

STATUS OF LITERACY GAP AND ROLE OF LITERATE WOMEN TO ACHIEVE THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS: AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

Gender disparity has been a major issue in India since a long time. The Indian Government has expressed a strong commitment towards education for all. The gender gap in educational sphere is quite high in India. It 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 total population in India, but around 46% women are still found as illiterate. Problems of gender disparity and discrimination begin with access to schooling. As per latest Human Development Report of South Asia, "One of the discrimination that girls and women are facing in India is the fact they are not able to enjoy the right to education. More than half of the adult illiterates (63%) are women and nearly 2/5th girls enrolled in primary school are drop-out before grade 5". So, it is a duty to diminish the girls drop-out and increase the girl's enrolment to reduce the male-female gender gap in education. So, in this paper, the researcher highlights the male-female gap in Indian education in primary, upper primary and secondary level and shows how female education can help to the achievement of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Key word: *Gender gap, Female Education, Millennium Development Goals*

Introduction:

Education is considered as a human right. It is essential for human emancipation and social Development. The concept of Development seems hollow without education and vice versa (Tilak, 2007). Education is a tool for the economic, social and political opportunities available to women. It empowers women to take control of their lives and creates opportunities and choices to improve their conditions as well as their families. Besides providing knowledge, skills and income –earning opportunities, education of women can reduce child and maternal mortality and fertility, improve family health and increase children education, particularly of girls. This in turn will improve the status of women in the society, and facilitate a faster attainment of the Millennium Development Goals.

Female education has long been acknowledged to have strong correlations with other dimensions of human and social development. As Mehrotra (2006) noted, low levels of education significantly affect the health and nutritional status of women. For example, in case of India, he noted that chance of suffering from diseases caused by malnutrition decrease steadily with increase level of education. Height and Body Mass Index (BMI) varies with level of education and illiterate women are reported at more risk of having lower height and BMI (leading to higher deficiency of Iron and nutrients). Similarly, he noted that while 56% of illiterate women suffer from anaemia, the percentage declines to 40% in case of the women who completed at least high school (Mehrotra, 2006).

Objectives of the study:

1. To highlight the status of female literacy in Indian education.
2. To analyse the level of male-female gap in Indian education.
3. To analyse the role of female education to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.
4. To suggest some measure to reduce the male-female educational disparity in India.

Background of the study:

In United Nations Millennium Summit in 2000, 189 world leaders made a historic promise to end poverty by 2015 and agreed to achieve the eight MDGs – reduce poverty and hunger, achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality and empower women, reduce child maternal mortality, combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensure environmental sustainability and develop a global partnership for development (Prem Singh, 2008). Education plays a prominent role in the MDGs Goal-2 - "achieve universal primary education"- bears the following target: "Ensure that by the 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling". Goals-3- "achieve gender equality"- focuses on gender parity in education at all levels, with ambitious targets for both 2005 and 2015 (Levine, 2003). Besides India's commitment to provide "free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of 14" and achieve universalization of primary education with substantial improvement in quality, the average years of schooling has remained low at less than three years. (Mohaptra, 1990). But there still exist a huge gap in literacy and huge unemployment.

Data base and methodology:

The paper has been made based on data which has been collected from Human Development Report of South Asia, Ministry of HRD, Department of Education, and census 2001 to analyse the temporal variation of male-female gender gap in Indian education. From this data sources the percentage of male-female literacy gap and Gender Disparity Index have been calculated.

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Causes of gender gap in Indian Education:

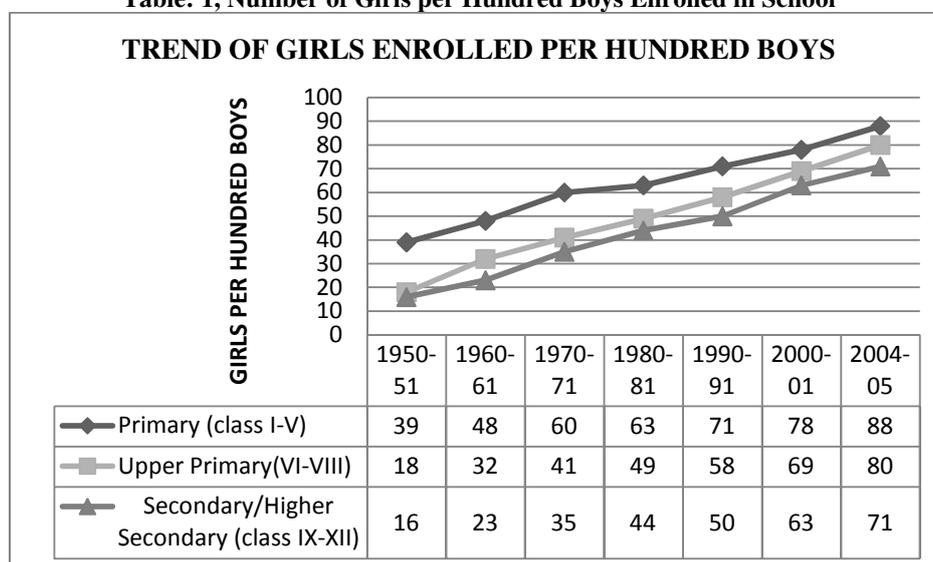
The causes of male female literacy gap in India as follows-

1. Indian society is patriarchal, and girls get less care than boys.
2. Most of Indian people live in rural areas where there is inadequacy of school infrastructure like improper facilities and inefficient teaching.
3. Existence of poverty and unconsciousness
4. Existence of Cast discrimination and
5. Existence of large illiterate females.

