Achieving equal rights and opportunities for women and girls

Highlights

The Millennium Development Goal (MDG 3) of gender equality and empowerment of women will determine India's long-term sustainable development. It is also the right thing to do.

India's progress on MDG 3 is mixed. India will achieve targets in girl's education and literacy, but lags behind on improvements to women's economic empowerment and equal representation for women in Parliament. Progress has been satisfactory at the primary level, but barriers are still being faced in secondary and tertiary education. Women's participation in the labour market is extremely low and stagnant. Most women work in informal jobs with little protection or job security. Some estimates suggest India could increase GDP by 25% if women's employment share matched men's. India should increase equitable representation of women in politics and all other areas of decision-making especially the civil service and the private sector.

Post-2015, targets and monitoring for gender equality and women's empowerment must improve to include all aspects of women's participation in society and address violence against women and discriminatory attitudes and social norms.

Key Actions for improving gender equality and women's empowerment in India include:

- Make women's participation in education safe, secure, equitable and relevant.
- Promote decent work for women in safe and productive environments free of harassment.
- Provide skills development for women.
- Facilitate quality childcare for women's participation in labour force and increase men's participation in unpaid work.
- Building on the 33% reservation for women in local bodies, work towards similar reservation in Parliament and state legislatures.
- Set wider gender equality objectives on eliminating sex-selection before birth, universal access to sexual and reproductive health, elimination of all forms of violence against women and including unpaid care and domestic working national accounting frameworks.

This policy brief has been prepared by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) on behalf of the United Nations Country Team in India.
Limited success in achieving gender equality

Gender equality and empowerment of women are goals that are not only intrinsically desirable for themselves but are critical for achieving the other MDGs and for the long-term sustainable development of the country. Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 3 addresses this issue and the indicators track crucial aspects of gender equality and empowerment, such as parity in education, participation in non-traditional work and representation in Parliament, but they do not cover fully all the essential aspects pertaining to this subject. India’s overall progress on MDG 3 is mixed: while the country is on track to achieve targets in girls’ education and literacy, it is lagging behind in achieving women’s economic empowerment and equal representation for women in Parliament. In order to more meaningfully achieve gender equality, the several essential areas not covered under the MDGs need to be addressed. These lacunae have been identified and sought to be tackled in the post-2015 development agenda currently being finalized. Most of them are vital concerns for India too.

Gender parity in education will be achieved at all levels by 2015

India has already achieved the overall MDG target of eliminating gender disparity in primary education and is on track to achieve parity in secondary and tertiary education as well. The Gender Parity Index (GPI) rose from 0.76 in 1990/91 and crossed parity (1.01) in primary education in 2011/12 (an increase of 33%); it increased from 0.60 to 0.93 (55%) in secondary education; and from 0.54 to 0.88 (63%) in higher education, in the same period. While progress has been satisfactory at the primary level, barriers are still being faced in secondary and tertiary education. The progress made in attaining gender parity at these three levels of education is summarized for the individual states and for India as a whole, in Figures 1, 2 and 3.

In primary and secondary education, most states have already reached parity or are close to doing so. Some states do have to make a greater effort particularly at the secondary level; such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. In tertiary education, much more effort by most states is needed. Parity in enrolment does not tell us about the actual outcomes in women’s education. For example, literacy, an outcome measure, shows that women are still far behind men. The overall youth literacy rate (age 15–24) was 86% in 2011 with female literacy among the young at 82% and the corresponding figure was at 90% for males. Literacy rates for young women in some states were far lower than this average, such as Bihar (64%), Jharkhand (71%) and UP (76%).

Empowering women remains a challenge

Economic empowerment

The share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector is a good measure of women’s participation in economic activity and a proxy for economic empowerment. This index has remained almost stagnant for India. During 2011/2012, the percentage of women in wage employment in the secondary and tertiary sectors was 19.3% and the figure is not likely to exceed 22.28% by 2015 by official estimates, far below the 50% needed to reach parity with men. The state-wise picture is summarized in Figure 4.

