



Education for Her: Assessing India's Journey toward Gender Parity in Schooling

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Abstract

Education for the girl child has long been recognized as a cornerstone of national development and gender equality. In India, several constitutional provisions and policy frameworks have aimed to ensure equal educational opportunities for girls. This paper examines the evolving status of girl child education in India up to 2020, analyzing enrolment, literacy rates, dropout patterns, and gender disparities. Drawing upon Census 2011, Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE) 2018–19, and National Sample Survey data, it highlights both the achievements and the persisting challenges. Despite the success of initiatives like the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (2015), National Education Policy (2020), and continued implementation of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and RMSA, barriers such as poverty, early marriage, gender bias, and infrastructural inadequacies remain. The paper concludes with recommendations for ensuring equitable access, improving quality, and fostering gender-sensitive environments in schools.

Introduction

Education is universally recognized as a fundamental human right and a transformative force for social justice, fostering personal development, national progress, and democratic participation (UNESCO, 2019). Within this framework, the education of the girl child holds exceptional significance, as it is both a measure and a means of achieving gender equality, empowerment, and sustainable development. Educating girls has a multiplier effect—improving family health, enhancing economic productivity, and promoting social cohesion (World Bank, 2020).

In the Indian context, the right to education for every child—especially for girls—has been reinforced through constitutional guarantees and legislative commitments. Articles 14 and 15 ensure equality before law and prohibit discrimination based on gender; Article 21A guarantees free and compulsory education for all children aged 6–14 years; and Article 45 directs the State to provide early childhood care and education (Government of India, 2011). These provisions are

further strengthened through policy frameworks such as the National Policy on Education (1986, revised 1992), the Right to Education Act (2009), and more recently, the National Education Policy (2020), all of which emphasize inclusive and equitable access to education.

While the pre-2015 era in India was primarily characterized by a strong emphasis on expanding enrolment, reducing illiteracy, and achieving universal access, the post-2015 period witnessed a strategic shift toward retention, quality learning outcomes, and empowerment (Ministry of Education, 2020). Programmes such as *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* (2015), *Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan* (2018), and the introduction of a *Gender Inclusion Fund* under NEP 2020 reflect this evolution from access-based initiatives to empowerment-based strategies.

However, despite these advances, gender disparities persisted, especially at the secondary and higher secondary levels, and among marginalized groups such as Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and economically weaker sections (NITI Aayog, 2020). Challenges related to early marriage, social norms, economic hardship, and digital inequality continued to limit girls' full participation in education. Therefore, understanding India's post-2015 journey toward gender parity requires examining not only quantitative progress but also qualitative transformations in the lived educational experiences of girls across diverse socio-economic contexts.

Status of Girl Child Education in India (2015–2020)

By 2020, India had made remarkable progress in its journey toward achieving gender parity in school education, particularly at the elementary level. The data from the Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) for 2018–19 reflects that the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for girls at the primary level reached 94.3%, demonstrating near-universal participation. At the secondary level, the GER for girls stood at 80.3%, indicating that although access to schooling had significantly improved, a notable number of girls continued to drop out or were unable to transition smoothly from upper primary to secondary education.

The Gender Parity Index (GPI), which measures the ratio of female to male enrolment, was another significant indicator of progress. It stood at 1.03 for the elementary level and 1.01 for the secondary level, suggesting that India had nearly bridged the gender gap in enrolment. A GPI value close to 1 reflects parity between boys and girls, meaning that in several regions, girls were enrolling in schools at rates comparable to or even higher than boys. This achievement is the result of targeted interventions such as the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*, *Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya Scheme*, and various state-led scholarship and awareness programmes.

In terms of literacy, female literacy rates rose steadily during this period—from 65.46% in 2011 (as per Census data) to an estimated 70.3% in 2018, according to the National Sample Survey Organisation's 75th Round. This growth in female literacy reflects not only the success of government-led educational initiatives but also a gradual shift in societal attitudes toward the importance of girls' education. However, despite this upward trend, the literacy gap between men

and women continued to persist, indicating that access alone does not guarantee equitable educational outcomes.

While the enrolment and literacy rates showed considerable improvement, the dropout rates remained a matter of concern. Data from the Ministry of Human Resource Development (2019) indicated that 17% of girls dropped out at the upper primary level, and the figure rose to 19.8% at the secondary level. These statistics point to deeper socio-economic and cultural challenges that continue to hinder the continuity of girls' education, such as household responsibilities, early marriage, and lack of safe commuting options. The problem is further compounded by inadequate infrastructure, particularly in rural schools, where basic facilities like toilets and boundary walls are still insufficient.

