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## **POLICY REPORT**

# **ACCESS TO SCHOOL EDUCATION FOR GIRLS IN INDIA: IMPACT & INTERVENTIONS FOR CHANGE**

**LEXQUEST FOUNDATION  
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**Acknowledgements:**

**Conceptualised by:**

- ❑ Tanya Chandra, Executive Director, LQF

**Author:**

- ❑ Akanksha Bisht, Research Associate, Policy, LQF

**About the Organisation:**

LexQuest Foundation (LQF) is an independent, non-profit, research and action organisation, established in 2014, in New Delhi. We are striving to create, advocate and implement effective solutions for a diverse range of development issues.

To endorse participative governance, we engage with a broad spectrum of stakeholders, from various sections of the society, to ensure that policy-making remains a democratic process. We utilize pragmatic and futuristic research to disseminate actionable knowledge to decision-makers, experts and the general public.

Our key activities include capacity and skill-building workshops, policy advisory programs, public outreach, and stakeholder consultations. We collaborate with the government, other organizations and individuals for impactful policy formulation and execution.

By employing sustainable and equitable solutions through our multidisciplinary, intersectional initiatives and programs, we are constantly working towards creating empowered communities.



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## **What hinders girls' access to school education in India?**

One of the major challenges of the education system in India is to **address gender disparities in terms of enrolment and drop-out rates of the girl child**. The dismal female literacy rate in **1981 was at 28.47% and increased to 65.46% in 2011** as opposed to the male literacy rate of 82.14% in 2011. The **rural findings of ASER 2018** also reflected that in 2008, 20% of girls nationally in the 15-16 age group were not enrolled in schools, and in 2018 this number remained at 13.5%. This **gender gap emerges at the earliest level of education and widens as the education level increases** owing to various socio-cultural disadvantages faced by girls in both public and private spheres. The significant drop-out rates and low enrolment rates for girls are determined by material **resources available with the family, gender norms established by society, home environment, perceptions about educated women, and school infrastructure, environment and distance**. Poverty is one of the major factors that affect female literacy, therefore, State support in providing free education is the most basic policy to be adopted which has been legislated in India through the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (RTE Act). Additionally, social factors like marriage at an early age, women becoming part of other households after marriage, **the perception of educated women as difficult, and preferably marrying girls to someone with superior social status hinder access of girls to school education, especially in rural areas.**

The **distribution of care work, household responsibilities, and decision-making power at home greatly affect educational levels. Household work like sibling care, domestic chores, the responsibility of domesticated**



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animals typically falls on girls. These conditions at home can lead to a fragmented schooling experience. The level of education of the parents, especially the mother, also has a positive relationship with the level of girls' education. The **school environment** is another factor that determines the participation of girls. If the school is too far away from the house, parents are reluctant to send their girl child to school because of costs of transportation and safety concerns. Factors like **classroom practices, teacher regularity, and lower child-teacher ratio also have a significant effect on girl child enrollment rate.** It is noteworthy that the level of community involvement in gender issues ensures higher levels of education for girls. Community participation can also ensure accountability and keep checks on teacher regularity. Therefore, if there is a **lack of community participation, especially of women, then girls have lower levels of support and motivation to continue with their education.**



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### **National Policies for improving access to school education for girls**

Various schemes and policies have been launched at the central level to mitigate disadvantageous circumstances and provide improved access to school education for girls. The efforts to improve the female literacy rate were made in earnest only from the 1980s, **before this, the articulation of such policies remained vague with unclear objectives and was mostly textual.** The major intervention towards girls' education was made by the National Education Policy (NEP), 1986. The scheme established by NEP 1986 to improve education for women was called the **Mahila Samakhya Programme (MSP)**. This policy was established in 1988. The 1986 NEP recognized the importance of education of women as a vital condition for improving education among adolescent girls. The objective was to benefit women of all age groups, especially marginalized groups. It integrated formal and informal education. It also stipulated to establish Mahila Shiksha Kendras to propel adult education and increase community participation in public education. **One of the main intentions of the program was to educate mothers so that they would root for educating not just their sons but daughters as well.**

The project to universalize education was propelled by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) through the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) launched in 2001. SSA has now come under the banner of Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), launched in 2018, that assimilates SSA, Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), and Teacher Education. SSA also has provisions to provide support to State governments in implementing the RTE Act. Following are two schemes under SSA to increase the female literacy rate:



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### **National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL):**

This policy was launched in 2003 to provide additional support in the form of free textbooks till VIII standard, separate toilets for girls, 50% female teacher recruitment, and community mobilization. This is an incentive-based scheme for parents to alleviate cost concerns that contribute to the parents' decision of sending girls to school.

**Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV):** This scheme was launched in 2004 which prescribes establishing residential schools with boarding facilities. **KGBVs serve as residential upper primary schools for girls belonging to SC/ST and minority communities along with girls from BPL families and tough circumstances.** This scheme focuses on girls above ten years of age and has been successful in States like Karnataka. **Since the launch of SMSA, more focus has been given to upgrade KGBVs.**

RMSA has made the following interventions to improve girls' participation in secondary education:

**National Scheme of Incentives to Girls for Secondary Education (NSIGSE):** This scheme provides an exemption from paying tuition fees in Kendriya Vidyalayas and 33% reservation for girls in Navodaya Vidyalayas. The scheme covers all girls belonging to SC/ST communities and girls from KGBVs who pass class VIII. Interventions including the establishment of new secondary schools, construction of Girls Hostels in Economically Backward Blocks (EBBs), self-defense training, the conduct of adolescent education programs,



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organization of awareness camps are taken up under RMSA to improve the education of girls at the secondary stage.

Most recent developments for improving access to education for girls have been made through the 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao' initiative and the National Education Policy, 2020.

**'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao' Scheme:** This scheme was launched in 2015. The objective is to eradicate the practice of sex-selective abortion to protect the girl child and ensure her education. It is a combined effort taken up by three Ministries viz., Women and Child Development, Health and Family Welfare, and Human Resource Development. Over the past couple of years, the scheme has been **heavily publicized through intense mass campaigning**.

**NEP 2020:** Under NEP 2020, the Central government has set up a 'Gender Inclusion Fund' to build the capacity of State governments to provide an equitable education to girls and transgender students. The fund will be available to the States to implement centrally decided priorities. It will also enable the State government to promote effective community-based interventions and address region-specific challenges. The policy also focuses on strengthening KGBVs.



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### Status of Current Policies: A Brief Analysis

The policies in place have tried to address various challenges that hinder access to school education for girls. From policies with provisions on addressing safety concerns, providing infrastructural support and guidelines to mobilizing communities to participate in improving educational outcomes, the State has been actively intervening, yet the female literacy rate in census 2011 remains at 65.5% as opposed to the male literacy rate of 82.1%. The **main focus of these policies has been on providing incentives for enrollment but these incentives remain inadequate because no meaningful reformatory intervention is made.** The struggle of improving implementation is another challenge emerging from budgetary constraints, lack of resources, or **owing to the absence of political will at lower levels of administration resulting in corruption.** Budgetary constraints arise from the low allocation of funds for public education expenditure. **India spends 4.43% of its GDP on education as opposed to the recommended level of 6% of the GDP.** This figure was envisaged in the NEP 1968, then reiterated in the 1986 policy, and a commitment to this end has also been stipulated in the 2020 policy. **In 2006, this expenditure was as low as 3.1% of the GDP.** Around **1180 KGBVs were sanctioned by the central government by 2006, but only 782 were operational.** One major **criticism is also regarding the disbursal of funds** which is a complicated process and can often render the lower-levels of administrative systems under-funded. **Centrally sponsored schemes involve step by step transfer of funds and release orders. Release orders slowly filter down to the lower-levels and then the process of procuring the funds can be equally tedious.**





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The focus of the government solely on enrolment and drop-out rates is another issue because it **cannot ensure the quality of education, teacher regularity, and forms of evaluation.** The challenge is not just to keep girls in school but to be able to impart them with knowledge and skills that empower them and that can only be ensured when adequate attention is paid to the quality of education they receive. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) published by Pratham Education Foundation in 2018 reflected that **boys hold an advantage in basic arithmetic.** The **NPEGEL scheme on the elementary level has also been criticized** for low learner achievement, poor classroom transaction, and low proportion of female teachers.

