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# WOMEN'S EDUCATIONAL RIGHTS IN INDIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY: ANALYSIS OF CONSTITUTIONAL AND REFORMATIVE PROGRESS

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## ABSTRACT

As India progresses into the 21st century, understanding the advancements in women's educational rights requires a thorough examination of multiple factors influencing their empowerment and equality. Despite significant strides, gender discrimination remains a pervasive challenge, manifesting in unequal opportunities and treatment across educational and professional sectors. This paper delves into how entrenched gender biases continue to hinder genuine gender parity and explores their impact on women's access to education.

Central to this discussion is the role of female literacy, which has been shown to have far-reaching effects on women's health, decision-making capabilities, and overall quality of life. Improved literacy rates contribute to better health outcomes and enhanced participation in societal decision-making processes, thereby fostering greater individual and collective well-being.

Additionally, the analysis includes an assessment of governmental initiatives such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and Mahila Shakti Kendra, which have been pivotal in promoting women's educational rights and opportunities. However, the paper critically examines the effectiveness of these programs, considering factors such as implementation challenges, accessibility issues, and the need for robust enforcement to ensure that benefits reach all women.

Through this comprehensive exploration, the paper aims to highlight the progress made in advancing women's educational rights in India, while also identifying the persistent challenges and gaps that need to be addressed. By addressing these issues, the study seeks to provide insights into the ongoing efforts to achieve gender equality and empowerment through education.

## 1. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Despite considerable advancements in various sectors, the evolution of women's educational rights in India during the 21st century reveals a complex interplay of progress and ongoing challenges. The Indian Constitution and a series of legislative reforms have been designed to promote gender

equality and expand educational opportunities for women. However, gaps remain in the effective implementation of these legal provisions, with persistent disparities in access to quality education, particularly in rural and marginalized areas. Gender biases continue to undermine educational outcomes, influenced by societal attitudes, cultural norms, and economic barriers that limit women's participation in education. Furthermore, while initiatives such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and the Right to Education Act aim to improve women's educational prospects, their impact is uneven, and often constrained by regional disparities, socio-economic factors, and resource limitations. This paper seeks to explore these dimensions of progress and challenge, analyzing how constitutional protections and reformative measures have shaped the educational landscape for women in India and identifying the critical issues that need to be addressed to achieve true gender equality in education.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

As Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru said-

*“To awaken the people, it is the women who must be awakened. Once she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves, the nation moves”*

Gender equality and women's advancement have been prioritized globally, with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG-5) explicitly aiming to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Various initiatives at global, regional, and local levels strive to eliminate gender inequality. Historically, Indian women have faced stereotyping and discrimination due to a deeply rooted patriarchal mindset. Social evils such as sati, the purdah system, female foeticide, infanticide, dowry, and domestic violence have been prevalent. Over time, various constitutional and legal provisions have been established to combat these issues. Despite these challenges, Indian women have made significant strides in various fields. The government has launched numerous schemes aimed at promoting women's education, health, and economic participation. Initiatives such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter), Mahila Shakti Kendra (Women's Power Center), and Ujjwala Yojana (providing clean cooking fuel) have contributed to improving the status of women in India.

The alignment of these initiatives with the targets of SDG 5 has the potential to further accelerate progress. For instance, higher female literacy rates, as emphasized by SDG 5, positively impact women's health and decision-making abilities. Government support, in the form of infrastructure development and women-centric programs, acts as a catalyst for empowerment. In contemporary

India, women have become more aware of their rights and have made significant strides toward empowerment. Empowerment is the process through which individuals are granted the autonomy to think, act, and manage their own lives independently. It is a means by which people reclaim control over their destinies and life circumstances. For women, empowerment is crucial to their meaningful participation in societal advancement. Individual empowerment involves the ability to make informed decisions, exercise choices freely, and realize one's full potential as an equal and active member of society.