Regional disparities were also evident across the country. States like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Himachal Pradesh had almost achieved universal female literacy, benefiting from strong public education systems, better governance, and active community participation. In contrast, states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan continued to lag behind, recording gender literacy gaps exceeding 15 percentage points. These variations reveal how social customs, economic deprivation, and policy implementation differ from region to region, influencing educational outcomes. Moreover, the rural–urban divide remained a critical determinant, with rural girls facing far greater obstacles than their urban peers. Girls belonging to Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) were particularly disadvantaged due to compounded discrimination based on caste, gender, and poverty.

Overall, while India's progress in expanding access and improving enrolment for girls between 2015 and 2020 is commendable, the challenge now lies in ensuring that these gains translate into sustained attendance, higher learning outcomes, and completion of secondary education. Bridging the regional, caste-based, and socio-economic gaps remains crucial for achieving true gender equality in education.

Key Developments and Policy Interventions

Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP), 2015:

Launched in 2015, the *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* (BBBP) scheme emerged as a flagship initiative of the Government of India with the primary goal of addressing the declining child sex ratio and promoting the education and empowerment of girls. The program is a joint effort by the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD), the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW), and the Ministry of Education (MoE). It primarily focused on raising awareness and enhancing community participation to eliminate gender-biased sex selection and promote girls' access to education (Government of India, 2015). Through various advocacy campaigns, community mobilization activities, and district-level interventions, BBBP contributed to increasing enrolment of girls in schools and reducing gender discrimination. Evaluations

conducted between 2015 and 2020 indicated a gradual improvement in the child sex ratio at birth and increased retention of girls in secondary education (MWCD, 2020).

National Education Policy (NEP), 2020:

The *National Education Policy (NEP) 2020* introduced a comprehensive vision for inclusive and equitable education. Recognizing persistent gender disparities, NEP 2020 emphasized the establishment of a *Gender Inclusion Fund* to ensure equitable access for female students and other gender minorities (Ministry of Education, 2020). The policy advocated for gender-sensitive curriculum development, recruitment of female teachers, and the creation of safe, inclusive learning environments. It also encouraged the preparation of *Gender-Inclusive Education Plans* at all levels of governance, integrating gender perspectives into teacher training and pedagogy. This shift toward inclusive education represents a transformative approach to tackling systemic barriers faced by girls, especially those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (2018):

Introduced in 2018, the *Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)* sought to consolidate three major schemes—Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), and Teacher Education—into a single unified framework for holistic school education. The initiative adopted a gender-focused approach by integrating strategies such as the provision of girls' toilets, menstrual hygiene management, and special training for out-of-school girls (Ministry of Human Resource Development [MHRD], 2018). SSA also promoted community mobilization for girls' education, gender sensitization of teachers, and incentives like free textbooks and uniforms to reduce dropout rates. By strengthening linkages between primary, secondary, and teacher education, Samagra Shiksha enhanced the continuity and quality of educational opportunities for girls (UNESCO, 2020).

Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs):

The *Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV)* scheme, initiated in 2004, expanded significantly under Samagra Shiksha by 2019, with over 5,900 residential schools catering to nearly 7 lakh girls from marginalized communities (MHRD, 2019). The KGBVs primarily target girls belonging to Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC), and minority groups who have limited access to education due to socio-economic barriers. These residential facilities provide safe learning environments, bridging courses, and remedial instruction to help girls re-enter the mainstream education system. Studies have shown that KGBVs have played a crucial role in improving retention and transition rates from upper primary to secondary levels among rural and disadvantaged girls (NITI Aayog, 2020).

Digital and Skill Education Initiatives:

Recognizing the growing importance of technology in education, initiatives such as *Digital India* and *PM eVidya (2020)* were launched to enhance digital access and bridge the gendered digital divide. The *PM eVidya* program, introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, aimed to provide equitable digital education through multiple platforms, including television (SWAYAM Prabha channels), radio, and online portals (Ministry of Education, 2020). Special efforts were made to provide digital devices and connectivity support to female students, particularly in rural and remote areas. Additionally, skill-based programs under *Skill India Mission* and *Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY)* encouraged adolescent girls and young women to acquire employable skills, promoting their economic empowerment and lifelong learning (NASSCOM Foundation, 2021).

Collectively, these initiatives reflect India's multi-pronged approach to promoting gender equality in education by addressing structural, socio-economic, and technological barriers. While significant progress has been achieved, continued efforts are essential to ensure that girls not only access education but also thrive and transition smoothly into higher education and employment.

