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GENDER EQUITY IN EDUCATION: A REVIEW OF TRENDS AND FACTORS

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

AIES	-All India Educational Survey
BMI	-Body Mass Index
DISE	- District Information System for Education
DPEP	- District Primary Education Programme
GPI	-Gender Parity Index
HDI	- Human Development Index
KGBVS	- Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya Scheme
LJ	-Lok Jumbish
MS	-Mahila Samakhya – Education for Women's Equality project
NCAER	- National Council of Applied Economic Research
NCERT	- National Council of Educational Research and Training
NFHS	- National Family Health Survey
NGO	- Non Governmental Organisations
NPE	- National Policy on Education
NPEGEL	- National Programme of Education for Girls at Elementary Level
NSS	- National Sample Survey
PMIS	-Project Monitoring Information System
POA	- Programme of Action
PROBE	- Public Report on Basic Education in India
SC	- Scheduled Castes
SSA	- Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan
ST	-Scheduled Tribes
TAS	- Terminal Assessment Survey
WRITE	- Women's Residential Institute for Training and Education

INTRODUCTION

This paper provides an account of gender equity in schooling in India, with a particular emphasis on educational access. It aims to highlight educational access issues affecting both girls and boys in India and the types of initiatives needed to secure meaningful and sustainable access for all. The paper has been commissioned by the Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE) and draws on CREATE's Zones of Exclusion model (see Appendix One).

Specifically, this paper refers to the gendered aspects of access in six zones of exclusion in Indian context (Govinda and Bandyopadhyay, 2007): children who have never been to school and are termed as 'never enrolled' (Zone 1); children who enter primary schooling (grades I through V), but drop out before completing primary (Zone 2); children who enter primary schooling but are 'at risk' of dropping out (Zone 3); children who complete primary but fail to make the transition to upper primary (grades VI through VIII) (Zone 4); children who enter upper primary schooling but who drop out before completing the cycle (Zone 5); and children who complete elementary schooling (in the Indian context, 'elementary' refers to primary and upper primary levels, or from grade I through grade VIII) but do not enter secondary schooling. Developed as a review of existing literature and data, the paper provides both qualitative and quantitative accounts of gendered access to schooling.

In the first section, the paper provides background narrative to the gendered contexts of education in India. There then follows quantitative information on educational access according to gender. Both data and research literature are analysed to highlight the interlocking nature of educational inclusions and exclusions, viewing gendered access alongside issues such as education of children belonging to scheduled caste, scheduled tribes and Muslims, disability, poverty and child labour. Supply-side issues are also discussed in terms of educational provision and gendered schooling practices. Initiatives designed to address gendered inequalities are then highlighted and critiqued. Finally, conclusions are drawn and recommendations are made for future research.

BACKGROUND TO GENDER IN EDUCATION IN INDIA

India accounts for 30% of the world's total illiterate population and around 70% of these illiterates are women. As per 2001 Census data, women constitute 48% of the total population in India, but around 46% of women are still found to be illiterate. Problems of gender disparity and discrimination begin with access to schooling. The Gender Parity Index (GPI) at the primary and upper primary levels was 0.9 and 0.8 in 2003 respectively (GoI, 2004). According to DISE (2006), this remained more or less same in 2005-06 (for primary GPI was 0.92 and for upper primary 0.84). Once girls are able to get enrolled in school, they are rather more likely than boys to continue their education with more success (UNESCO, 2004). Access and retention problems deepen at higher levels of education with the GPI at lower secondary and upper secondary levels dropping to 0.73 and 0.67 respectively (UNESCO, 2004).

Female education has long been acknowledged to have strong correlations with other dimensions of human and social development. As Mehrotra (2006) notes, low levels of education significantly affect the health and nutritional status of women. For instance, in the case of India, he notes that chances of suffering from the diseases caused by malnutrition decrease steadily with increased levels of education. Height and Body Mass Index (BMI) vary with level of education and illiterate women are reportedly at more risk of having lower height and BMI (leading to higher deficiency of iron and other nutrients).

