

IS LIFE GETTING BETTER FOR YOUNG WOMEN?

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The real difficulty is that people have no idea of what education truly is. We assess the value of education in the same manner as we assess the value of land or of shares in the stock-exchange market. We want to provide only such education as would enable the student to earn more. We hardly give any thought to the improvement of the character of the educated. The girls, we say, do not have to earn; so why should they be educated? As long as such ideas persist there is no hope of our ever knowing the true value of education.

M. K. Gandhi cited in (*National Council for Teacher Education, Undated*)

Introduction

The United Nations Millennium Campaign started in 2000. 147 heads of State and 189 member states of the United Nations, through the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), agreed, *inter alia*, to deliver universal education and eliminate gender disparity.

Two of the eight MDGs are focussed on education, particularly the education of

girls. MDG 2 targets universal primary education by 2015 while MDG 3 seeks to eliminate gender disparity in primary education by 2005 and all other levels of education by 2015. The attention on girls follows increasing evidence that educating girls has multiple flow-on effects including improved maternal health and a reduction in infant mortalities, limiting the spread of HIV/AIDS, empowering women and reducing poverty (Archer, 2005). As the saying goes “*If you educate a man, you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate the nation*” (*United Nations Economic and Social Council, 28/02/2006*).

The goal to eliminate disparity in primary education by 2005, only five years after the MDGs were set, recognised that educating girls underpins the achievement of all seven other MDG targets. Helping girls onto the first rung of the development ladder, by facilitating access to education, is a necessary first step in the fight to overcome the challenges of sustainable development as outlined in the MDGs.

In September 2013, the Secretary General of the UN, Ban Ki-moon, noted that it was less than 1,000 days to the 2015 target

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date for achieving the MDGs (United Nations, 2013b). Thirteen years after its inception and less than two years before the Campaign ends, it is now time to ask “Is life getting better for young women?”

To answer this question, this paper examines the educational data for India and Australia with particular attention on the states of Gujarat and Queensland. Our focus on young women in the states of Gujarat and Queensland reflects, respectively, the location of the conference in which this paper is being presented and the authors’ home state. Beyond that, these localities represent two states in different stages of development and where government policies relating to young women¹ and education are likely to differ to reflect both shared and disparate social values.


The states of Gujarat and Queensland are not similar. Gujarat is on the north-west coast of India, Queensland is on the north-east coast of Australia. Queensland has an area nearly nine times larger than Gujarat but Gujarat has a population thirteen times larger than Queensland’s. However, Gujarat is considered to be one of India’s richest states (Morris, 2012) and is considered the entrepreneurial hub of India (Mehta & Joshi, 2002) while Queensland’s economy is growing at twice the rate of the rest of Australia (Queensland economy powering ahead of the rest of Australia by: *Paul Syvret*, *The Courier-Mail*, October 11, 2013). But all is not perfect. Over the past

two decades, Gujarat’s average growth rate of GDP has been higher than the national average (UNICEF India, downloaded 2013) yet, as a state it ranks poorly on indicators of mortality and life expectancy as well as education, (Arora, 2012; Parikh, 1996). In a similar vein, while free education was introduced in Queensland in 1870 and women voted for the first time in the 1907 state election, a recent Queensland report says ‘despite cash being funnelled into Queensland’s education system, the state’s schools are behind national and international standards’ (Queensland schools given fail mark as Newman Government promises overhaul by: *Tanya Chilcott*, *The Courier-Mail*, December 23, 2013)

Our analysis uses secondary education data and past research findings to examine how the lives of young women have changed since the declaration of the MDGs. We concentrate first on achievements to date on MDGs 2 and 3 that target education for all, at least to the primary level, and eradication of gender disparity in all levels of education. We then seek to understand the strategies that have underpinned such changes before finally identifying what still needs to be done.

To understand the current status of girls’ education in Gujarat and Queensland our analysis is guided initially by the relevant indicators associated with MDGs 2 and 3 outlined in Table 1 below. As performance against MDG indicators is generally reported at the national level results for India and Australia are also considered.

