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Revamping Public Education:
towards Gender Equity and Women's
Empowerment in India

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Abstract

Women Empowerment comprehends the action of elevating the status of women through education, awareness, literacy, and training. Empowerment is also about equipping them to make life-determining decisions and giving them power in that space of society where they didn't have it earlier. Though policies on women's empowerment exist, there are significant gaps between policy advancement and 'actual' practice at the community level. Women in India are victims of crime, specifically- rape, kidnapping and abduction, dowry-related crimes, molestation, sexual harassment, eve-teasing, etc., with the crime rate against women being 62.4% (2019)^[1]. In spite of various measures taken by the Government, women are still discriminated against and marginalized at every level of the society- whether in access to education, economic participation, social participation, political participation, or reproductive healthcare. The lack of any serious effort to rectify the above issues against women further compounds the situation, ranking India at the position of 112/153 in World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2020^[2]. The dignity of women can be upheld only by empowering them.

This research paper explores 'Revamping Public Education in India to make it gender-inclusive', premised in the Education 2030 Framework for Action^[3], Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 - 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' and SDG 5 - 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls', and a follow-up multi-sectoral approach as a primary condition for women empowerment.

Keywords *Women Empowerment, Education, Gender Equality, SDG 4, SDG 5*

1.0 Introduction

In developing countries like India, girls are more likely to drop out of school as compared to boys^[4]. Universalizing affordable, accessible and equitable public education thus becomes a tool for women empowerment because it enables them to respond to everyday challenges (patriarchy, sexism, etc.) to confront their traditional roles (unpaid care work, homemaker, etc.). It brings a reduction in gender inequality and functions as a means of improving their status within the family, along with developing the concept of public participation. Inclusive educational environments, planned carefully so as to not jeopardize the quality of education will progressively empower female students (especially poor and vulnerable girls) to continue their education, reach their fullest potential in the future- as informed choices fuel productivity at the individual level, and economic growth at the larger level. Though the Gender Inclusion Fund and Special Education Zones introduced by the National Education Policy, 2020^[5] and other prevalent policies (like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao) give hope towards building a gender-equal public education system, the real conundrum of the state of public education in India, as a whole, fails to provide gender parity under the proposed provisions. Further, a pattern observed in the education schemes of the Ministry of Human Resource Development and Ministry of Women and Child Development is that the main focus is on reducing the cost of girls' education- providing free meals, uniforms etc. (refer National Programme for Education of Girls at an Elementary Level^[6]; Mid-Day Meal Scheme^[7]) - as the opportunity cost of educating a girl child is considered high and investing in girls' education is considered to be an act of watering someone else's plants. Almost all these educational policies are primarily focused on temporary direct actions aimed at enrolment, and lack initiatives regarding generating awareness of the benefits of educating and retaining girls in schools for their empowerment - both occupational and social. Policy-makers must thus lay emphasis on strengthening existing education policies for the girl child and further focus on these schemes and related provisions from a gender and sexuality perspective. In tandem to the stated objective, this Paper reviews current policies and suggests some plausible corrective actions.

2.0 Re-thinking the Legal Mandates of Right to Free and Compulsory Education, 2009^[8] (RTE) and District Primary Education Programme (DPEP)^[9] to address Gender Inequality through Education

As per the World Bank Databank, “Labor Force, Female (% of Total Labor Force) – India”^[10], women account for only 19.9% of the total labour force in India, and according to the National Task Force on women in Science Report^[11], India’s R&D sector has less than 15% women force, due to restrictive cultural practices regarding women’s work and education. A major reason behind the above-stated data is the mandatory promotion policy of the RTE Act under which students are promoted without any formal examination- clearly distorting the learning outcomes - resulting in a poor foundational base for future employment, especially for the female students. Because of this mandate, many-a-times, the students of 3rd, 4th and 5th standard are often clubbed and taught the same curriculum by teachers for years. Further, the districts under the DPEP hardly offer any critical reflection on such issues that determine primary school completion rates^[12], and as a result, about 78% of students in IIIrd class and 50% of students in Vth class cannot read an IInd class text, as per Pratham’s ASER Report^[13]. To address this loophole, a minimum standard of merit must be set for promotion of students at primary levels, and the rights-based empowerment framework, as mandated in the RTE must be pushed beyond 6-14 years of age (also in compliance with the United Nations charter assigned by India, which states that India will provide free education to students up to the age of 18), to include higher education (free collegiate) and vocational training for the vulnerable and marginalised women strata, and to ensure that the RTE policy continues to provide a robust support to the needs of girls- at all levels of education.