Figures

Figure 1

Ratio of girls to boys in primary education, 2004–2012, India and states

Figure 2

Ratio of girls to boys in secondary education, 2004–2012, India and states

Figure 3

Ratio of girls to boys in higher education, 2004–2012, India and states

Figure 4

Ratio of girls to boys in wage employment, 2004–2012, India and states
The overall labour force participation rate (LFPR) of women in 2011/12 was at 23% (including primary sector employment) far below that of men (56%). Even though in urban areas women's LFPR has increased marginally; it fell for rural areas from 32% to 25%, over the period 1972/73 and 2011/12. Several factors are responsible for this decline, such as increased educational enrolment, higher household incomes, change in work preferences, lack of job opportunities, greater mechanization in farming and difficulties in measurement (such as for home-based work). As in many other indicators of human development, women's LFPR in India is much lower than that in East Asia (67%), and it is also lower than the participation rate in some South Asian countries, such as Bangladesh (60%) and Sri Lanka (38%). Both these countries also have better rates of gender parity in secondary education.

This fall in women's labour force participation needs to be reversed. An increase of over 25% in GDP can be achieved if female employment rates were to match men's by 2020. More decent jobs for women are necessary and better monitoring should be undertaken of informal and unregulated work such as domestic services, which has risen substantially (see Box 1) in recent times. Women also receive about 40% lower wages in employment with private employers and 20% lower wages even when employed in the public sector, a situation which must be remedied.

An important general measure for empowerment is to provide women with legally enforceable property and land rights, which gives them an economic identity in addition to a relational identity, enables them gain economic independence and make choices outside family relationships. To enable access to decent employment, together with education more opportunities for vocational training for women need to be provided. In this regard, Apprenticeship Training Institutes for Women have been proposed in Haryana and Uttarakhand in the 2015/16 union budget as part of the ‘Skill India’ initiative. In addition, workplaces should be made more attractive for women (including meeting women's sanitation needs), sufficient access to childcare facilities need to be created, and safety and security concerns need to
be addressed. Fiscal measures such as tax breaks and/or benefits provided for families where both the parents are in full time employment may also help.

Women’s economic empowerment can also be furthered by promoting women’s entrepreneurship, through various national support structures, capacity-building and self-help group networks and credit provisioning. This would ensure across the board growth, not limited to only those with tertiary education, and will have a significant socio-cultural impact, as more women turn into entrepreneurs.

As women in farming comprise about three quarters of all women workers in the rural sector, special attention is needed in this area as well. Crucial in this context is enforcing the rights of women farmers to land ownership, water and forest resources, and recognizing their proper share in the value addition in agriculture value chains. In rural India, 83% of women depend on agriculture while only around 10% have some ownership entitlements over agricultural land owing largely to the cultural practices and traditions which dictate that ancestral land be passed from father to son. Only recently (in 2005) was the Inheritance law under the Hindu Succession Amendment Act changed to give equal rights to sons and daughters in inheriting agricultural land. However, even after this amendment, women own less than a tenth of the agricultural land in the country. The strict enforcement of new legislation measures reversing discriminatory treatment of women in the inheritance of agricultural land is essential to restore to women their right to ownership of land. This is important if women are to be able to access credit, such as bank loans, agriculture extension services and participate in agricultural development.

At the same time, to counter the loss of employment due to growing mechanization in agriculture, alternative employment needs to be facilitated through vocational training and skill development of women in rural areas.

**Box 1**

Women workers in the unorganized sector

All workers in the unorganized sector in India suffer from job insecurity, low pay, and poor working conditions, but women workers are even more vulnerable. The ILO assesses that the proportion of women workers in vulnerable employment exceeds that of vulnerable male workers. A development of particular concern is that in recent years there has been a large increase in the number of women working in domestic service — a sector which is unregulated and where women may suffer abuse and exploitation. In the case of rural women this has increased from 29.8% in 1983 to 42.2% in 2011/12 and for urban women the share of women in domestic services has increased from 38.5% to 48%. Careful monitoring is necessary of such vulnerable female workers as well as ensuring decent terms of employment for them.

Sources: ILO calculations based on NSS Rounds 50–68; Abraham (2013).
Political empowerment: The proportion of seats held by women MPs in Parliament has increased only marginally from about 10% to 11% over the 20 year period; 1991 to 2011, and remains significantly lower than the desired range of 40–60% and the global average of 20.8%. Neighbouring Nepal has achieved faster progress here and is the only Asian country to have reached 33% female representation in Parliament bolstered through the reservation of seats introduced in the Interim Constitution of 2007. This indicator, if considered by itself, gives an incomplete picture of women’s representation in the political system in India. For example, as a result of a constitutional amendment in 1993, one-third of all leadership positions at the local (panchayat) level (later increased to at least 50% in 2011) have been reserved for women. This has led to 1.2 million women being elected to local government positions. The representation of women in local government has a positive multiplier effect. It gives agency to more women in society and also has an inter-generational impact, encouraging girls and boosting their aspirations. It allows gender issues to be effectively raised in government and addressed. Given its enormous benefits, the level of representation at the panchayat level should be replicated in Parliament, by passing the Women’s Reservation Bill. At the same time, increased training for women at the panchayat level on their roles, responsibilities and powers is crucial in order to help build constituencies to support the aspirations of women at the national level and to develop a culture of political participation. Representation of women should be expanded in the bureaucracy and in the private sector as well.