Similarly, he noted that while 56% of illiterate women suffer from anaemia, the percentage declines to 40% in the case of the women who have completed at least high school (Mehrotra, 2006: 914).

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Despite strong economic and social evidence of the high returns to female education, most communities continue to under-invest in female education relative to male education. Even as the thresholds of schooling completion increase, with significantly narrowing gender gaps in primary education in particular, discrimination against girls in secondary and higher education remains an issue. Economic and social privilege also affect gendered patterns of access, with girls in secondary and higher education predominantly drawn from higher income and social groups, endowed with higher social status.

Reasons for parental under-investment in female education are diverse and well-known (see Subrahmanian, 2005). The deeply embedded undervaluation of female labour, identified primarily with the reproductive or household sphere, underlies the belief in many communities that educating females bring low returns, as skills required in the reproductive sphere require domestic socialization and not many years of schooling.

The gender division of labour continues to reward women less in the workplace (Kingdon, 1998b). This has resulted in relatively lower female education and work participation reflecting the ideological bias against considering women as household bread-winners. Low valuation of female labour in the market place and association of female labour with fulfilling domestic responsibilities including child rearing has led to a deep-seated cultural association of women with the institutions of marriage and family. Jha and Jhingran's (2002) detailed study of schooling in communities across 10 districts of India shows the continued belief in the importance of marriage for girls at an early age, and of maintaining asymmetries between men and women in educational attainment as a marker of relatively greater male social status.

While gender inequalities intensify with poverty, caste inequalities and geographical location (particularly in underdeveloped rural areas), particular gender-differentiated ideologies cut across all social groups, explaining why in all social groups, girls lag behind boys in access to and participation in education. These include specific views on the appropriate roles to be played by women in family and society, and the underlying controls placed on female mobility and chastity.

These gender-specific ideologies are responsible for the continued wide gaps in female secondary schooling enrolment. Further, responsibilities for securing domestic water and fuel place tremendous time burdens on women, often shared with younger girls in the family who could otherwise be in school or at rest or play. Investments in water supply, sustainable energy and renewable sources of fuel all can have significant impact on female education.

Sexual harassment and violence also continue to be major constraining factors preventing parents from freely sending their girls to school. Public spaces in India continue to be relatively hostile to the presence of women, and rarely function in a way to make women feel secure and confident.

Transporting girls to school and back safely, especially where secondary schools and universities are far away from their homes, is a critical policy measure that has received scant attention. Similarly,

while initiatives to teach girls self defense or cycling have been widely hailed as critical components of gender-sensitive education, they have not really been taken up and promoted widely through the education system.

Ideologies that shape female and male identities in Indian society are mutually reinforcing across institutions, such as the family, workplace, and community (Kabeer and Subrahmanian, 1999) leading to vicious cycles of under-investment in females.

Female education has suffered as a result of this, though it is well-known that breaking the cycle of multiple deprivations can be significantly furthered through ensuring quality education for girls and boys. Education has the potential to contribute to alternative socialization, challenging conventional gender ideologies, levelling the playing field between males and females in relation to skills, credentials and qualification, and allowing women the use of knowledge to empower themselves in diverse ways.

For example, a study in Calcutta has shown the positive impact that education has on the ability of women to resist and resolve situations of domestic violence (Sen, 1999). However, gender ideologies are open to change, and the recent structural shifts in Indian society and economy in an era of economic liberalization and globalization have created new aspirations and opportunities, which are likely, in turn, to have had an impact on the demand for female education. Evidence of these changing dynamics, it can be argued, is found in the ever increasing demand for female elementary education.

