



*Journal of Advances and
Scholarly Researches in
Allied Education*

*Vol. IV, Issue VIII, October-
2012, ISSN 2230-7540*

REVIEW ARTICLE

FEMALE EDUCATION: AN UNDENIABLE PRIORITY TO REDUCE POVERTY

Female Education: An Undeniable Priority to Reduce Poverty

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INTRODUCTION

Women constitute almost half of the population in the world. But the hegemonic masculine ideology made them suffer a lot as they were denied equal opportunities in different parts of the world. The rise of feminist ideas has, however, led to the tremendous improvement of women's condition through out the world in recent times. Access to education has been one of the most pressing demands of these women's rights movements. Women education in India has also been a major preoccupation of both the government and civil society as educated women can play a very important role in the development of the country.

HISTORY OF WOMEN EDUCATION IN INDIA

Although in the Vedic period women had access to education in India, they had gradually lost this right. However, in the British period there was revival of interest in women's education in India. During this period, various socio religious movements led by eminent persons like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar emphasized on women's education in India. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Periyar and Baba Saheb Ambedkar were leaders of the lower castes in India who took various initiatives to make education available to the women of India. However women's education got a fillip after the country got independence in 1947 and the government has taken various measures to provide education to all Indian women. As a result women's literacy rate has grown over the three decades and the growth of female literacy has in fact been higher than that of male literacy rate. While in 1971 only 22% of Indian women were literate, by the end of 2001 54.16% female were literate. The growth of female literacy rate is 14.87% as compared to 11.72 % of that of male literacy rate.

IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN EDUCATION IN INDIA

Women education in India plays a very important role in the overall development of the country.

It not only helps in the development of half of the human resources, but in improving the quality of life at home and outside. Educated women not only tend to

promote education of their girl children, but also can provide better guidance to all their children. Gender discrimination still persists in India and lot more needs to be done in the field of women's education in India. The gap in the male-female literacy rate is just a simple indicator. While the male literary rate is more than 75% according to the 2001 census, the female literacy rate is just 54.16%. Prevailing prejudices, low enrollment of girl child in the schools, engagements of girl children in domestic works and high drop out rate are major obstacles in the path of making all Indian women educated.

OTHER UNDENIABLE BENEFITS

There are several compelling benefits associated with girls' education, which include the reduction of child and maternal mortality, improvement of child nutrition and health, lower fertility rates, enhancement of women's domestic role and their political participation, improvement of the economic productivity and growth, and protection of girls from HIV/AIDS, abuse and exploitation. Girls' education yields some of the highest returns of all development investments, yielding both private and social benefits that accrue to individuals, families, and society at large by:

- Reducing women's fertility rates.
- Lowering infant and child mortality rates
- Lowering maternal mortality rates
- Protecting against HIV/AIDS infection
- Increasing women's labor force participation rates and earnings
- Creating intergenerational education benefits

Girls' education and the promotion of gender equality in education are vital to development, and policies and actions that do not address gender disparities miss critical development opportunities.

GENDER AND POVERTY

Six out of ten of the world's poorest people are women who must, as the primary family caretakers and producers of food, shoulder the burden of tilling land, grinding grain, carrying water and cooking. This is no easy burden. In Kenya, women can burn up to 85 percent of their daily calorie intake just fetching water.

Yet some 75 percent of the world's women cannot get bank loans because they have unpaid or insecure jobs and are not entitled to property ownership. This is one reason why women comprise more than 50 percent of the world's population but own only one percent of the world's wealth.

Equality between men and women is more than a matter of social justice - it's a fundamental human right. But [gender equality](#) also makes good economic sense. When women have equal access to education, and go on to participate fully in business and economic decision-making, they are a key driving force against [poverty](#). Women with equal rights are better educated, healthier, and have greater access to land, jobs and financial resources. Their increased earning power in turn raises household incomes. By enhancing women's control over decision-making in the household, gender equality also translates into better prospects and greater well-being of children, reducing poverty of future generations.

Gender equality and women's empowerment is central to achieving the [Millennium Development Goals \(MDGs\)](#). Yet, while there are some positive trends in gender equality, there are still many areas of concern. Gender equality is a condition for inclusive, democratic, violence-free and sustainable development. This is why UNDP works collaboratively with national partners to:

- Include women in planning, budgeting, and policy-making processes in a meaningful way;
- Promote women's and girls' economic rights and opportunities;
- Address the gender dimensions of HIV and AIDS;
- Strengthen the collection and analysis of gender-disaggregated data;

Ensure that essential [public services](#) like health and education benefit women, men, girls and boys equitably.

EDUCATION AND POVERTY

The relationship between education and poverty reduction is very clear: educated people have higher income earning potential, and are better able to improve the quality of their lives. Investment in education is an essential element of any poverty

reduction strategy. Education is the primary vehicle by which economically and socially marginalized people can lift themselves out of poverty and obtain the means to participate fully in their communities.

Females in developing countries typically receive less education than do males. Although it is generally true that country with high GNP have greater educational equality for males and females, amongst poor countries there is considerable variation, both in overall levels of enrolment and in female/male enrolment ratios.

Though primary education is compulsory in India, only 66% of adults are literate with big differences between males and females (male: 76.9% and female: 54.5%). Expanding girl's education, for example, has a positive effect on income generation, fertility and infant mortality, nutrition, and enrollment rates. The synergies of education investment are powerful, and underscore the importance of education to facilitate achievement of a range of social and economic goals.