¹ In the context of this paper ‘Young women’ refers to girls and young women to the age of 24




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Target 2.A: Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling

2.1 Net enrolment ratio in primary education

2.2 Proportion of pupils starting grade 1 who reach last grade of primary

2.3 Literacy rate of 15-24 year-olds, women and men



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Target 3.A: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015

3.1 Ratios of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education

Source:(United Nations, 2013c, 2013d)

in 2010 (World Bank, Undated-b). At the same time the enrolment of boys also improved. By 2008 gender parity was reached for enrolments.

Gujarat seems to be on a similar trajectory. According to the Education Department of the Government of Gujarat (Education Department Government of Gujarat, 2013) the ratio of girls to boys admitted to 1st standard in 2003-04 was 90:100 while in 2012-2013 this was 97:100². In net enrolment terms³ (age 6 to 14) Gujarat performs better than India for both boys and girls (Boys 97.49 per cent: 89.98 per cent and girls 93.96 per cent and 83.48 per cent respectively (Mahatma Gandhi Labour Institute, 2004).

In Australia and Queensland primary enrolments and school participation rates for 6 year olds respectively have been consistently high (above 95per cent) for both boys and girls for the last two decades (World Bank, Undated-a)(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012b)

Enrolment rates

While advances in universal education have been made, in 2013 over 57 million children globally continued to be out of school (United Nations, 2013). This is an achievement, as this number is less than the over 100 million children not in school in 2005, 59 per cent of whom were girls (Archer, 2005).

In India and Australia the story appears to be better than the global average. In India enrolment of girls in school increased from 75.9 per cent in 2000 to 93.5 per cent in 2004 and further to 98.5 per cent

Retention rates

Enrolment rates and parity at enrolment age, however, fail to show the full picture. Once boys and girls are enrolled in school do they continue? Does parity endure as children progress through the years of education?

² Note: this ratio may reflect the ratio of girls to boys in the population

³ Net enrolment refers to the proportion of children of a particular age group attending grades specified for that age group.

At a national level, MDG data for the proportion of students starting grade 1 who reach the last grade of primary is only available for India to 2009. No MDG data is available on this indicator for Australia. In India in 2009 more than 97 per cent of both girls and boys completed their primary education. This is up from around 63 per cent of girls and 82 per cent of boys in 1995 (United Nations, 2013a). In Australia the participation rate of students in the final year of primary education remains close to 100 per cent with the number of male students around 2 percentage points higher than female students. This remains the case through junior secondary school but reverses by years 11 and 12 when the number of female students exceeds the number of male students (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012b).

State level data is more scant. Gujarat has made significant advances over the last decade to reduce the number of drop-outs in primary education. Drop-out rates have declined substantially from averages of around 18 per cent and 34 per cent for Standards 1 to 5 and Standards 1 to 7 respectively in 2003-04 to as low as 2 per cent and 7.5 per cent respectively in 2011-12. Drop-out rates for girls have declined in line with drop-out rates for boys. However, there are significant regional disparities across the state with the dry regions experiencing the highest dropout rates resulting in only 60.45 per cent of girls and 83.24 per cent of boys attending elementary school (Mahatma Gandhi Labour Institute, 2004).

For Queensland, school participation rates for age 12 (the average age students graduate from primary education) remain high (102 per cent⁴) suggesting that few students drop out at primary school levels. As Queensland students progress through secondary school a majority remain enrolled to the age of 15 (year 10). But, in 2006, by 16 years of age close to 20 per cent of boys had dropped out although this had been reduced to 12.5 per cent by 2012. In contrast, in 2006, around 12.5 per cent of girls dropped out of school at age 16 and this had been reduced to around 8 per cent in 2012 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012b).

Literacy rates

Literacy rates recognise that attending and staying at school do not, by themselves, demonstrate learning and retention. Literacy rates, or the percentage of the population aged 15-24 years who can both read and write with understanding a short simple statement on everyday life, has improved dramatically in India. Literacy rates of younger people aged 15 to 24 have increased from 61.9 per cent of the population in 1991 to 81.1 per cent in 2006 (World Bank, Undated-b) and, according to the census, to as high as 83 per cent in 2011 (Census Organisation of India, 2011). Literacy is highest amongst younger Indians (in 2011 the overall literacy rate 74 per cent while youth literacy rate is 83 per cent) and has increased most significantly amongst

⁴ Rate exceeds 100% as it includes students who reside outside of Queensland who are enrolled in Queensland schools. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012b)

women. That said women still fall some way behind men with 84 women to every 100 men between the ages of 15 to 24 literate in 2006 up from 67:100 in 1991 and 80:100 in 2001 (United Nations, Undated-b).