Empowering women goes beyond just enabling them to make personal decisions; it involves liberating them from all social and familial constraints across various dimensions, including mental, emotional, legal, and decision-making spheres. When women are empowered, they can influence and uplift their families, communities, and nations, paving the way for a brighter and more equitable future. This empowerment is not only a fundamental right but also a vital component of societal progress and development.

The central and state governments have launched various schemes to promote women's emancipation. Despite these efforts, patriarchal attitudes and gender bias persist in both public and private spheres.

### **3. GENDER DISCRIMINATION**

Gender bias is deeply entrenched in patriarchal societies, significantly affecting women's lives. Patriarchy, prevalent globally, perpetuates inequality by demeaning women and reinforcing their lower status. This bias begins before birth and continues throughout a woman's life, manifesting in various forms of discrimination and inequality. In India, the situation is particularly severe. According to global gender indices, India ranks 141st out of 142 countries in gender health and survival, 127th on the gender inequality index, and 114th in the global gender gap report. The decline in the sex ratio—from 32.2% in 1987-88 to 24% in 2014—illustrates a troubling gender imbalance, reflecting widespread disempowerment of women. (Ray, 2015). Historically, ancient Vedic literature did not disparage the birth of girls and included mantras for their well-being. However, societal attitudes towards female children have worsened over time. Reformists in the 19th and 20th centuries advocated for women's rights, such as abolishing child marriage, supporting widow remarriage, and promoting female education. Despite these efforts, gender equality remains elusive, and discrimination persists. Female foeticide and infanticide are among the most severe manifestations of gender bias, driven by a preference for male children. Even

when girls are born, they often face deprivation of equal opportunities, nutritious food, and education. Early marriages further limit their personal growth, and societal expectations impose additional burdens, such as dowry demands and restricted autonomy.

The literacy gap exacerbates this issue. In 2011, female literacy in India was 65.46%, compared to 82.14% for males (India Book 2020). This disparity reflects the belief that educating women is less valuable, as they are often expected to prioritize family duties over personal development. In many traditional societies, women are viewed as inferior to men, with their roles confined to managing households and caring for children. Men are typically seen as the heads of the family, with greater authority and power. Women's education and skills beyond domestic duties are often undervalued. An educated woman may face difficulties maintaining traditional lifestyles or finding a suitable spouse, especially in societies with arranged marriages, where educational and professional mismatches can impact marital stability.

Even in affluent families, gender discrimination can limit educational opportunities for girls, influenced by deeply ingrained societal norms and economic factors such as poverty. This perpetuates the cycle of gender bias and undermines efforts to improve women's status and opportunities.

Gender parity is making incremental progress worldwide, with the global gender gap closing to 68.5% in 2024, a modest increase from 68.4% in 2023. At this rate, full gender parity will not be achieved for approximately 134 years, far beyond the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target. Iceland remains the leading country, having closed over 90% of its gender gap with a score of 93.5%. Meanwhile, India has fallen two places to 129 out of 146 countries, down from its 127th position last year. Despite a previous improvement from 135th place in 2022, India has closed 64.1% of its gender gap in 2024. This "slight regression" is attributed to minor declines in education and political empowerment, according to the latest Global Gender Gap report by the World Economic Forum (WEF). Given India's population of over 1.4 billion, even small setbacks represent significant numbers. Although there has been some improvement in economic participation, India would need to increase its score by 6.2 percentage points to match its 2012 level of 46% (The Hindu 2024).

To address these issues, India must focus on closing gender gaps in labor force participation, which stands at 45.9%. This will require comprehensive measures such as preventing girls from dropping out of higher education, providing job skills, ensuring workplace safety, and facilitating work-life balance through shared domestic responsibilities. The literacy gap between men and women is currently 17.2 percentage points, placing India 124th in this regard. While India's performance in

political empowerment is somewhat better, female representation in Parliament remains low. In the most recent Lok Sabha election, despite nearly 800 women candidates, the number of female Members of Parliament decreased to 74 from 78 in 2019, comprising just 13.6% of the 543 seats (The Hindu 2024).