Trends and Data Insights

Over the last decade, India has witnessed noteworthy improvements in gender-related educational indicators, particularly concerning access, retention, and participation of girls in school education. Transition rates for girls — which indicate the percentage of students progressing from one educational level to the next — showed significant advancement between 2014 and 2018. According to *Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+ 2018–19)*, the transition rate for girls improved from 88.5% in 2014 to 94.7% in 2018, reflecting the success of several government initiatives aimed at ensuring continuity in girls' education (Ministry of Education, 2019). This steady rise suggests that fewer girls are dropping out during the shift from primary to upper primary and secondary education, a trend that correlates with targeted interventions like the *Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV)* scheme, *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*, and the *National Scheme of Incentive to Girls for Secondary Education*. These programs have contributed to enhancing enrolment, minimizing early marriage, and fostering parental awareness about the long-term benefits of girls' education. Another positive indicator of gender inclusion is the increase in female teacher representation. By 2019, women constituted 49.2% of India's total teaching workforce (Ministry of Education, 2019). The growing presence of female educators is significant not only for gender balance within the profession but also for improving girls' educational outcomes. Research indicates that the availability of female teachers enhances girls' school attendance, comfort, and participation, especially in conservative or rural communities where socio-cultural norms may restrict interaction with male teachers (UNESCO, 2020). Moreover, a gender-diverse teaching force plays a crucial role in promoting inclusive pedagogy and creating gender-sensitive school environments.

The reduction in the number of out-of-school girls is another substantial achievement. Data from the *National Sample Survey (NSS) 75th Round* revealed that the proportion of out-of-school girls aged 6–17 years declined from 10.3% in 2014 to 5.2% in 2018 (NSSO, 2019). This improvement highlights the success of programs like *Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan* and mid-day meal schemes, which enhanced school accessibility and reduced economic constraints on families. However, despite these advancements, the persistence of out-of-school girls in certain regions—especially among Scheduled Tribes (STs) and in states such as Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh—indicates the need for sustained local interventions and stronger community mobilization efforts (UNICEF, 2020).

While access and enrolment have shown progress, learning outcomes for girls remain a major concern. The *Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2018* reported that only 44% of girls in Grade 5 could read a Grade 2-level text (ASER Centre, 2019). This gap highlights the challenge of ensuring not just attendance but effective learning. Factors such as inadequate teacher training, large class sizes, and limited access to remedial support contribute to this persistent learning deficit. The findings suggest that while the quantitative gender gap in enrolment has narrowed, qualitative aspects—such as foundational literacy and numeracy—require more focused policy attention.

Overall, the data depict a nuanced picture: India has made commendable strides in enrolment, transition, and female participation in the teaching workforce, yet challenges persist in learning achievement and regional equity. The emphasis must now shift from access to *quality and equity* in education, ensuring that every girl not only enters school but also acquires the necessary skills and competencies to progress and succeed.

Challenges Persisting Post-2020

Despite significant progress toward achieving gender parity in school education, a range of structural, socio-economic, and cultural barriers continue to impede girls' sustained participation and educational attainment in India, particularly in the post-2020 period.

1. Socio-cultural constraints:

Deep-rooted social norms surrounding gender roles, early marriage, and dowry practices continue to significantly affect girls' education. Even after policy interventions and awareness programs, early marriage remains one of the leading causes of school dropout among adolescent girls, particularly in rural and semi-urban regions (UNICEF, 2021). According to *National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5, 2019–21)*, nearly 23% of women aged 20–24 years were married before the legal age of 18. Such early marriages often interrupt schooling, limit mobility, and reinforce gendered expectations that prioritize domestic responsibilities over education. Furthermore, prevailing patriarchal norms in several communities discourage girls from pursuing higher education, especially when institutions are located far from their homes (Das & Bhattacharya, 2021).

2. Economic barriers:

Poverty remains a critical deterrent to girls' continued education. Many low-income families still rely on their daughters for household chores or wage labor, viewing girls' education as a secondary priority compared to that of boys (World Bank, 2022). Economic hardships intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, when school closures and loss of family income pushed many girls out of school permanently. A *UNESCO (2021)* report estimated that millions of girls in South Asia, including India, faced heightened risks of dropping out due to financial stress and domestic workload. The lack of affordable secondary schools and indirect costs such as transportation, uniforms, and digital devices further exacerbate economic exclusion.

3. The digital divide:

The shift to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic exposed and deepened existing gendered digital disparities. Data from *National Sample Survey (NSS) 2019* and *UNICEF (2021)* indicate that only 38% of rural girls had access to smartphones or reliable internet connections necessary for digital learning. This digital divide limited their participation in online classes, resulting in learning losses and disengagement from formal education. Factors such as restricted device ownership, lack of digital literacy, and parental monitoring of girls' screen use further marginalized them (OECD, 2021). Although programs like *PM eVidya* sought to mitigate this gap, access and usability remained uneven, particularly for girls from marginalized communities.