Gender gap in Indian Education:

Before the independence, the female literacy was very poor, but after the independence the rate of girls enrolled at different level constantly increase specially after Sarva Siksha Abhiyan, but still now expected results are not found in case of male-female ratio. During 1950-51, in primary level girl’s enrolment were 39 per 100 boys, but it increases to 88 per hundred boys in 2004-05. In case of upper primary level, the ratio was only 18 per hundred boys in 1950-51, but it rises to 80 per hundred boys in 2004-05, and in secondary level it has increased from 16 to 71 from 1950-51 to 2004-05.

Table: 1, Number of Girls per Hundred Boys Enrolled in School



Source: Selected educational statics 2004-05. Ministry of HRD, Department of Education.

Despite rapid growth in literacy in post independence India, gender deprivation still exists and needs to be solved. Despite progressively increasing gains for females in literacy and education (Table: 2), in 2001, slightly more than half of the female population was literate as against three-fourth of males (75.85%). One can argue that if the present trend continues, it will take another five decades to finally close the gender gap in terms of literacy attainment.

Table: 2, Male-Female Literacy gap in India (In percent)

Census Year	Persons	Male	Female	Male-Female literacy gap
1951	18.33	27.16	8.86	18.30
1961	28.30	40.40	15.35	25.05
1971	34.45	45.96	21.97	23.98
1981	43.57	56.38	29.76	26.62
1991	52.21	64.13	39.29	24.84
2001	65.38	75.85	54.16	21.70

Source: Census of India 2001

Gender Parity Index (GPI) is another measure to assess gender equality in education. GPI is the ratio of girls General Enrolment Ratio (GER) to boys. When the GPI shows a value of one (1) at a level of education that means opportunities for and access to education are available equally to both girls and boys at the level of education. Over

the years, the gender gap has been narrowing, yet substantial gender disparity still persist which is evident from the table -3.

Table: 3, Gender Disparity Index in India

year	Primary	Upper primary	Elementary
1950-51	0.49	0.69	0.49
1960-61	0.43	0.52	0.42
1970-71	0.32	0.42	0.33
1980-81	0.29	0.35	0.30
1990-91	0.25	0.31	0.26
2000-01	0.17	0.18	0.16

Source: Department of education, Ministry of HRD

Millennium Development Goals through Women Education:

Women are one of the most important people in a family as well as society. Literate women can able to solve different problems in a family as well as a society but illiterate women don't able to solve the problems. So, how can literate women solve the different problems and help to achieve the Millennium Development Goals are given-

- (a) **Eradicate Extreme poverty and hunger:** An educated woman by participating in income-generating activities promotes family income and thus helps the family to get rid of poverty.
- (b) **Achieve universal primary education:** Since women are still deprived of basic educational facilities, education to every woman broadens the scope of universalization of primary education. Besides that, an educated mother will always educate her children but an illiterate mother may not.
- (c) **Promote gender equality and empower women:** For women, education can be a pivotal catalyst for gender discrimination, a springboard by which they may claim their rightful place in society and development. Education would actually accord certain advantages of women in areas where they have traditionally lacked access or different rights. Thus, education promotes women empowerment, which ultimately leads to gender equality.
- (d) **To reduce child mortality:** An educated mother can understand child-rearing better.
- (e) **Improved maternal health:** An educated mother is more capable of keeping herself healthy.
- (f) **Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases:** Education is also a key means of empowering girls against HIV/AIDS and other diseases, giving them the knowledge and self-confidence needed to protect themselves through proper precaution.
- (g) **Ensure environmental sustainability:** Evidence shows that education among women usually builds environmental consciousness in them. It enriches them with the basic knowledge about the adverse impact of environmental degradation.
- (h) **Develop a global organization for development:** Addressing the multiple barriers faced by girls in their efforts to access quality education and to persist in school necessarily leads to integrated, multi-sectoral approaches that involve numerous parterres. This goes to the heart of the integrated efforts that are required to achieve the MDGs as a whole.

Government Efforts:

Indian government has implemented different schemes to ensure the girls education, some of the notable schemes that have come in the recent years are like Sarva Siksha Mission, National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL) for providing additional support for education of disadvantaged girls at elementary level, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya with boarding facilities at elementary level for girls belonging to SC, ST, OBC and minorities, Mahila Samakhya in rural areas for education and empowerment particularly those are socially and economically marginalized group through informal learning etc.

Suggestion and conclusion:

To achieve the Millennium Development Goals and to reduce the male-female literacy gap, Government has launched different scheme but those are not enough if are not implemented properly. Except the government educational efforts, some suggestions that can ensure the level of literacy gap and to achieve Millennium Development Goals are -Schooling has to be made completely free for girls up to the higher secondary stage, constitutional amendments, overcome the poverty and hunger particularly in rural areas, abolishing the social discrimination etc. The final and ultimate suggestion in related to policy changes and decision -making process which are often defective and are not practical, which need to be rectified immediately.

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