

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION: THE WAY FORWARD*Dr. Harini C,**Asst. Professor, SIES College of Commerce and Economics, Sion (E)**Education of girls and women- Opportunities and obstacles**Category- for presentation and publication***Abstract**

Sustainable development goals are a set of goals formulated by UN, so as to ensure a sustainable future for the generations to come. It comprises of 17 interconnected goals that must be addressed to achieve the goal of sustainability. One of the goals is to achieve gender equality across the globe. The first step to achieve equality is education. Girls' education has a specific significance for any society. Educated girls are better in terms of health and general awareness. As today's girls are the mothers of tomorrow, their increased awareness about life can help in bringing up a healthier and better generation. Educated mothers will be able to direct their children the right way thereby reducing crime rates and violence in the society. Education is the only force that can empower women both in the family as well as in the society. Ban Ki Moon, the former secretary general of UN opined that education of a girl is the best investment that a country can make. This paper specifically examines the challenges of girl's education in India. In India, access to education is a big problem for women especially from rural India. There is a huge difference in the male literacy rates and female literacy rates in many states especially the BIMARU states. The paper tries to analyse the various obstacles that come across education of girls and the ways to overcome those obstacles.

Key words: *education, empowerment, gender equality, sustainable goals*

“When You Educate a Girl, You Educate a Nation.” ~ Helene D. Gayle

In 2015, UN member nations adopted a set of 17 Sustainable development goals. The fifth goal out of which is to ensure gender equality through empowering women and girls. Education is the basic tool to bring in equality and empowerment. A nation cannot attain progress without its women gaining education. Girls' education has a specific significance for any society. Educated girls are better in terms of health and general awareness. As today's girls are the mothers of tomorrow, their increased awareness about life can help in bringing up a healthier and better generation. Educated mothers will be able to direct their children the right way thereby reducing crime rates and violence in the society. Education is the only force that can empower women both in the family as well as in the society. Ban Ki Moon, the former secretary general of UN opined that education of a girl is the best investment that a country can make.

As a UN member nation, India has to take drastic steps in this direction. According to 2011 census data, there is a huge disparity between the literacy rates of males and females. In India the male literacy rate is 82.10% whereas female literacy rate is only 65.46%. Though the picture from urban India is much better rural India still carries a bleak image. There is a huge difference in the male literacy rates and female literacy rates in many states especially the BIMARU states (Som, 2014). As a traditional patriarchal society the problems faced by Indian girls and women to attain education are many. From Vedic times onwards females had limited access to education. Barring the examples of Gargi, Maitreyi, Tilotama there were not many female scholars. The situation really didn't change much overtime. Some of the major obstacles hindering the path of education for girls are as follows

Preference for a male child

Even today Indian society prefers male child. This gender preference is evident in the latest census data too. The overall sex ratio of the population is 940 females for 1000 males. The basic reason for this gender preference is the perception that a girl child is a liability or someone who brings lot of expenditure and financial burden to the family through wedding expenses and dowry whereas boys are considered as the providers of emotional and financial care in the old age. Many Indian parents spend less on the education of girls though there is significant improvement post the implementation of right to education. Even when education is provided for girls many families prefer to send their sons to a better school than daughters. This trend is visible in terms of higher education as well. When boys join more expensive courses such as Engineering girls are asked to pursue traditional

graduation programs. During an interview session conducted by the researcher with parents on girls' education, many parents from the upper middle class families revealed that they don't want their girls to study too much as it would be difficult for them to find wedding alliances for them. So even when the statistics show a positive trend in terms of primary education, the issue of female education is still entangled in the web of matrimonial alliances.

Limited access to quality education

The number of schools in rural areas is still less than in urban areas. Schools also struggle from various infrastructural issues such as lack of adequate buildings, toilets and good libraries. As most of the high schools are situated far away from remote villages it becomes difficult for the students to travel so far for schooling. Though this issue affect both the genders alike, because of the more conservative nature of our society it affects girls more. Especially after the onset of puberty, girls stop coming to school. Many girls thus end their formal education with primary education. This was scenario till recent times, but a very recent survey conducted by Aser centre in 2016 reveals certain heartening findings. It says that students continue to be the formal education system for a longer duration instead of dropping out at early ages. Also the 94% of girls and 95% boys are enrolled in school at the age of 14 marking a sudden decline in the gap of education between the genders. But many students who took part in the survey couldn't solve basic mathematics problems or read fluently in their regional language or English. This is a big question mark on the current education system.

Lack of commitment from authorities to the cause of education

Commitment to reducing inequality index (CRI) of Oxfam international UK has placed India in the bottom list of performers. India ranked 147 among the 157 countries participated in the survey. The index is an indicator of the efforts taken by any country to reduce inequality. The finding suggests that the budget allocation by Government on health, education and social protection is very low, thereby pushing the poor further down. Especially the spending on education stands at 3.4 percent of the GDP. Even when there are educational programs initiated by Government at various levels the implementation is not very successful. Addressing issues such as absenteeism of teachers and increasing the time spent on quality interaction with students can improve the condition. Further, the appointment of more lady teachers will make the students also comfortable. Special sensitization programs for teachers depending upon the demography of students will also help to make the interaction easier. Implementation of performance based reward system for teachers can also ensure that they remain motivated.

The Road Ahead

Girls' and women's education policies should focus more on skill development and employability rather than mere literacy. Customised syllabus catering to the needs of specific communities is the need of the hour. Also assessment system has to be revised. Collaboration with other countries in this regard is beneficial. Gender studies should be made a part of the curriculum, so that the gender stereotypes can be broken from the young minds. Regular teacher training programs should be conducted so as to refresh the knowledge of teachers and to introduce them to newer technologies. The education system must also try to inculcate leadership skills in girls as they are the future leaders. Good labs and access to technology should be provided that would open their doors to the future. To prevent attrition rate in higher education more affordable courses can be started especially in the distance mode that would help girls to pursue their studies even when they can't regularly travel to the college/university.

Conclusion

When in rural India access to quality education is a major obstacle in women's education, in urban India the mentality of parents in general that overqualified girls would find it difficult to find suitable grooms backfire their dreams of higher education. Both the conditions point fingers at the need for a change in attitude of the society. Even when there is a marked improvement in the enrolment of girls, many of them do not achieve age appropriate learning levels. Progression to higher education is also a major concern. Dropout rate is still at high level. Many girls do not reach graduation level. Education is very much important for the development of individuals, communities and nation as a whole. A joint effort from Government, parents, teachers, local bodies and communities is required to address the issue. Quoting the words of Urvashi Sahni, an educational activist "even

without all of the ‘developmental and economic goodies’ that come from girls’ education, we should care about educating girls because it is inherently valuable to them and is their right”.

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