3.0 Scale-up/Revive Model schools and programmes to put Women in the position of change-makers and address the Inter-State Inequalities in Girls’ Education

There exists a significant gender gap when we observe the educational participation in states which are historically known for gender discrimination, such as UP, Bihar, Orissa and Rajasthan. Also, in some states, girls have higher rates of enrolment as compared to boys, such as Goa, Kerala, Delhi, and Meghalaya^[14]. Instead of following the same schooling system as envisaged under NEP, the Model Schooling System must be adopted in accordance with the special circumstances and follow-up baseline surveys of every state. Decentralising

the education system will widen female participation in areas where gender discrimination is high.

The success of local innovative programmes such as Shiksha Karmi^[15], Lok Jumbish^[16], and Mahila Samakhya^[17] show how building up women's skills and placing them at positions of responsibility, within wider educational settings leads to significant impacts. Such model programmes need to be scaled by the government to reproduce positive externalities. Also, reviving successful schemes like Kishori Sanghas^[18] or Meena^[19] for empowering adolescent girls can further promote active participation of girls in school activities.

4.0 Implementation of Special Incentives, Relevant Vocational Counselling and Training to Socially Uplift Meritorious Vulnerable Girl Students

Measures like incentives (for example, more scholarships and follow-up monitoring to ensure that the proposed aid reaches the beneficiaries), resources (like special mobile libraries, bicycles to travel to school), guidance and professional counselling regarding plausible occupational choices and life skills need to be provided at educational institutions, especially for marginalised girls that have an exemplary merit record to their name (belonging to SCs, STs, Tribal communities or having disabilities). The suggested provisions can be incorporated on a wider basis while restructuring the school curriculum under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 Provision 4- *Curriculum and Pedagogy in Schools (especially at the secondary and above level)*. Also, as mentioned in the National Programme of Education for Girls at Elementary Level^[20], teachers must be trained as catalysts to support and encourage girls (in school and out of school) to continue education and build a scientific temper, increase their self-awareness and achieve occupational achievement in future. This will empower women to make their own independent life decisions.

5.0 Universalising Investment in Girls' Education Schemes

The recent case of Aishwarya Reddy, a 19-year-old student committing suicide because of not being able to pay educational expenses, despite being a scholarship holder^[21] is a testament to the systemic loopholes in the current public education system- a system that fails to address inequalities and the special needs of vulnerable girl students. To address this issue, the government must universalise and expand schemes to help people save money for securing the future of the girl child. A scheme to look at in this context is the Sukanya

Samriddhi Yojana Account^[22], where a person can open an account for their girl child of up to 10 years old to save funds derived from high return rates- for her better future. But, it is often misused in the sense that many people regard it as a copy of the Public Provident Fund (PPF), which is used to make a long term investment under the garb of investing for the daughter. The same is the case with the Balika Samriddhi Yojana^[23]. Hence, there is a need to extend the reach of these schemes by universalising and making them accessible to all income brackets.

6.0 Gender-Sensitive Curriculum: Gender Education at the school level for building an Inclusive Learning Environment

Gender stereotypes shape children's understanding of women's and men's capabilities. Some reactionary school practices, offensive to the female gender include-offering Home Science as a subject with an intention to teach girls how to be good homemakers- wives and mothers; as many teachers in schools are females, it perpetuates the belief that care work is meant for women.

Discussions around such topics among children will influence systemic change- such as by challenging patriarchal stereotypical prejudices. Besides, giving girls a platform to participate and raise their voices and ideas during such discussions will promote positive gender roles. As schools form the formative platform where students experience gender-power dynamics, the concept of gender as a multidimensional term including gay, lesbian, bisexual and other sexual orientations need to be taught- a very crucial step currently missing in the national school curriculum as envisaged by National Curriculum Framework under the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), and the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT). Thus, gender education must be made a part of the compulsory educational curriculum under NEP 2020 Provision 4.24-*Curricular Integration of Essential Subjects, Skills, and Capacities*. It is important to realise that incorporating gender-sensitive education and discussions in the curriculum will help forge an all-inclusive learning environment for everyone, irrespective of one's gender orientation.