Social empowerment: Gender equality and empowerment of women requires changes in attitudes and actions on the role of women and men, girls and boys in household tasks and care-giving, and attitudes to intra-household gender inequality in nutrition and education. Greater action is required to end discriminatory practices such as requirements of dowry, early marriage. Eradicating violence against women and girls requires stronger efforts to end domestic violence, and change physical and social environments that can create perceptions of threat or fear of violence outside the home.

Discrimination against women that starts before birth, through the practice of sex selection, has resulted in a rapidly declining child sex ratio (CSR), which has become an urgent concern. In India, the CSR has fallen to 919 girls per 1,000 male children in the 2011 Census and there are a number of states and districts where the figures are even more distressing. Among the main reasons responsible for this situation is the son-preference that prevails in India and the less than equal access that girls have to food, nutrition, health care and education and employment.

Trafficking of minors is another major issue. According to official estimates, at least 40% of the three million women in prostitution are underage. Violence against girls has also been rising. Reported child rapes have increased steadily from 2,113 cases in 2001 to 7,112 cases in 2011, when it represented about 30% of all reported rapes. Violence in public spaces in general is on the increase and women and girls face sexual harassment and assaults in public spaces every day. According to a study undertaken by UN Women for Delhi, nearly 95% women ranked public spaces as unsafe and 73% said they feel unsafe in their own surroundings. Women also face violence at home. Dowry-related violence is widespread with the National Crime Records Bureau reporting 8,233 dowry harassment deaths in 2012, while unofficial figures are at least three times as high. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3), 35% of married women aged 15–49 in 2005–06, had experienced physical spousal violence.

The problem of child marriages remains a significant challenge to achieving gender equality. States such as Kerala have started to address this issue by prohibiting registration of marriages of couples marrying below the legal age requirements. However, India continues to be one of the 20 countries with the highest prevalence of child marriages in the world, with a 47% prevalence rate between 2001 and 2011.

Several initiatives have been undertaken in the country to change attitudes towards girl children, including ending child marriages. In Haryana, the Apni Beti Apna Dhan scheme provides incentives for delaying marriage and for educating women. A World Bank study confirmed the many possible benefits of the scheme and the initiative is now being replicated in several states.

The challenge of discriminatory social norms and stereotypes needs to be addressed simultaneously on multiple fronts. To begin with, a radical shift in the nature of the discourse surrounding women and girls is necessary and gender stereotyping needs to be eliminated by incorporating gender sensitization and awareness in the national education curriculum, across the country. Better implementation of legislation already in place such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005, the law on pre-conception and pre-natal sex determination, laws against dowry and child marriage and protection of children from sexual offences, and the Criminal Amendment Act 2013, are also needed. Women should also be provided legal assistance to fight injustices and violence. The Nirbhaya Fund (named after a victim of rape and murder) established to strengthen women’s safety and security should be expanded in scope and fully utilized. Proposed One-Stop Crisis Centres should also be expanded to provide help to women affected by violence. Finally, the needs of women from groups that face discrimination, in general or are more vulnerable need particular attention. These include tribal and SC women, single women, widows, elderly women, women abandoned by their spouses or families or children, orphaned girls and women and girls with major health conditions, (such as those suffering from diseases such as HIV/AIDS for instance, ailments associated with high levels of stigma and discrimination) and with disability.
Empowering women economically through entrepreneurship

Women constitute less than 14 per cent of registered entrepreneurs in India. Supporting women entrepreneurs provides a dual benefit of growth from entrepreneurship and far greater economic empowerment for women. The United Nations, through UNESCAP, has initiated a regional programme to promote women's entrepreneurship in several Asian countries, including India. The programme was launched jointly with Goldman Sachs’ 10,000 Women initiative.

A recent Indian survey of women entrepreneurs across 12 states in India conducted under this programme, found they were concentrated in India’s more productive sectors of services (48 per cent) and manufacturing (44 per cent). The vast majority of them were graduates or postgraduates. They were also more likely to be married and benefiting from domestic help. They relied heavily on families and information networks to build their enterprises and access financing. Over half relied on support from their husband or, father or both to begin their business.

