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Girls' Education in Rural India

Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims that, “Everyone has the right to education.” Yet, in rural India numerous social, cultural, and economic impediments limit access to education and deprive girls of this basic right. Study after study illustrates a large disparity between urban and rural girls. The impact of this egregious human rights violation is magnified by the fact that the lack of an equal education affects women and girls’ ability to enjoy other rights guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. For instance, the rights to work, freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of thought, and many others cannot be fully enjoyed without an education.

First, it is necessary to examine raw participation numbers for the educational system in India. The number of girls per 100 boys in higher education has improved from a mere 13 girls more than half a century ago, in the 1950-51 school year, to 78 girls per 100 boys 60 years later — still a large disparity (Ministry of Human Resource Development). However, Gross Enrollment Ratios (GER), which represent enrollment in a grade level as a percentage of residents in the age group corresponding to that grade level, show that even with this progress in women’s education, the urban-rural divide remains large, as overall gross enrollment according to the GER index is 22.56 in urban areas as compared to 7.51 in rural areas, or about a three-fold divide between urban and rural areas. It should be noted, however, that this urban-rural divide is larger for females: rural females score only a quarter as much as urban do females on the GER index, while rural males score about 40 percent as much as their urban counterparts (Sahni and Shankar). So, while progress has been made over the last several decades, rural females still lag

far behind rural males, urban females, and urban males in education. And the opportunities for rural females to participate in higher education are growing at a slower rate than that of rural males.

Furthermore, despite these increasing (but still inadequate) education levels, workforce participation has been declining among women in India, from 34% in 1990 to 27% in 2011 (Khera). This downward trend has also been observed in periods of economic growth, not just times of stagnation. This decline reflects the continued disparity between education levels of males and females.

Sunita Bose investigated social and cultural constraints on the education of girls in India, including the relationship between a mother's education and her daughter's education. She found that young women are at a greater educational disadvantage compared to their brothers in families in which mothers have a strong preference for sons — which is the case in the majority of families in India. An increase in the mother's education is shown to reduce the effect of preference for sons and to reduce the bias against daughters. Thus, providing the basic educational rights of girls will increase female education across generations, and accelerate the long term solution to this problem of disparity in education based on gender.

This paper by Sunita Bose also summarizes evidence for a theoretical framework for understanding the broader benefits of education, surveying extensive prior research. Increased education is associated with better bargaining power and a resultant increase in resource control. Education is thought to improve a woman's efficiency and ability to deal with the outside world. Inside the home, increased education may improve women's status by giving them more

decision-making authority, more equal partnership with their spouses, and the ability to resist or overcome some cultural biases. Influences that give women more voice and agency within the family decrease discrimination against women. One of the most important of these influences is education. Thus, gender discrimination in education has an impact not only on the women who are denied education by limiting their options, but also on future generations by its impact on their daughters.

Ila Patel describes some of the reasons for the persistent urban-rural divide in female education in India, despite the progress in women's education that has occurred. Her research examines the effects of the women's rights movement in India on the education of girls. She notes that the urban women's movement, dominated by middle class women, did not pursue or sustain efforts to change curriculum content in order to bring about systematic changes in school practices or alter gender differentiation in the selection of field of study at higher levels. Focus on education reform, such as protests against stereotyped images in school textbooks, subsided as the attention of the women's movement shifted to other burning issues of violence against women, such as rape, sati — also known as widow-burning, abortion of female fetuses, dowry-related deaths, and atrocities against women during communal unrest and riots. Although there are many areas where women's rights need to be protected, and while enormous progress has been made in many of these areas, removing barriers to education will address a key human rights challenge and help remedy many of the other ills suffered by rural Indian women.

As part of my research into these issues, I spoke to an educator who works at a government-run school in rural Uttar Pradesh. It serves underprivileged groups, such as members of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other so-called Backward Classes. She says that

mothers who have lived a life of oppression have become more supportive of their daughters' education, but only to a certain extent. They are incentivized to take advantage of government programs that provide fresh cooked meals, medical examinations, shoes, and woolens, all at no cost. This is especially enticing given the poverty and the low standard of living in rural areas. However, the families often prefer that the girls focus on household chores, including fetching water from the village well, and helping in the family business (e.g. farming, rope-making, managing fisheries, etc.). According to the educator, "Since it is a male dominated society in rural areas, people don't want the girls to be very educated. They think that if they empower women then later the girls will stand up for their rights...No matter how many facilities are provided [for girls] the rural society still prefers boys and they are pampered much more than girls. The girls slog whereas the boys get spoiled..." However, programs for teenage girls like Meena Manch and Kishori Balika Yojana have recently been growing in popularity and magnitude. These programs educate girls about general health and personal hygiene, how to overcome social stigma, and other moral and social lessons. The government also provides the girls personal hygiene products, iron supplements, deworming medicine for tapeworms, eye examinations, aids for physically challenged girls, and numerous other services. They also receive free vocational training to promote their independence.

Unsurprisingly, educational equity for girls is correlated with women's economic strength, political power, and their presence as political leaders. Irma Clots-Figueras studied this relationship, both confirming the relationship, and finding that the strength of the relationship is weaker for rural girls. In any case, women in India are underrepresented in all political positions. According to Clots-Figueras, "In urban areas, the wage of an educated woman is 3.5 times the

wage of an uneducated woman. In rural areas, the wage of an educated woman is 1.5 times the wage received by an uneducated woman.” This means that rural women have a smaller economic incentive to invest in their own education. This is due in part to social constraints which reduce the mobility of educated women living in rural areas, making their education less valuable.

One of the observed benefits of education in India is a decrease in total fertility rate, which is favorable in rural areas where access to contraception is limited (Jain and Nag). That paper finds that there is convincing evidence that female education in India monotonically increases the use of contraception and age at marriage, both of which, in turn, decrease fertility rates. Experience across the globe has shown that decreased fertility rates are associated with greater economic, political, and social independence of women.

Social norms and obsolescent cultural values in rural India have denied women their human right to an equal education. Hindered progress in the area of girls’ education has contributed to a vast disparity between urban and rural women, with rural women left far behind. Though progress is being made, ultimately attitudes towards girls’ education must change to achieve true equity.

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