7.0 Behaviour Change Sessions for Parents and Feedback mechanism to track the Challenges and Needs of Girl Students

Statistically, girls are more disadvantaged because of gender inequality as compared to boys^[24]. In order to ensure that the developed policy mechanisms introduced by NEP 2020 are reaching to ensure quality education of the Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) as defined in NEP 2020, a robust feedback mechanism should be established between the school authorities and the beneficiaries. Given that a large number of parents in India are likely to spend less on girls' education, Behaviour Change Communication (BCC) activities involving parents (like, community campaigns or street plays) to highlight the importance of education for the girl child is something left unexplored by the education policies in India. Also, assessments to include parents' opinions, regarding barriers the girl child might be facing to attend school regularly (like, sibling-care and household work) or about the inequalities in the school environment (like, violation of child safety etc.), must be discussed on a regular basis, to address these obstructions in girls' learning and make the schooling system more robust- transparent and accountable.

8.0 Use of ICT/Mobile-Learning as a part of the new Learning Environment (classroom dynamics) created by COVID-19 Pandemic

The Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (OXFAM) Status Report- Government and private schools during COVID-19^[25], states that 80% of parents of students enrolled in government schools have reported a discontinuity in learning because of COVID-19. The *Curtailing Dropout Rates and Ensuring Universal Access to Education at All Levels* provision in NEP 2020 needs to be revised urgently in light of gender-responsive COVID-19 response, to strategize for the availability of low-cost technology supporting accessible and personalised education, by providing portable devices (like tablets) is the need of the hour to ensure continued learning (in a remote pattern) amidst closure of schools. Owing to the fact that women have lesser access to the internet as compared to men^[26], this provision becomes all the more significant for girls, as such a pedagogical practice will allow for better opportunities and flexible time tables to acquire skills at one's own pace- addressing gender-and-class based barriers, such that the framework supports the empowerment of girls. It is important to note here that though the NEP 2020 emphasises on digital learning, it does not provide any details about the long-term suitable infrastructure requirements to achieve such an objective.

9.0 Address the lack of Menstrual Health Management (MHM) provision in schools

Schools under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan^[27] have the responsibility of providing girls with a safe environment when they are undergoing a transition- from childhood to adolescence. However, during menstruation, school girls do not have any logistical or emotional support provided by the school environment^[28]. Provision of sanitary napkins, as mentioned in the NEP 2020 does not suffice for MHM and thus there is a need of establishing a comprehensive MHM and Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) facility, and follow-up education and awareness to reduce girl drop-out rate because of the stigma around menstruation^[29]. One policy to be strengthened here is the Swachh Vidyalaya Mission^[30], which is a sub-mission under Swachh Bharat Abhiyan that includes the provision of separate toilets for girls and boys. This will reduce absenteeism of girls from school because of menstruation and uphold the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan's main motto of providing access and retaining girls in schools.

10.0 Strengthen the Implementation of Girls' Education schemes by building partnerships with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and other Multi-Level Stakeholders

The government must build partnerships with CSOs and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)- to address the restrictive costs, like- reliance on daughters for sibling and child care, forcing them out of school, etc. by carrying out massive campaigns as the CSOs usually have a large local presence. Apart from reaching out to the remotest of areas, NGOs can help the government design better tracking systems for data collection, provide volunteers for gender training, build capacities of School Development Management Committees (SDMC), etc. An example to look at here is the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao^[31] flagship scheme which suffers from poor on-ground implementation, as more than 50% of the funds allocated towards the scheme are spent on publicity only^[32]. Another case to look at is the lack of teaching-learning materials and infrastructure offered by the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas^[33]. Taking the support of Private entities, such as local NGOs- for the execution of community outreach activities will help ensure sustainable interventions, with regular outreach of education and health activities to be executed at the community level.

11.0 Conclusion

The given anecdotes point out that only by improving coordination, convergence, and linkage between various multi-sectoral programs i.e. improved collaboration between the departments of education, Women and Child Development, Backward Classes and Minorities, Social Welfare and Rural Development and Panchayati Raj will streamline the educational processes for better synchronisation and allow for pooling and better utilisation of resources for improved impact for Girl Child Education. Education brings about knowledge and a reduction in gender bias which functions as a means of improving the status of women within the family and the community. Education is thus the foundation of women empowerment.

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