Literacy rates in Gujarat have also seen an upward trend reaching 78.03 per cent in the 2011 population census (Census Organisation of India, 2011). While female literacy has improved it has done so at a slower rate than male literacy and thus remains significantly behind that of males (63.31 per cent and 85.75 per cent respectively). This was up from 2001 when the overall literacy rate in Gujarat stood at 69.14 per cent (60.40 per cent and 78.49 per cent respectively for females and males). According to the 2004 MDG report for Gujarat, tribal women in the state have the lowest levels of literacy and geographical disparities are apparent (Mahatma Gandhi Labour Institute, 2004). In the dry region in the north, for example, female literacy rates are as low as 41.3 per cent (in contrast to males of the same region at 69.9 per cent) (Census Organisation of India, 2011). Indigenous children in remote areas of Australia have among the lowest literacy rates in Australia. Lack of school attendance is the main reason (<http://www.indigenouliteracyfoundation.org.au/what-is-indigenous-literacy.html> Accessed 20/01/2014).

In Queensland recent data on adult literacy rates collected as part of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIACC) found that only 56.0 per cent of adults between the ages

of 15 – 74 achieved Level 3 or above literacy levels⁵. Level 3 literacy is generally regarded as “the minimum required for individuals to meet the complex demands of everyday life and work in the emerging knowledge-based economy” (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008, p5). This was slightly above the overall average for Australia (53.6 per cent). Literacy levels for women in Queensland were slightly above those of men with 56.7 per cent and 55.3 per cent achieving Level 3 or above respectively (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013b).

Literacy levels in Australia have not changed much over the past two decades. In 2006, 53 per cent of Australians achieved level 3 or above in prose literacy which was only a slight improvement on 1996 at approximately 51 per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008).

Gender disparity

Gender parity has also improved considerably in India over the past two decades at all levels of education (primary, secondary and tertiary). Primary education reached parity between girls and boys in 2007, up from 74 girls to every 100 boys in 1990, and has remained so since. As schooling continues, however, fewer girls remain. In 2010, 92 girls for every 100 boys attended secondary school and 73 girls for every 100 boys received tertiary education (United Nations, Undated-b).

5 Literacy was measured on a scale of 1 to 4 with increasing levels of complexity. For definitions see ABS (2013) Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, Australia, 2011-2012, 4228.0

From Gujarat data it is possible to calculate the ratio of girls to boys enrolled in Standard 1. Over the past decade the ratio has varied from 92 to 98 girls per 100 boys. Note: this may be more of a reflection of female representation in the population as much as parity in enrolment. When considering the dropout rates from Standard 1 to 5 and Standard 1 to 7 (reported above), girls have had consistently higher dropout rates over the past decade suggesting decreasing parity in secondary and tertiary education (Education Department Government of Gujarat, 2013).

In contrast, in Australia, girls and boys are on par for receiving primary and secondary education but by tertiary level girls far outstrip boys (135 girls to every 100 boys in 2010). This has been the case for the last two decades (United Nations, Undated-a).

In Queensland policy initiatives aimed at removing female disadvantage in education in the 1970s / 80s were slow to be introduced when compared to other states in the country. This is attributed to the conservative political agenda of the state government at the time which saw women's place in the home, combined with the particular social, cultural and ideological values of key and powerful groups within the community. See Lingard, Henry, and Taylor (1987) for a chronological review of the struggle for girls' education in Queensland. Using ABS data on full-time and part-time student numbers in Queensland government and non-government schools it

is possible to calculate the ratio of female to males (2006 to 2012). Note: this does not take into account the ratio of girls to boys in the population. Parity between boys and girls at enrolment age (age 6) has been consistent over that time (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012b).