The changing demand for girls' education, and particularly for primary schooling, has been noted even in highly conservative societies such as feudal Rajasthan (Ramachandran, 1998). Given that education in India is strongly associated with securing occupational mobility (Sudarshan, 2000), these changing dynamics are important to study in relation to their links to the kind of demand for different types of schooling being fuelled. Sudarshan (2000) argues that the two driving motivations for education in India are linked to aspirations for salaried occupations and to the marriage market, where wide gaps between the educational qualifications of males and females are considered to constitute a risk to the stability of the marriage. Structural changes in both these types of market, for
employment and marriage, are likely to have attendant changes in the demand and length of female schooling (Subrahmanian, 2003a).

Policy documents like the report of the Kothari Commission (GoI, 1964-66) and the National Policy on Education 1986 (GoI, 1986) and its POA in 1992 (GoI, 1992a) have put enormous emphasis on promotion of gender equity in education by reducing the gender gap in access, retention and transition from one stage to other. However, despite such policy recognition of the importance of female education, dedicated programmes within Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), and efforts at 'gender mainstreaming' within the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), data shows a continuing gender gap in relation to attendance and drop-out. As this review paper goes on to argue, the increased enrolment of girls is widely attributed to the increasing number of 'informal' or 'nonformal' education

programmes, and associated with a public sector that is considered widely to have failed in terms of delivery of quality education.

If the increasing enrolment of girls is taking place in an environment of fragmented provision and poor quality public delivery, then the question remains of the value and success of current policy and programmatic interventions in relation to closing the gender gap in a sustainable way.

TRENDS IN LITERACY

In recent years, India has reportedly shown considerable improvement at each level of education for boys as well as for girls. Drawing on data from the national Census, many studies and reports have indicated that there has been significant improvement in literacy levels, and particularly in the reduction of female illiteracy, during the decade 1991-2001. The gender gap in literacy has also narrowed during that time, although there was still a gap of 22 percentage point between the genders according to the 2001 Census, in comparison to a 25 percentage point gap ten years earlier.

The last decade has experienced the highest decadal increase in literacy (12.6 percentage points) since Independence, with an increase in this period from 2.2% to 64.8%. For the first time, the country has also experienced faster growth in female literacy, which increased by around 15 percentage points (from 39-54%) as compared to that of males (64-75%). There has been a spectacular increase in the percentage share of the literate population over the fifty years since Independence (Census of India, 2001). While in 1951 only 25% of males and 8% of females were literate (GOI, 1997b), in 2001 their percentage shares had moved to 76% and 54% respectively. Along with this huge increase in the literate population, the absolute number of illiterates also declined substantially during 1991-2001 as compared to the earlier decade of 1981-1991. The literacy rate improved by 8.6 percentage points from 1981-1991, while the increase was 12.6 percentage points during the next decade.

TRENDS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLING

Along with improvements in literacy, India has witnessed a significant increase in primary as well as upper primary enrolments. The recent data (GOI, 2007a) suggests that there has been a considerable increase in the participation of girls in school because of an increase in enrolments and decline in drop-out rates over the years. The numerical strength of girls as well as boys has increased rapidly during the last few decades and in particular since 1990. Table 2 indicates that around 97.4 million children were enrolled in primary schools in 1990-9191, with numbers increasing to 130.8 million in 2004-2005.

In terms of upper primary, numbers have increased from 34 million to 51.2 million during same period. The gap between the number of boys and girls has also reduced during this period. In terms of absolute numbers, however, girls' enrolment has been consistently lower than that of boys over the same period, both at primary and upper primary levels.