#### 4. REASONS FOR THE FLAWED SEX RATIO

Traditional customs and societal norms continue to shape the lives of female children in India. Despite efforts to promote gender equality and enforce laws protecting their rights, female infants still face severe challenges. Female infanticide and selective abortion remain critical issues, with female fetuses being terminated based on their gender, and newborn girls sometimes being abandoned or killed (Lok Sabha Secretariat 2015).

The ongoing preference for male children has led to a troubling decline in the child-sex ratio. As of Census 2011, the ratio stands at 914 girls for every 1,000 boys, one of the lowest figures since India's independence (Economic Times 2011). Globally, the expected ratio is above 950 girls for every 1,000 boys. While states like Kerala have a favorable ratio of 1,084 girls per 1,000 boys, northern states such as Haryana, Rajasthan, and Delhi show alarming ratios as low as 830 girls per 1,000 boys.

Several factors contribute to the skewed sex ratio (Lok Sabha Secretariat 2015).

***Low Social Status of Women:*** Women in India often hold a subordinate status, being seen as less valuable than men. Their roles are typically confined to domestic duties and reproductive functions, limiting their access to rights and opportunities.

- **Economic Burden:** The dowry system, which requires families to provide financial gifts to the groom's family, imposes a significant economic burden. In a poverty-stricken country, this practice makes girls seem like a financial liability rather than an asset, leading to a preference for sons.
- **Lack of Education:** Illiteracy and limited access to education contribute to the devaluation of girls. Without education, there is a lack of awareness about the potential and value of female children, perpetuating gender biases.
- **Advancements in Diagnostic Techniques:** Modern technologies such as ultrasounds and amniocentesis allow for early sex determination of foetuses. Although the government has imposed regulations against prenatal sex selection, illegal practices persist, often facilitated by bribery.

- **Post-Birth Discrimination:** In cases where prenatal sex determination is not possible, severe discrimination continues after birth. Reports of abandoned girls found in dumpsters, and instances of new-borns being subjected to cruel practices like drowning in boiling milk or being fed pesticides, highlight the extreme measures taken to avoid raising female children.

These factors collectively contribute to the ongoing crisis of gender imbalances and underscore the urgent need for comprehensive measures to address these deep-seated issues.

## 5. DEMOGRAPHICS OF INDIAN WOMEN

As of 2024, India's population stands at approximately 1.44 billion, making it the most populous country in the world, surpassing China. This population is equivalent to about 17.76% of the global population. Women in India number approximately 686 million, while men number around 755 million. 48.4 percent of India's population is female, while 51.6 percent of the population is male (Digital India 2024). India ranks 214th out of 236 countries and territories in terms of the female-to-male ratio, placing it among the countries with a significantly skewed sex ratio (Digital India 2024).

This reflects a significant gender disparity in the population. Despite notable advancements in various fields such as science, economics, and technology, India continues to face substantial challenges, including overpopulation, poverty, illiteracy, caste discrimination, child trafficking, communalism, and gender inequality.

The Human Development Index (HDI) provides a comprehensive overview of progress in three fundamental areas of human development: life expectancy, education, and living standards. For 2022, India's HDI stands at 0.644, placing it within the Medium human development category. This score ranks India 134th out of 193 countries and territories globally (UNDP 2022). This indicates that, although there has been progress in health, education, and income, there remains a considerable gap compared to countries with high human development indices. Countries with higher HDI values tend to have populations that live longer and receive more years of schooling compared to those in lower-ranked nations. Addressing gender inequality is crucial for India's development. Women face various forms of discrimination and inequity, impacting their health, education, and economic opportunities. Ensuring gender equality and empowering women will significantly contribute to the nation's overall progress and development.