UN CALLS FOR WOMEN TO DRIVE GROWTH AND POVERTY REDUCTION

A new United Nations interagency report on the gender dimension of agricultural work says women still benefit less than men from rural employment. The report says women in the rural villages should be empowered so they can help reduce poverty and drive economic growth.

AMONG THE REPORT'S CONCLUSIONS ARE

- The enormous economic contribution of unpaid work must be recognized, and measures must be implemented to reduce and redistribute the burden of housework.
- Public works programmes can support gender equality in rural employment, especially if beneficiaries are genuinely involved in designing them.
- Promoting quality female education in rural areas and reducing gender gaps in primary and secondary schooling will improve women's access to decent employment.
- Non-traditional agricultural exports can generate quality employment for women and men, but women in particular are vulnerable to lax enforcement of labour standards.
- A package of complementary policy measures is needed to address the many gender differences in rural employment. The measures should include legal reforms that promote gender equality; social safety nets; assistance to organizations supporting

farmers, women and youth; child care programmes; education; and better access to information and labour markets.

The cornerstone of the report's analysis is the United Nation's Decent Work Agenda, which focuses on better jobs, social protection, and universal application of labour standards and promotion of equitable rural institutions.

EMPOWERING GIRLS THROUGH EDUCATION IN INDIA

UNICEF is working with the Indian government and other international and non-governmental organizations to help provide quality education for all girls. Girls' education is now a state priority in India, owing in part to efforts by the Indian government, international agencies and local non-governmental organizations. Quality education for all girls is a basic right, and UNICEF is working to ensure it remains high on the agenda. In Bihar's rural villages, a programme is encouraging parents to educate daughters along with their sons. As a result, thousands of girls are now attending school for the first time, in informal settings organized by village women. This is just one of several girls' education programmes in the state, but much more needs to be done to realize the right of a quality education for all.

PROMOTING EDUCATION FOR POOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

There is also a broad range of possibilities for educational initiatives with a gender and poverty focus outside of the schooling system. Adult literacy programmes may be valuable in reaching women who were not schooled as girls. This kind of education can be delivered in a variety of forms, not only literacy classes, but integrated with other programmes such as credit, income generating, health etc. A focus on promoting learning for empowerment and social, economic and political involvement suggests the importance of education for legal awareness and leadership training. Adult literacy programmes have been shown to have positive impact on women's political empowerment in their communities, e.g. in Andhra Pradesh, India. Gaining basic literacy and numeracy increases women's confidence and self-esteem. However, care is needed to ensure that adult education does not become a form of second best education for the poor, disguising the need to reform educational systems.

GIRLS' EDUCATION: A WORLD BANK PRIORITY

The World Bank is committed to fighting poverty and helping developing countries invest in their education systems. In light of this, it has embraced the achievement of the [Millennium Development Goals](#) as its main priority and, particularly, "eliminating gender

disparity in primary and secondary education." The World Bank has recognized that there is no investment more effective for achieving development goals than educating girls.

The World Bank is a partner and one of many players in the international drive to improve gender equality and empower girls and women. World Bank activities focus on assisting countries' own efforts to advance gender equality. Through its lending and non-lending activities, the Bank has helped to improve lives of girls in client countries. Since the [World Conference of Education in Jomtien](#) in 1990, the Bank's emphasis in the area of girls' education has increased and gender equality has been integrated as an important component of the Bank's poverty reduction mission. The Education for All – Fast Track Initiative and the recent Education Sector Strategy Update has reinforced the World Bank's commitment to the Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals.

How are girls doing?-Success and Challenges

Girls' enrollments tend to go upwards. Thirty years ago, girls represented 38 percent of primary enrollments in low-income countries and boys, 62 percent. Today, the gender gap has narrowed with girls representing 48 percent and boys 52 percent of primary enrollments (OECD/UNESCO, 2005). Gross enrollment rates for girls in some low-income countries have gone from 52 percent to 94 percent over that same period. These averages, however, hide sharp differences among regions and countries.

Between 1999 and 2006, the worldwide number of children not in school declined rapidly from about 100 million to 75 million. However, girls still constitute 55% of all out-of-school children, down from 59% in 1999. Worldwide, for every 100 boys out-of-school there are 122 girls. In some countries the gender gap is much wider. For example, for every 100 boys out of school in Yemen there are 270 girls, in Iraq 316 girls, in India 426 girls, and in Benin 257 girls (UNESCO GMR, 2007).

CONCLUSION

Gender differential access to school is usually caused by poverty, adverse cultural practices, schooling quality and distance to schools. However, there are some emerging challenges that reduce girls' enrollment in primary, secondary and tertiary education. These are: HIV/AIDS, orphanhood, conflicts, emergencies and other fragile situations, gender-based violence, and information technology gender gap.

Gender disparities still remain in both primary enrollment and school completion rates. However, many low-income countries have registered

improvements in primary school completion rates, with an average increase of 6 percent (from 63 percent in 1999 to 74 percent in 2006) (World Bank, EdStats, 2008). The completion rate for girls rose by 9 percentage points, from 57 percent in 1999 to 70 percent in 2006, whereas the primary school completion rates for boys increased only from 63 percent to 70 percent during the same period in low-income countries (World Bank, EdStats, 2008).

"Education is not a way to escape poverty - It is a way of fighting it."

--Julius Nyerere, former President of the United Republic of Tanzania

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