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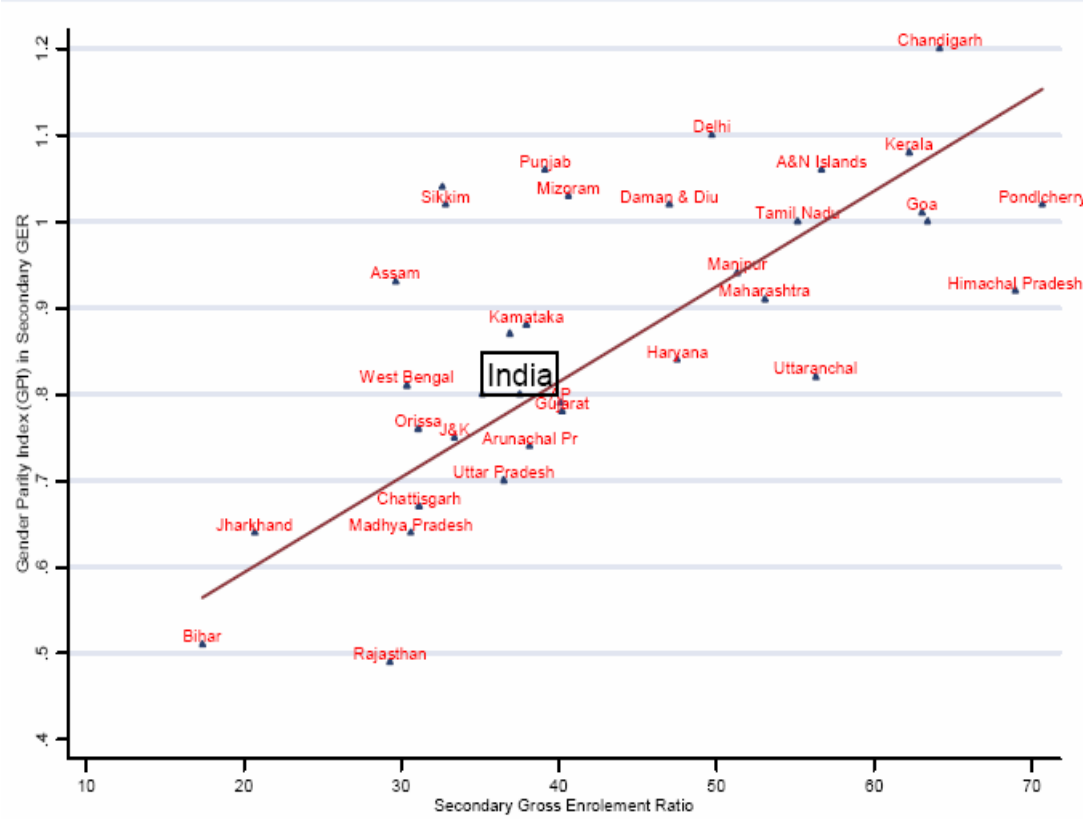
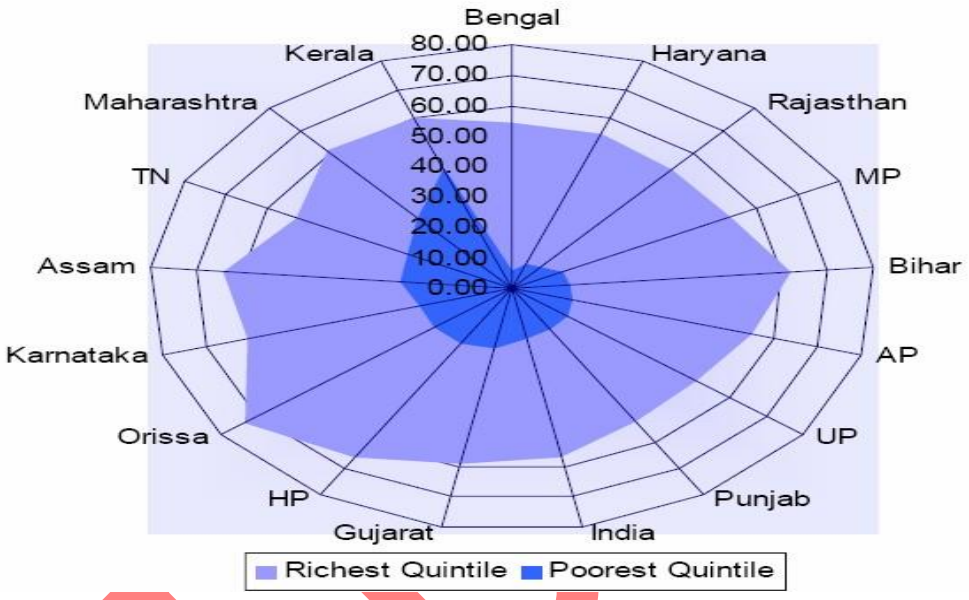
INTER-STATE DISPARITIES