The Gender Inequality Index (GII) evaluates disparities between genders across three critical areas: reproductive health, empowerment, and labor market participation. Reproductive health is assessed through metrics like maternal mortality ratios and adolescent birth rates. Empowerment is gauged by the proportion of parliamentary seats held by each gender and the percentage of the population with at least some secondary education. Labor market participation is measured by the rates at which women and men participate in the workforce. In 2022, India's GII is 0.437, positioning it 108th out of 166 countries (UNDP 2022).

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## **6. CRIME AGAINST WOMEN**

In India, crimes against women continue in many forms despite continuous efforts to empower them, severely affecting their safety, security, and general well-being. Among the frequent offenses is domestic violence, which involves intimate partners or family members abusing intimate partners physically, emotionally, or psychologically, and is one of the most common types of violence against women in India (UNFPA 2004). Sexual harassment is another type of crime including unwanted advances, inappropriate touching, and vulgar remarks are just a few examples of the sexual harassment that women experience in public places, workplaces, and educational institutions. Sexual assault and rape are horrible crimes that seriously compromise a woman's bodily integrity and dignity. Sexual assault and rape occurrences are still being recorded at frightening rates despite strict laws. In India, crimes against women continue in many forms despite continuous efforts to empower them, severely affecting their safety, security, and general



well-being. Among the frequent offenses is human trafficking -Girls and women are trafficked for a variety of reasons, such as forced marriage, forced labour, and sexual exploitation. Honour Killings are another type of violence inflicted upon women. When women make decisions about marriage or relationships that defy social conventions, family members may kill them in the name of upholding family honour. Acid assaults: As a kind of retaliation or retribution, women are the target of acid assaults, which seriously injure them physically and psychologically (UNFPA 2004).

## **7. WOMEN'S EDUCATION: THE CHALLENGES**

Females generally receive significantly less education than males due to prevailing social norms and, in some cases, fears of violence. According to Sonalde Desai (1994) in her book on Gender Inequalities and Demographic Behaviour, these disparities are influenced by several factors. For example, when schools are located at a distance, staffed by male teachers, and require girls to study alongside boys, parents, particularly those from poorer or more traditional communities, may be hesitant to send their daughters to school due to concerns about potential threats to their safety and reputation.

In rural areas of India, for instance, girls often take on the role of secondary caregivers within their families. They are responsible for tasks such as looking after younger siblings, fetching water, gathering firewood, cleaning, and cooking. These responsibilities frequently discourage families from sending their daughters to school. Additionally, the pervasive practice of child labor in certain communities, including those involved in washing and agricultural work, further restricts educational opportunities for girls, particularly in underprivileged areas.

In many impoverished and marginalized communities, cultural practices and societal beliefs contribute to the low educational enrolment of girls. Families often perceive that educating their daughters will require them to accumulate more resources and property for dowries, which they may find financially burdensome. As a result, girls' education is frequently deprioritized.

India is predominantly an agrarian country, with 68.4 percent of its population residing in rural areas, and over 48 percent of this rural population being female (SECC 2011). While the Government of India has enshrined the right to primary education up to the age of 14 in the constitution, high dropout rates, particularly in rural regions, remain a significant challenges at the primary education level. In rural and impoverished families, girls contribute significantly to household chores and agricultural labour. This view makes it difficult for families to justify the investment in their education, as the perceived immediate economic benefit of their labour

outweighs the long-term benefits of schooling. Consequently, many girls are kept at home to manage domestic responsibilities and contribute to farming, rather than attending school. Several barriers to women's education exist, including sociological factors rooted in gender stereotyping and discrimination, as well as economic concerns. Gender stereotypes often channel women into roles and education programs associated with their domestic responsibilities. In higher education institutions, women are more likely to enroll in courses traditionally considered suitable for them, such as arts and education, while they are underrepresented in fields related to science and technology. Vocational and technical education also tends to be male-dominated, with training programs often focusing on domestic roles rather than economic productivity (Sehrawat 2022)

