

Inadequate Budget: Education budget has seen persistent budget cuts over the years particularly from 2014 onwards. It is still at a staggering 3.4 % of the GDP. Even targeted schemes like the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme aimed to raise awareness and improve welfare services for girls, spend nearly 60% of its budget on advertisements in 2018-19.[23]

Access to Online Education Difficult: Further a new emphasis has been given on distance and online mode of education which may find girls disadvantaged due to the digital divide. Only 12.8 % women are able to use a computer, 14.9 % could use internet and interestingly only 12.5% women could access internet in the last 30 days. This is worse in rural areas. (7 %, 8.5% and 6.6%) (NSSO, 2017-2018). This has been found to be deepening inequalities in education during COVID-19 crisis.

Impact of Emergencies on Education of Girls:

Emergencies occurring due to natural disasters, pandemics or civil strife affect both boys and girls, however it affects girls disproportionately, 'Factors that limit girls' educational opportunities in stable contexts often intensify in crises.'[24] Emergencies witness an increase in Gender-based violence and sexual abuse as trafficking and early marriage. Schooling gets disrupted and there is problem in accessing quality education. India is prone to a number of natural disasters like floods, earthquakes and drought, so also there are a few areas affected by civil strife.[25]

Policy Gaps

Although a landmark Act, Right to Education Act 2009 remains restricted to 6 to 14 the age group, the critical early childhood years and the adolescent years of 15 to 18 age are not included

- Research has shown that quality ECCE helps children to obtain better academic achievement scores and less likely to drop out in primary school by at least 15-20% [26]

- As per Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2015, six lakhs less girls have access to the pre-school component of the ICDS in comparison to boys.

- A significant roadblock to girls' education at the secondary level is the distance to school. Even if girls get enrolled in secondary education, they end up dropping out, as in the case of Rajgarh, Haryana where the nearest secondary section in a school is 8 km away[27].

In NEP 2020 Girls' education is part of the section on *Equitable and Inclusive Education: Learning for All*, clubbing girl's education as part of Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs). This approach negates the historical structural barriers and treats girls as mere numbers, the strategies that policy proposes remain generic, like providing bicycles and organizing cycling and walking groups to provide access to school. The transformative role of education in bringing gender equality in the society is totally ignored.

Significance of Girls' Education

Girls need to be educated because it is their Right, it is their basic entitlement.

- Education is 'sure way of giving them much greater power -- of enabling them to make genuine choices over the kinds of lives they wish to lead'[28]
- Educated girls will have skills, information and self-confidence that helps her be a better worker, citizen and a parent.[29]
- Education transforms lives of girls, she is safer, is better nourished, experiences less discrimination, makes her own decisions and has control on her productive and reproductive life.[30]
- Education helps girls to play a leadership role in her community and society at large.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Right to Education: the need for a Continuum

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE), 2009, makes elementary education a fundamental right under Article 21A of the Indian Constitution. It, however, excludes children below 6 years and 15-18 years from its ambit.

Recommendations:

- Extend RTE Act, 2009 from birth to 18 years, in line with the internationally recognized definition of childhood.
- The RTE Act should be supported by practical strategies and solutions that make it possible for girls to attend schools. These could include but not be limited to, provision of creche and child care facilities that relieve girls from sibling care, expanded access to secondary schools, and provision of safe transport.
- Develop effective support strategies to ensure transition of girls at various levels with strategies like counselling, learning support, accelerated learning bridge courses, effective and robust child monitoring system.

2. Safe and Secure Environment:

A safe and secure environment goes a long way in supporting education of girls, in fact it is the most fundamental requirement for girls.

Recommendations:

Safe and Secure Infrastructure: The RTE norms of safe, clean and hygienic school infrastructure should be non-negotiable. To reiterate:

- School buildings should be safe with proper boundary walls.
- Access to school should be safe by ensuring the road is free of physical hazard and addressing risks of bullying, harassment or Gender Based Violence.
- Provide safe transport to girls to reach schools.
- Schools need to have appropriate WASH facilities and menstrual hygiene education for both girls and boys.
- Ensure proper nutrition of girls in all age group through mid-day meals and supplementary nutrition.

Child Protection Mechanisms: Proper child protection mechanisms should be part of all school systems, including residential schools for girls. These mechanisms should be established in coordination with bodies like National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) and other protective agencies like National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), and Police. All schools should establish protective well- defined norms and rules and gender-responsive grievance redressal mechanism.

Work with Boys and Men: Engagement with boys and men through curricular approaches or community-based programs is imperative if GBV and harassment of girls are to be prevented.