The MSP scheme with its focus on increasing women's community participation with a clear objective of educating mothers to encourage them to send their girl child to schools and to provide resource centers for dialogue and discussions is reformatory in nature. The State has however, **failed to support Mahila Sanghs with adequate facilities and training for capacity building.** Although there have been success stories in this context, basic struggles of being able to participate in the activities of the Mahila Sanghs or to assert decision-making power through the Sangh remains challenging.

The **discrimination in subject choices available to girls is another major issue** that has not been addressed by the government. The **CABE committee report in 2005** highlighted this issue and studied it as a site of reformatory intervention. Uttar Pradesh is one example of such discrimination where Mathematics is compulsory for boys but not for girls. This is also rampant in rural areas where **single-sex girls' schools do not offer Mathematics as a subject at all.** The



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reformatory role of schools has yet not been channelized by policies. **Poor classroom practices or textbook curriculums often end up strengthening gender stereotypes and norms.** Focusing more on community participation for motivating girls and keeping schools accountable is another form of intervention that has not been built to its full potential. These are important sites that can lead to larger socio-cultural reforms and addressing them remains challenging but active intervention in these aspects is necessary to produce meaningful change. It is a well-acknowledged fact that to truly empower girls, education is a necessary tool not just for livelihood generation to render them financially independent but also to break stereotypical gender norms and reinforce norms of gender inclusivity. In doing so, auditing gender depiction in textbooks should not remain just a mechanical enterprise.



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## **Scope for Policy Reforms**

An analysis of the current policy space in the sector suggests that to improve access to school education for girls, the need for reformatory policies should be realized sooner than later. **Interventions should be made for capacity building so that groups like Mahila Sanghs are empowered to create systems of accountability and participate in decision-making processes.** In this regard, the MSP scheme should be strengthened as it has immense potential for larger social reform. To that end, **the objectives of the program should be revised to create more short-term goals.** More data should be collected under this scheme to understand problems and arrive at solutions. This will require **capacity building of local women, Mahila mandals and SHGs to set up and manage resource allocations to support childcare and the education of girls.**

Another major form of intervention is to make Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) more universally available. Despite the regular expansion of the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), the coverage of ECCE under it was **as low as 40% in 2009**. Since the NEP 2020 has recognized the need for better ECCE, it has directed towards the development of a National Curricular and Pedagogical Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (NCPFECCE) by NCERT in two parts (one for 0-3 age group and the other for 3-8 years). The aim of the policy is to align ECCE in India with the latest research and best international practices. The policy also envisages strengthening the Anganwadi centers, especially in economically backward regions. **This includes training the Anganwadi workers and also establishing Anganwadi centers located alongside primary schools. This will reduce the responsibilities of**



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**sibling care that would allow better educational prospects for the elder girl child of a family.** But such a step has also been **criticized for increasing the burden of Aganwadi workers without recognizing the work they do.**

The **ASER Report 2019** also emphasized the need for expansion of two areas of services, i.e., **bringing up the young and looking after the elderly and sick**, with the increasing demand for quality education. The need for a gendered perspective in the planning process is an essential component for social reformation. For this, **targets shouldn't be spelt out only in terms of enrolment rate or drop-out rates.** Rather, more quality interventions should be made like ensuring the availability of subject choices that can increase chances of employability. **Being mindful of the kind of representation of women in school textbooks and providing women role-models in unconventional set-ups can also prove to be an important reform** in this regard. It is also important to not just talk about iconic women role models that may seem like unattainable goals but to focus on local women figures who are contributing towards the society and economy. The exposure of the girl child to the role model is essential for exposure and breaking gender stereotypes. **Fighting gender stereotypes and making education more inclusive for all genders require meaningful reformatory intervention and not just increasing the number of girls regularly attending classes that reinforce in them patriarchal notions of womanhood.** This will lead to better access to education for the coming generations as well because when the mother has decision-making power and is educated the chances of the girl child attending and being able to utilize school education will increase substantially.



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