Additionally, families are more likely to prioritize the education of boys over girls and are more inclined to withdraw girls from school for household duties or other socially driven reasons. This systemic inequality continues to hinder the advancement of women in both formal and informal educational settings. Parental reluctance to educate girls is a significant barrier to their access to education. Several factors influence the decisions made by parents in Indian society regarding the education of their daughters. These decisions are often shaped by societal perceptions of women and the roles they are expected to fulfill. When women are primarily viewed as child bearers, education can be seen as an unnecessary luxury (Lamba 2017). In this view, investing in a daughter's education is often considered less valuable compared to investing in a son's education. This is because sons are typically expected to care for aging parents, making their education appear to be a more worthwhile investment. Conversely, since women are seen as fulfilling primarily reproductive roles, their education is often deemed less essential, with any benefits potentially accruing to the households they join after marriage.

In economically disadvantaged communities, families are less able to afford education for their children and are more likely to prioritize spending on sons over daughters for these reasons. In the middle class, the value of educating girls is often underestimated as a means of developing their potential. Among the upper-middle class, while financial constraints may not be an issue, entrenched gender biases persist. These biases include the belief that the economic return on educating women is lower or that women's education is only supplementary (AISHE 2020). Although there has been progress in improving women's education over the years, substantial challenges remain. The gender gap in literacy rates further highlights these issues and underscores the need for continued efforts to enhance educational opportunities for girls.

## 8. WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND CONSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL PROVISIONS

Women constitute almost half the population in the world but the patriarchal and masculine ideology made them suffer as they were denied equal opportunities in different parts of the world. However, the rise of feminist ideas has led to the tremendous improvement of women's condition throughout the world in contemporary times. Access to education has been one of the most pressing demands of the women's rights movements across the globe. Education of women has been a major preoccupation for both the government and civil society in India as they play a very pivotal role in shaping the country. When women are educated and empowered, the benefits are enormous. Women's literacy leads to increased life expectancy, reduced child mortality, and healthier as well as educated children as per studies. Surveys in developing countries have shown that women with more education have smaller, healthier, and better-educated families. Educated women are likely to take care of their health, desire fewer children, and educate them which makes it more likely for their children to survive and thrive into adulthood. As stated earlier the female literacy rate was recorded at 65.46%, which was notably lower than the male literacy rate of 82.14%. The Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE) data for 2019-20 indicates that the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for girls at the primary level (Grades I-V) was 94.32%, while at the secondary level (Grades IX-X), it was 79.59%. At the higher education level, the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) for 2019-20 reported a female GER of 27.3%. Despite these advancements, school dropout rates remain a concern. UDISE 2019-20 data reveals that the dropout rate for girls at the primary level was 4.36%, at the upper primary level was 5.59%, and at the secondary level was 17.0%. Gender parity has made significant strides, as indicated by the Gender Parity Index (GPI). The GPI for primary education reached 1.02 in 2019-20, signifying gender parity, while at the secondary level, it was 1.04, reflecting a slight advantage for girls. In higher education, the GPI stood at 1.01, suggesting near gender parity (Ministry of Education, 2020; UDISE, 2019-20; AISHE, 2019-20).

### *Constitutional Provisions for Women's Right to Education*

The constitutional rights of women in India, particularly the right to education, are fundamental to promoting gender equality and empowering women. The Indian Constitution, through various articles and amendments, ensures that women have equal education opportunities.