Figure below shows great inter-state variation in gender-disparity in secondary school enrolment rates. The gender parity index here is the male to female secondary school enrolment ratio. A ratio of 1 represents gender equality. States such as Bihar and Rajasthan have grotesque gender inequality: girls are only half as likely to enrol in secondary school as boys. Other BIMARU states . Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, together with their split-offs (Jharkhand and Chattisgarh) . also have appalling gender inequality5, but on the bright side, many states have gender parity or even slightly pro-female secondary enrolment rates, e.g. Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Kingdon (2005) finds that an important part of the reason for gender inequality is to be found within the household, as opposed to institutional explanations (indeed, policy promotes girls. enrolment by instituting tuition free schooling for girls). Using household fixed effects equations, she finds strong within-household bias against daughters in terms of enrolment and household educational expenditure.



Source : World Bank (2006)

Using National Sample Survey data for 2004-2006, there is a good deal of interstate variation in the extent of inequality in access to secondary schooling, as seen in Figure 4. The inequality (measured as the difference in access to secondary education among those in the top and bottom quintiles of the distribution of household per capita income) is greatest in Haryana, Andhra Pradesh and the so-called. BIMARU. (Sick) states. Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. which lag behind in many other indicators of social development. The inequality is lowest in the left leaning states of Kerala and West Bengal.



Source : World Bank (2006)

A final point to note: by focusing on equality of treatment and opportunity through a gender lens,we need to emphasise equally the importance of paying attention to the kinds of behaviours andattitudes that impose gendered expectations on males within the schoolroom. As Sewell et al. (2003) and Figueroa (2000) have argued for the Caribbean, dominant constructions of male identity and masculinity can bring enormous pressure to bear on boys significantly affecting their performance in school. Similarly, in the UK, expectations for boys to underperform as an aspect of their 'laddish' identity can turn into self-fulfilling prophecies (Arnot and Phipps, 2003).

EDUCATION OF SCHEDULED CASTE (SC) AND SCHEDULED TRIBE (ST) GIRLS

According to Government of India data for 2004-05, enrolment of SC and ST children has increased (see Table 10) at both the primary and upper primary levels (GOI, 2007a). However, the gender gap continues at both levels, with more boys than girls from SC and ST groups in schools. The increase in numbers of both boys and girls has been particularly substantial during the last decade. In 2004-2005 there were almost 25 million SC children in primary school, compared to 15 million in 1990-1991. Similarly, in 2004- 2005 there were almost 14 million ST children in primary school, compared to almost 8 million in 1990-1991.

Ramachandran (2001: 9) describes how issues with the enrolment of SC and ST girls are of more concern in certain states. The enrolment situation of SC girls is of concern in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, while the enrolment of ST girls is low in Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Bihar. Ramachandran (2001: 2) further states that, 'a MODE/UNICEF (1995) study observes that the percentage of children who have never been to school is higher among SC and ST groups' (Ramachandran, 2001: 2).

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The educational disadvantages of these groups are firmly embedded in wider inequalities of poverty and deprivation. Children receive discriminatory treatment in school, are sometimes asked to sit separately, and are not permitted to drink from the same source of water as other students. Such deep-seated discrimination can constrain the effectiveness of special measures targeted at these historically disadvantaged groups. For example, the national Midday Meal scheme, which has the potential to unite socially divided groups, is in many states unable to effectively deliver the required outcomes, becauseof discrimination in the implementation of the programme (Thorat and Lee, 2005).