Community Engagement: It is essential that communities make girls' safety at school and in the community a priority and work towards changing discriminatory attitudes and practices within the community. Ensure participatory safety audits for safe infrastructure, gender sensitive school ethos and violence free schools.

3. Ensure Quality and Equity

RTE has well stated norms to ensure quality education for all children but they remain elusive for most schools. RTE norms need to be strengthened with efforts for equity, for there can be no quality without equity initiatives. Quality and equity needs to be integral to curriculum, classroom practices and teacher development.

Recommendations:

Curriculum and Learning Material: Review and revise curriculum, text-books and other learning material to make it gender sensitive and gender-transformative. Learning material should work towards altering the existing patriarchal and misogynist attitude of boys (and girls) and to make women and girls' more visible, as empowered role models.

Classroom Practices: Train teachers on gender-sensitive and inclusive teaching-learning practices. The issue here is about equity; girls as learners will need extra support for learning, as to redefine their self-concept, aspirations and life goals . It is imperative that not only gender but caste and religious biases and discriminatory classroom practices are also addressed.

Teacher Recruitment and Professional Development

Trained teachers are important for promoting girls' education as they ensure quality, equity and learning.

- Ensure all teacher positions are filled with adequate number of professionally qualified, trained, supported, regular teachers

- Ensure proper gender representation during teacher recruitment and to ensure adequate career path for women teachers to ensure representation of women in the teaching profession

- Revise teacher training curriculum to make it practical and sensitive to social realities of gender, social exclusion and patriarchy

- Ensure adequate budgets and monitoring for teacher recruitment and training.

4. Empowerment and Life Skills

Along with academic skills, girls need to be equipped with skills that help them succeed in their day to day and later in life. Girls who face pervasive patriarchy in all aspects of their life must be empowered with Life Skills (LS) that help them overcome these barriers and negotiate for a better quality of life for themselves and their families. LS need to cater to boys too, it is utmost necessary that boys move from their entitlement, machismo and misogynistic perspective to a learning to live and work with women as equals.

Recommendations:

- **Life Skills:** Develop Life Skill (LS) Curriculum that is age and grade appropriate in a participatory manner with representation from technical experts, teachers, community members and children. LS curriculum should enable girls (and boys) to understand the structural barriers of inequality and prepare them with skills and competencies that help them achieve transformative life outcomes and social change[31].

- **Teachers Training:** Teacher training institutions need to integrate LS training in their pre- and in-service teacher training programmes to ensure an enabling, democratic environment that gives space to girls to express and assert themselves.

5. Governance and Financing for equitable and inclusive girls' education

Governance in education should be responsive, accountable, transparent and ensure engagement of citizens. Capacity of government decision makers and professionals at all levels (state, central and local level) needs to be built to design and implement gender sensitive policies and practices across the education system, efforts should not be restricted just to girl centric initiatives like KGBV. Budgets and plans at all levels should be informed by a gender lens.

Recommendations:

- Gender should be a cross-cutting theme in all policy formulations and strategies on education including budgeting at all levels, local/ Panchayat, state and central level.

- Increase budget for education, with funding incentivizing closing of gender-based disparities and closing the gap in per girl costs across states by lifting the floor of expenditure.

- Ensure optimum investment in issues related to safety, gender sensitization of teachers and accelerated learning for girls to enable their return and complete their education.

- Undertake regular gender and social inclusion audits of schools to inform education planning, budgeting, and management of resources

- Strengthen sensitization of education management personnel on issues of gender transformative education

- The scope of work and capacity of mandate holders on gender issues in the system (e.g., the gender coordinators) must be expanded to engage with the larger school net, not only with the dedicated schools meant for girls alone (e.g. KGBVs).

- Enhance regulation of private schools, including regulation of fees, to close the gender gap in enrolment.

Parents and Community Engagement

It is important to engage parents/mothers and the community as a whole to ensure ownership and also address the issues of girls' education collectively and act as an enabler for girls' education

- Invest and strengthen statutory bodies like school management committees (SMCs) and Panchayati Raj Institutions through training to plan, monitor, support and audit functioning of schools, particularly with the perspective of ensuring schools become more gender transformative

- Emphasize women's representation and leadership in Panchayats, SMCs and other education committees

- Strengthen mechanisms for grievance redress to allow instances of violations of educational rights to be reported and acted upon

- Enable formations of SMC federations at the district and state level for longer and proactive engagement for making girls' education inclusive and equitable.

CONCLUSION

The present Policy Brief is an initial step by the RTE Forum and its partners for promoting girls' education at all levels. Comprehensive and sustained advocacy will be undertaken at national and state level to ensure gender sensitive policies and programmes that are backed with adequate budgetary allocation.

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