The Indian Constitution guarantees several fundamental rights and protections aimed at promoting equality and justice. Article 14 ensures equality before the law and equal protection within the

territory of India. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. Article 21A mandates free and compulsory education for children aged 6 to 14 years, while Articles 29 and 30 protect the cultural and educational rights of minorities, including women from minority communities. Articles 39(a) and (f) direct the state to ensure equal rights to livelihood for men and women and to provide opportunities for children to develop healthily. Article 42 provides for humane conditions of work and maternity relief, and Article 45 promotes early childhood care and education until the age of six. (Constitution of India, 1950). Key legislation and policies complement these constitutional provisions, including the Right to Education (RTE) Act (2009), which enforces free and compulsory education for children aged 6 to 14 years; the National Policy on Education (NEP 2020), which seeks to eliminate educational disparities and provide equal opportunities for women; and the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) Scheme (2015), which aims to improve the child sex ratio and enhance the education and empowerment of the girl child.

## 9. KEY LEGISLATIONS AND POLICIES FOR WOMEN'S EDUCATION

***Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009: Focus on Women and Girls:*** The Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009, is a landmark piece of legislation that mandates free and compulsory education for all children aged 6 to 14 years, with a strong emphasis on promoting gender equality and ensuring educational opportunities for girls. The Act enshrines the right to education as a fundamental right under Article 21A of the Indian Constitution and is designed to address educational disparities, including those based on gender. A significant aspect of the RTE Act is its provision for the reservation of 25% of seats in private schools for children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This includes a focus on girls, especially those from marginalized communities, ensuring that they have access to quality education regardless of their socio-economic status. By mandating this reservation, the Act aims to reduce the educational gap between boys and girls and promote gender equity in education.

Furthermore, the RTE Act emphasizes the creation of a School Management Committee (SMC) in every school. These committees are tasked with overseeing the implementation of the Act's provisions and ensuring that the educational needs of all children, including girls, are met. The SMCs play a crucial role in monitoring school performance and addressing any barriers that may disproportionately affect female students, such as gender-based discrimination or safety concerns.

The Act also includes provisions for infrastructure improvements, such as separate toilets for girls, which are essential for ensuring that female students can attend school comfortably and regularly. By addressing such practical needs, the RTE Act supports the retention and completion rates of girls in school. Overall, the RTE Act is designed to promote inclusivity and equity in the education system, with a specific focus on bridging the gender gap and ensuring that every girl child has the opportunity to receive a quality education, thereby contributing to their overall empowerment and development (MoE, Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2009).

***Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) Scheme, 2015:*** The Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) Scheme, launched in 2015, focuses on improving the child-sex ratio and promoting the education and empowerment of the girl child. The scheme targets gender-based discrimination and aims to enhance the status of girls through multi-sectoral interventions. It includes measures for increasing awareness about the value of girls, improving their access to education, and providing financial incentives to families for supporting the education of their daughters. The program integrates efforts across health, education, and social welfare sectors to address the declining child sex ratio and promote gender equality (MWCD, Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India 2015).

***National Education Policy (NEP), 2020:*** The National Education Policy 2020 introduces several key measures aimed at improving educational opportunities for women and addressing gender disparities. One of the central aspects of the NEP 2020 is its commitment to achieving gender parity in education. The policy emphasizes the importance of creating an equitable educational environment that ensures the inclusion of all students, particularly women and girls.

The NEP 2020 highlights the need for targeted interventions to support the education of girls, especially in rural and underserved areas. It proposes the establishment of gender-sensitive schools and the integration of gender perspectives into the curriculum to foster an environment that is supportive of female students. Additionally, the policy aims to improve access to education for women by addressing issues such as dropout rates and the need for flexible learning options.

The policy also outlines measures to enhance the safety and well-being of female students, including the establishment of gender-sensitive infrastructure and the provision of sanitary facilities in schools. This is intended to address the practical challenges that female students may

face, such as menstrual hygiene management, which can impact their school attendance and performance (Sehrawat 2022).