4. Gender bias in curriculum and limited leadership representation:

Another persistent challenge lies in gender representation within the educational ecosystem. Textbooks and curricular materials often reinforce traditional gender roles, portraying men as leaders and women in caregiving or subordinate positions (NCERT, 2020). This subtle but pervasive bias shapes perceptions of girls' capabilities and aspirations. Furthermore, female representation in educational leadership roles—such as principals, district education officers, and policy planners—remains disproportionately low (NITI Aayog, 2021). The absence of women in decision-making positions reduces the visibility of gender-sensitive perspectives in institutional governance and curriculum design.

5. Safety and transportation concerns:

Safety concerns continue to be one of the most cited deterrents for girls attending secondary schools, particularly in remote and rural areas. Long distances to schools, absence of reliable transportation, and risks of harassment contribute to absenteeism and dropout (Plan India, 2020). Parents, especially in conservative communities, often restrict girls from traveling alone, further limiting access to secondary and higher education. Inadequate infrastructure—such as lack of separate toilets for girls and poor lighting—also impacts retention and attendance (Ministry of Education, 2021). Ensuring safe learning environments, community-based monitoring, and gender-responsive school design remains crucial for sustaining educational participation.

In summary, while India's educational policies have made substantial strides in improving enrolment and access, systemic inequities rooted in socio-cultural practices, economic vulnerability, and digital exclusion continue to hinder full gender equity in education. Post-2020, the focus must extend beyond parity in numbers to *parity in experience and opportunity*, ensuring that girls not only attend school but also learn, lead, and thrive.

Discussion

Between 2015 and 2020, India's approach to girl child education witnessed a notable transformation—from an initial focus on enrolment and access to an emphasis on empowerment, quality learning, and retention. This period marked a policy shift driven by the realization that mere access to schooling does not ensure educational equity or social transformation. Schemes such as *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP, 2015)* and *Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (2018)* reflected this change by addressing not only enrolment gaps but also the social and institutional barriers that restrict girls' educational trajectories (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Empirical evidence indicates that female education has a transformative impact on social outcomes, including delayed age at marriage, improved maternal and child health, and enhanced participation in the labor market (UNESCO, 2019; World Bank, 2020). For instance, *UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report (2019)* highlighted that each additional year of schooling for girls can increase future earnings by up to 10–20%, while the *World Bank (2020)* emphasized that secondary education for girls is closely associated with delayed first births and a reduction in fertility rates. However, the translation of these benefits into tangible gender equality outcomes remains inconsistent across regions.

Persistent structural inequalities—rooted in caste, class, and geography—continue to impede equitable educational experiences. Girls from marginalized communities, including Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and economically weaker households, often face intersectional disadvantages that exacerbate gender disparities (NITI Aayog, 2020). In rural and remote areas, lack of infrastructure, inadequate sanitation, and safety concerns further limit attendance and retention. Social norms continue to dictate domestic responsibilities, early marriage, and restrictions on mobility, constraining girls' capacity to complete secondary and higher education (UNICEF, 2019).

Thus, while India achieved near gender parity in enrolment at the elementary level by 2020, the goal of empowerment through education—defined by agency, autonomy, and equal participation—remains a work in progress. Future strategies must therefore focus on *transformative gender inclusion*, which integrates socio-economic empowerment, curriculum reform, and digital equity to ensure that education serves as a genuine pathway to gender justice and national development.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen gender budgeting and consistent funding for girls' education.
2. Expand digital infrastructure and provide subsidized devices to rural girls.
3. Integrate life skills, vocational, and digital literacy into curricula.
4. Introduce re-entry programs for adolescent mothers and dropouts.
5. Reform curriculum to remove gender stereotypes and promote inclusivity.
6. Strengthen school-community partnerships and mentorship programs.
7. Ensure monitoring and accountability for all schemes.

Conclusion

India's journey toward gender parity in education up to 2020 reflects both significant achievements and persistent challenges. While enrolment parity between boys and girls has nearly been realized, ensuring that girls not only enter school but also stay, learn effectively, and transition successfully into higher education and employment remains a pressing goal. The path forward must go beyond numerical equality to address deeper structural and socio-cultural barriers that limit girls' educational and life opportunities. True empowerment can only emerge when education becomes a means of social transformation—challenging patriarchal norms, promoting gender-sensitive curricula, enhancing teacher training, and building pathways that connect education to economic independence and leadership roles. By integrating equity, quality, and empowerment, India can move from access to true agency in girls' education.

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