IMPORTANT FACTORS EFFECTING GENDER EQUITY

School Availability

Improvements in educational access in India were quite spectacular during the 1990s. A comparison of data from AIES surveys (NCERT, 1999 and 2005) indicates improvements in the availability of government schools over that decade. There was a 14.19% increase in the number of primary schools and 51% increase in the number of secondary schools. Despite these improvements, even at the time of Seventh AIES in 2003, out of total 1,231,391 habitations in the country, 13% do not have a primary school within a 1km radius; while 22% lack an upper primary school within 3km (NCERT, 2005).

Many of these habitations are predominantly inhabited by marginalized groups, particularly SC and ST populations. In the State of Jharkhand (which has a high proportion of ST groups), children in 23% of habitations were unable to access primary school within 1km distance; while in 39% of habitations an upper primary school is not available within 3km (NCERT, 2005). To address the demands of poor people, the state has opened 14,000 Alternative Schooling centres under EGS/AIE Scheme (Govinda and Biswal, 2006) in the state. These are single teacher schools, without buildings.

Teachers in these schools lack professional qualifications. Many other states also have opened such schools to accommodate growing number of children particularly in remote areas. However this statistics is widely changed in urban areas with private schools coming up and spreading educationalreach of the country.

Value of Education

The perception of the importance of education for girls seems to affect enrolments, particularly in rural areas. Of girls in the 5-14 age group, 23% of those living in rural areas had never attended an educational institution because education was not considered necessary, as opposed to 15% of their urban counterparts (GoI, 2006b; see Table 14). This is compared to 16% of rural boys and 12% of urban boys aged 5-14 years who were found to have never attended school for this reason (GoI, 2006b; see Table 14). Thus it seems evident that girls and children living in rural areas are less likely to go to school than urban boys because of the value placed on education. It seems work still has to be done on mobilizing communities around the importance of girls' education, particularly in rural areas.

Dropping Out

It is also evident from the 61st Round NSS that a large number of children are dropping out before completion of a basic education cycle (GoI, 2006b; see Table 16). Very few children reported distance to educational institution as a reason for dropping out. Around 40% of urban and rural male drop outs aged 10-14 years had left school because they were required to support household income. Girls aged 10-14 years were more likely to drop out because of household chores (11% for rural and 17% for urban girls).

Around 11% of urban male drop outs and 10% of urban female drop outs aged 10-14 had to leave school because their education had not been considered important. Around 7% of boys and 9% of girlswho dropped out of school in rural area had to leave the school for the same reason.

POLICY, PROGRAMME AND INSTITUTIONAL EFFORTS TO MAINSTREAM' GENDER ISSUES IN EDUCATION

Ramachandran (1998) provides a comprehensive list of the types of interventions for improving female access to education that have been detailed in various policy and programme documents over the years. Box 1 shows a mixture of approaches such as, for example, building more schools, improving management structures and administrative efficiency, increasing accountability, and curriculum reform.

The most established policy and programme interventions in India are those that try to improve access to schooling, through non-formal or alternative schooling programmes (such as bridge courses) and constructing schools. Access reforms that have required inter-departmental coordination (such as improving school sanitation through building toilets and supplying water) have been far less successful. Reforms that demand 'root and branch' changes in the ways in which institutions 'think' about gender inequality have rarely been attempted, apart from some cursory efforts to make textbooks more gender sensitive. Efforts to address biases in curriculum *transaction* have been entirely missing.

DEVELOPING CAPACITIES AND SKILLS OF WOMEN TO ACT AS CHANGEAGENTS

A significant feature of innovative programmes that have made an impact on female education is their investment in cadres of women involved in different aspects of education (management, teaching, community mobilization) and their emphasis on women's participation. This is one critical lesson that has yet to be adopted and scaled up within the education system; currently, it is a token strategy within the wider approach.

Programmes such as Shiksha Karmi, Lok Jumbish, and Mahila Samakhya have demonstrated the importance of building up women's capacities and skills and giving them positions of responsibility within the wider education intervention. Investing in adult women, as argued in the introduction to this paper, is one of the key interventions that can make a significant and meaningful impact on female education. This involves, however, substantial investment in processes of confidence building and awareness rising to ensure that women feel equipped to fulfill new roles and responsibilities.