Furthermore, NEP 2020 stresses the importance of promoting women in higher education and research. It encourages the creation of scholarships and incentives to support female students pursuing higher education and advanced studies. The policy aims to bridge the gender gap in higher education and increase female participation in fields where they are traditionally underrepresented. The NEP 2020 also emphasizes the need for vocational training and skill development for women, ensuring that they have access to career-oriented education that enhances their employability and economic independence. By promoting vocational training programs and integrating them into the education system, the policy seeks to empower women with practical skills and knowledge that can lead to better job opportunities and economic empowerment (NEP, 2020).

***Women and the National Education Policy 2020*** : The central government in July 2020 has given a go-ahead to New Education Policy (NEP), envisioning an education system ingrained in Indian principles and beliefs. The transformation to a brighter, future a better 'Bharat' with an equitable and vital knowledge structure is possible with the provision of quality education to all. The NEP 2020 also aims at increasing the GER. By 2035 the Modi government plans to have 50 percent GER including vocational education through various reforms suggested in NEP. The National Education Policy of India covers certain key gender issues in the Indian educational system. The problems and solutions for educational attainment under the 4th Sustainable Development Goal can be learned from India's experience. Access is the most vital of them all. The report suggests several initiatives to improve women's access to resources. Creating special education zones, Gender Inclusion Funds, targeted scholarships, and gender inclusionary projects are a few examples of this. The NEP also covers the issue of sexual harassment that women endure while traveling to school or inside the school. The National Policy on Education-1986, being replaced by NEP-2020, is the need of the hour as the new policy is an inclusive charter focusing on all the levels of learning from the elementary stages of education to higher education in India. The policy mentions reducing dropout rates at higher education levels in point three. Although the data supplied are not gender-specific, they are nevertheless alarming. As one's educational level rises, so does their retention rate. According to the policy, GER for Grades 6-8 was 90.7 percent, but only 79.3 percent and 51.3 percent for Grades 9-10 and 11-12, respectively. The policy also lays out the initiatives that the government must take, one of which is maintaining gender balance in

higher education admissions. This will allow for greater inclusivity and less prejudice at a higher educational level.

The policy also says that female teachers shall be given special consideration. It also strives to ensure that different groups are fairly represented in the appointment of faculty at all levels of education. India has only 23.4 percent female labor force participation rates in the world which is one of the lowest in 2019. As a result, a special emphasis on female employment is unavoidable. The policy also suggests that gender sensitization should be one of the topics that need to be integrated into the curriculum. Gender can also be incorporated into the development of relevant clubs and organizations as the policy suggests (Sehrawat 2022).

#### **10. GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES TO PROMOTE WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN INDIA**

***Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) Scheme:*** The Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) scheme was launched in 2004 to provide educational opportunities to girls from disadvantaged communities, including Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and minority communities. The scheme establishes residential schools specifically for girls in educationally backward blocks and districts, with a focus on improving their access to quality education. KGBVs cater to girls who are unable to attend regular schools due to socio-economic constraints. As of the latest data, over 3,000 KGBVs are operational across the country, significantly contributing to the educational advancement of girls from marginalized communities. (MoE n.d.1)

***Mid-Day Meal Scheme:*** The Mid-Day Meal Scheme, initiated in 1995, provides free meals to school children, including girls, in government and government-aided schools. The primary goal is to improve nutritional levels among children and encourage school attendance, especially in economically disadvantaged regions. By reducing the financial burden on families and improving food security, the scheme aims to increase enrollment and retention rates, particularly for girls who might otherwise drop out due to poverty. Recent reports suggest that the scheme reaches over 120 million children across the country, playing a crucial role in promoting educational participation (MoE n.d.2).

***National Scheme of Incentives to Girls for Secondary Education:*** Launched in 2008, the National Scheme of Incentives to Girls for Secondary Education provides financial incentives to

girls who continue their education beyond the primary level. The scheme aims to reduce dropout rates among girls by offering scholarships, covering educational expenses, and providing stipends to encourage families to keep their daughters in school. Eligible girls receive financial assistance upon reaching secondary education, thereby promoting higher enrolment and retention rates. As of recent reports, the scheme has successfully benefited thousands of girls, contributing to increased secondary education enrollment (MoE n.d.2).

***Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY):*** Although primarily a financial inclusion scheme, the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) has implications for women's education as well. Launched in 2014, PMJDY aims to provide financial services to the unbanked, including women from low-income households. By improving financial literacy and access, the scheme indirectly supports educational expenses and other needs, including those of female students. The financial empowerment of women through PMJDY contributes to reducing economic barriers to education and supports families in investing in their daughters' schooling (MoF 2014).

These initiatives collectively aim to tackle various barriers to education faced by women and girls in India, including socio-economic constraints, health-related challenges, and educational access issues. Through targeted programs and financial support, the government is working to enhance educational opportunities and promote gender equality in the educational sphere.

## **11. CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD**

The landscape of women's education in India has evolved significantly over the past few decades, marked by a series of transformative policies, legislative acts, and data-driven initiatives. This paper has examined the impact of various educational reforms, such as the Right to Education Act, the National Education Policy 2020, and state-specific schemes, in advancing women's educational opportunities. It has also reviewed relevant data, highlighting both the progress made and the persistent challenges.

India has implemented a range of policies aimed at enhancing educational access and gender equality. The Right to Education Act, of 2009, has been a cornerstone in ensuring free and compulsory education for children aged 6 to 14, significantly benefiting girls by increasing enrollment and retention rates. Similarly, the National Education Policy 2020 has introduced reforms to enhance the quality of education and promote gender parity, including measures to address dropout rates and support girls' education in underserved areas.



State-specific initiatives, such as the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme, have also played a crucial role in addressing gender disparities in education. This scheme focuses on improving the child-sex ratio and promoting the education of the girl child through targeted interventions. Additionally, the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) scheme aims to provide educational opportunities for girls from marginalized communities, ensuring that they have access to quality education. Despite these advancements, challenges remain. Data reveals persistent gender disparities in educational attainment, with dropout rates among girls continuing to be a concern, particularly in rural and disadvantaged areas. The decline in the child sex ratio and ongoing socio-economic barriers highlight the need for continued efforts and refined strategies to address these issues.

A notable example of success in female education is Kerala, which stands out as a model for its achievements in this area. Kerala's high literacy rates, near-universal female literacy, and effective implementation of educational policies exemplify the positive outcomes of a comprehensive and inclusive approach to education. The state's initiatives, such as the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), coupled with strong government support and community involvement, have contributed to its impressive educational outcomes. Kerala's focus on higher education and the active promotion of female students' participation in various academic and professional fields further underscores its commitment to gender parity in education. In some states, such as Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar, Jammu and Kashmir, and Rajasthan, the female literacy rate is below 60 percent.

High dropout rates among girls, particularly at the secondary and higher secondary levels, are a major concern, driven by factors such as early marriage, socio-economic conditions, and inadequate educational infrastructure. Socio-cultural barriers, including entrenched traditional norms and gender biases, further hinder girls' educational attainment. Additionally, infrastructure and accessibility issues, especially in rural and remote areas, exacerbate the problem by limiting educational opportunities. Implementation gaps in national schemes and policies also affect the effectiveness of programs designed to support girl's education. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach, including improving infrastructure, increasing community engagement, and ensuring more effective policy implementation. By tackling these issues, Uttar Pradesh and other states can work towards enhancing educational opportunities for women and overcoming the barriers that currently impede their progress.

In conclusion, while India has made significant strides in improving women's education through legislative reforms and targeted programs, ongoing challenges necessitate continued focus and action. Future efforts should emphasize enhancing the implementation and monitoring of existing policies, addressing socio-cultural barriers, and supporting comprehensive educational and economic opportunities for women. By learning from successful examples like Kerala and adapting strategies to local contexts, India can work towards achieving greater gender equality in education and ensuring that all women have the opportunity to realize their full potential.

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