Is life better?

The galvanising effect of the MDGs on girls' education has contributed, at least in part, to significant advances in primary school enrolment and retention, particularly in India and Gujarat. But, is this sufficient to improve the lives of young women?

Critics of the MDG indicators relating to education argue that they are reductionist and inadequate and that to achieve the goals of universal education and gender parity then education in its broader sense needs to be considered. This includes early childhood, lower secondary and youth education, as well as adult literacy and quality which were all addressed under the Education for All Framework at the World Education Forum in Dakar months prior to the declaration of the MDGs (Archer, 2005). Rather than reducing the focus of education to primary education, Archer argues, we need to educate the decision makers – those who decide whether their children should attend school; and focus on all areas of disadvantage that prohibit children from attending school – disability, homelessness, poverty, children of migrant labourers, orphans and those from linguistic and ethnic minority backgrounds – not just gender.

In Australia experience has shown that increased participation of girls in education over the past three decades has resulted in increased participation by women in the workforce but failed to translate into equality. While young women have, in general terms, been better educated than young men since the mid-1990s (OECD, 2011 cited in (Adema, 2013) in labour markets, for example, they continue to suffer from disadvantage including lower participation than their male counterparts in paid work, higher participation in part time work, pay inequity, limited career advancement opportunities and limited prospects of reaching the top of the career ladder as well as lower retirement income (Adema, 2013). In addition, as expectations for women to co-contribute to family income have increased, women, in the most part, continue to carry the majority of the burden of household and other unpaid duties. In the 2012-13 Multipurpose Household Survey (MPHS) conducted across Australia, women are over represented (60 per cent) as a share of those who wanted a job or preferred to work more hours with the need to care for children, particularly due to the high costs of childcare, being reported as the main reason for not looking for work or more hours (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013a).

Gender equity in the Australian workforce made advances in the 1970s with the introduction of fair pay legislation and a “strongly centralised Australian award system to eliminate the most overt forms of wage discrimination against women

(Whitehouse, 2003, p116). While significant advances were made to address pay inequity limited progress has been made since (Whitehouse, 2003). Demonstrating persisting pay inequities in the Australian labour market, in 2010 the median salary for women with postgraduate qualifications was \$70 000 compared with \$85 000 for their male counterparts (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012a). Income inequality is closely related to disparity in higher education choices where women are generally underrepresented in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, sectors which generally attract higher starting salaries, yet are over represented in fields such as health and education (ABS 2012a; Adema, 2013). Similar findings are shared across OECD countries. Adema (2013) notes that educational performance (or underperformance) by women in particular subject areas is unlikely to be the contributing factor to differing educational choices but that such choices are more likely to be driven by attitudes and interest towards particular subjects that are likely to be formed early in life and “influenced by traditional perceptions of gender roles and wide acceptance of the cultural values associated with particular fields of study” (p. 8).

In India and Gujarat the challenges are different. Like Australia, at the national level India has put in place legislation and social policies to reduce gender inequality such as “marriage acts (1955), acts for the prevention of trafficking of women (1959) and education for women’s equality in the

1986 National Policy on Education (NPE)”(Ross, Shah, & Wang, 2011). Since the commitments made in the NPE, India, together with international development agencies, has continued to put in place policies to narrow the gender gap in education (for a review see Ross et al, 2011). Enrolment rates for girls have increased substantially and dropout rates through primary education have decreased. Staying in school for girls, however, is limited by factors such as domestic responsibilities including cooking, collecting firewood and water and taking care of younger siblings or the need to work, particularly in poorer families. For girls the effects of cultural practices such as payments of dowry by a bride’s family, hypergamous marriage and a patrilineal kinship system also contribute to lower retention of rates past grade 5 (Ross et al., 2011). The practice of girls moving to the family of the husband after marriage means that any investment in the education of daughters is perceived as lost to the family.