Support to women cadres is also highly critical, as they may need to defend processes of change that are otherwise resisted by their communities.

CONCLUSIONS

The preceding analysis reveals that there has been considerable improvement in participation of girls during the post-Independence period, yet it continues to be below 50% both at primary and upper primary levels of school education. Although the increase in enrolment has been more significant at the upper primary level as compared to primary level, progress has been made. Data from the Seventh AIES, for example, shows an increase in total girls enrolment of 26.2 percentage points in primary schools and 37.5 percentage points in upper primary schools from 1993 to 2002 (NCERT 2005).

There has also been a notable increase in the enrolment of rural girls. While enrolment of girls in all areas grew by almost 37% in grades I-V and by 52.5% in grades VI-VIII, in rural areas it increased by 42.4% in primary schools and 66.2% in upper primary schools during the same period. It is noteworthy that enrolment of girls is increasing steadily with higher growth rates than that of boys; the growth ratesfor girls' enrolment at the primary stage (grades I-V) were twice as high as that for boys and more than double at the middle stage (grades VI-VIII).

The GER of both boys and girls have shown steady increases at the primary and upper primary levels, but considerable gender gaps remain, particularly at the upper primary level. GER of boys as well as of girls are much lower at the upper primary level than primary level, but there is very little difference between GPI of primary and upper primary. While the GPI is now 0.95 at the primary level, it is 0.93 atthe upper primary level. Although the GER of boys was much higher than girls at the upper primary level, the GER of boys increased by 20 percentage points whereas for girls this increase was around 44 percentage points between 1981 and 2005.

The analysis in this paper also throws some lights on considerable variations in the growth of enrolmentof girls across the states. In many states there has been a significant improvement in girls' enrolments during the six years between NFHS I (1993) and NFHS II (1999). Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Bihar have witnessed especially high increases. States such as Haryana, Maharashtra, Punjab, Kerala and Tamil Nadu also had high levels of enrolment initially, and continued to experience increased enrolment levels between 1993 and 1999.

Despite such impressive gains in the participation of children in schooling, a large number of girls still face difficulties in entering school and continuing their studies. The states which need serious attention are Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and West Bengal, where more girls than boys tend to remain out of school. There is also a significant gender gap in educational participation in states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Orissa. In Bihar, Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Chandigarh, the GPI has not yet reached 90 at the primary level. Some of the major reasons for girls' non-attendance and drop out include gender discrimination by parents and society in general; the undervaluing of girls' education; the burden of household chores and sibling care; poverty; and the practice of child marriage. It is also evident from the state-wise attendance rates that girls in

certain states (e.g. Bihar, Arunachal Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh) are less likely to be enrolled in school than girls living in others (e.g. Kerala, Himachal Pradesh and Mizoram). In general, wide gender disparities in enrolment still exist in 'educationally backward' states, and accompany long-standing gendered divisions in society. Although in the majority of states girls have lower enrolment rates than boys, girls do have higher rates of enrolment than boys in Goa, Kerala, Delhi and Meghalaya. This suggests that positive change is possible.

To conclude, challenges in achieving gender equality remain significant, and recent policy initiatives are silent on many of the critical issues of quality and mainstreaming gender within the education system as a whole. Lessons since the mid-1980s point to the need for intensive process-based, multi-sectoral approaches in order to sustain gains made in enrolment rates. Whether this is within the capacity of the existing educational architecture, or is possible without major administrative reforms, is the most important question. Further, the impacts of the increasing commercialization of schooling and the rise of diverse providers needs to be better understood and addressed. A pragmatic view would be to accept that this cannot happen and therefore to push for greater decentralization and more innovative ways to encourage local communities to achieve change. As long as weak incentives continue to be offered to a large and opaque education bureaucracy, the kinds of change required are unlikely to take place in the near future.

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