In Gujarat specifically low education attainment results for both boys and girls in the state, relative to other states in India, are considered to be the result of macro conditions such as poverty, environmental degradation and high levels of seasonal migration together with “low priority given to education by parents and children and poor quality of education that is not very relevant to the poor”(Mahatma Gandhi Labour Institute, 2004). Trust in the education system is an issue. Parents and students need to believe that an education

will increase access to economic opportunities rather than relying on networks to find employment (The saying in Australia “it’s not what you know but who you know” suggests a similar past).

While significant advances have been made since the declaration of the MDGs in the enrolment of girls in primary school, girls remain underrepresented in secondary and tertiary education and women’s literacy rates continue to be substantially below that of men.

What still needs to be done?

The concerns of the MDGs about women and girls are a core concern for social workers. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) has stated

the social work profession’s core commitment to human rights must involve a commitment to protecting and preserving the basic rights of all women and girls. Women of all ages and at all stages of the life cycle deserve protection from discrimination in all forms, including the elimination of all forms of gender-specific discrimination and violence

(International Federation of Social Workers, 2014, s.51)

This definition moves the debate beyond the MDG’s concern for education and equity to wider social and cultural constraints on women and girls. Obviously governments in India and Australia, Gujarat and Queensland have put in place

educational policies for girls that are bearing fruit. Life is getting better, at least in that respect. But what, then, when girls are educated? Are their circumstances better, are they able to use the education they have received, have their life choices really changed?

The work of social workers has a dual perspective: the person in their environment. In this the profession argues that the person can only be understood and assisted as they are interacting within their social environment. For the educated young woman, there are a number of circumstances that can limit or pervert the potential she has because of the particular environment in which she lives. The IFSW is clear that about the profession's obligations and asks social workers to work on these limiting issues: 'This special commitment to women of all ages is necessary because in all national and cultural contexts women and girls do not have equal access to the tangible and intangible benefits of being members of human society' (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014, s1.2).

Obviously, there have been some good changes but there is a way to go. Reports from both our countries show that girls, including educated girls, still face considerable, unfair barriers to full participation in employment, political and economic life. In India, for example, the 12th Five Year Plan (2012-2017) gives the 'highest priority to ending gender based inequities, discrimination and violence faced by girls and women' (Planning Commission Government of India, 2013, p214). In

Australia, similarly, the Office for Women in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet prioritises economic security, safety, reducing violence against women and enhancing women's organisations to improve women's equal place in society (Office for Women, 2014).

For a social work response, besides education, the IFSW lists five other 'critical concerns' (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014, s4.1) to guide social workers:

1. **Poverty:** 'Among the world's 1 billion people living in poverty, women remain in the majority (INSTRAW, 2005). Women's poverty results from structural factors related to national debt burdens, inadequate government spending on programs targeted to women, and paid employment that is often limited to the lowest-paying and most unstable jobs that provide the least (if anything) in employment-related benefits (UNIFEM, 2005)'.
2. **The economy:** 'Although women do the majority of the world's work, women do not share equally in income, earnings, and wealth. Discrimination against women in earnings, employment, access to credit and capital accumulation mechanisms, and employment-related public and private social benefit systems (UNIFEM, 2005) also affects the economic well-being of their children and other household members'.
3. **Health:** 'All aspects of health and health care, including mental health along with physical, social, and sexual and reproductive health, are vital to human and social well-being. Gender disparities in

health and access to health care persist worldwide’.

4. Violence: ‘Many women and girls from all social, cultural, and income groups are subject to specific forms of physical, sexual, and psychological violence because of their gender. This gender-specific violence includes emotional, physical, and verbal assault; rape and mass rape; sexual harassment; sexual exploitation and slavery; forced pregnancy; forced or selective abortion; and forced sterilization’.

5. Discrimination for being a girl: ‘Discrimination against women can begin early in life. Prenatal selection, female

infanticide or abandonment, childhood sexual exploitation, genital mutilation, and limited access to adequate nutrition and health care all affect the number of girls in some parts of the world who survive into adulthood (Working Group on Girls, 2006)’.

These ‘critical concerns’ are systemic issues that show that gender is interconnected with and interwoven in all aspects of contemporary societies. This is not new; it has been known for many years. What it does show is that improvement in female education as planned for in the MDGs can be held back if the social contexts of girls’ lives are not also improved. Both India and Australia require further action here.

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