The study found that Indian women entrepreneurs had little access to information about loans, incentives or other schemes set up by the Government and financial sector institutions. Only 20 per cent of women entrepreneurs had applied for Government schemes to support their enterprise. Around half had no knowledge of them. Even when information was available, women entrepreneurs faced challenges with complex procedures and documentation for credit support or loan guarantors.

Indian women entrepreneurs also felt significant social pressure to complement, and not substitute, their time spent building their enterprise with their traditional gender roles of managing the family, child care and household. Most (65 per cent) found juggling both work and family life challenging.

To improve opportunities for women entrepreneurs India must first implement policies that integrate women in the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Government, state governments, BDS providers, supporting organizations). This also involves better access to critical spheres (such as finance and credit, market, infrastructure and social service and technology) to boost female entrepreneurship. Second, better and more inclusive government legislation on taxation and government business regulations will foster women’s entrepreneurship. Specific assistance to women entrepreneurs through income tax rebates and tax relief, and subsidies and concessions targeted at women entrepreneurs including collateral-free lending may help reduce dependence on informal networks for women-led entrepreneurial innovation and start-ups. Simpler procedures for registering a business and financial and legal assistance are necessary especially for women entrepreneurs who are often excluded from the informal knowledge sharing networks. Third, India should provide better infrastructure and amenities in industrial areas where there are currently far fewer women. Creating amenities in industrial areas, with easy mobility and transport, child-care facilities and proximity to residential areas are crucial needed measures.

Source: UNESCAP

Achieving gender equality and women’s empowerment

While meaningful gender equality will require societal changes and attitudes which occur gradually, there are a number of priority measures that can help advance gender equality. These include the following:

- Make educational institutions at all levels safe and secure for girls and women with mandatory improvements in the areas of water and sanitation, safety, and gender sensitive curricula. Begin awareness raising campaigns to promote secondary and tertiary education for girls.
- Take measures to promote women’s employment in decent jobs by paying particular attention to vocational education and skill development for women. All attempts must be made to make the workplace safe and secure for women, including facilitating quality childcare for working mothers.
- Actively promote more employment of women, including
providing more than 100 days of work under MGNREGA, particularly in northern states where women’s employment in the scheme is lagging.

- Building on the 33% reservation for women in local bodies, work towards similar reservation in Parliament and state legislatures.

- Focus special attention on states and communities and vulnerable groups that have fallen behind on women’s education, employment and empowerment.

- Take measures to implement the laws relating to under-age marriages and to ensure that girls are not married before they turn 18 and boys are not married before they turn 21 years of age.

- Scale up campaigns that involve the private sector and NGOs, to bring about attitudinal change. Pursue vigorously the implementation of the amended Hindu Succession Act to ensure that women’s land ownership rights are demanded by the women themselves, and these are recognized and enforced by the states.

- To ensure achievement of the enlarged gender equality objectives under the future Sustainable Development Goals, India should ensure wider gender equality objectives such as (a) elimination of sex-selection before birth, (b) universal access to sexual and reproductive health, (c) elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls, (d) women’s labour market participation and (e) accounting and recognition of unpaid care and domestic work by women.

Some of these measures could be promoted as a part of the ambitious **Beti Bachao-Beti Padhao** (protect the daughter-educate the daughter) campaign of the Government of India, launched by the Prime Minister on 22 January 2015. As part of the campaign, another welcome measure is the Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana and tax exemptions on interest payments for girls’ savings accounts, aimed at encouraging savings for a girl child’s education. More such incentives could be applied to address other dimensions of gender inequality.

### Endnotes

1. The Gender Parity Index is the ratio of the number of female students enrolled in primary, secondary and tertiary education to the number of male students enrolled.


About the India and the MDGs Policy Briefs

This policy brief is part of a series developed by the Research and Knowledge Team of the United Nations in India. The policy brief series provides additional information and analysis on India’s progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as they end in 2015, and medium-term policy recommendations. The series accompanies the report of the United Nations Country Team in India entitled *India and the MDGs: Towards a sustainable future for all*, released in February 2015*. The report makes an assessment of achievement of MDGs by India over the past 14 years and draws policy lessons for accelerating progress for closing the gaps and carrying momentum post-2015 to end poverty and other deprivations and provide sustainable prosperity for all.

(* http://www.unescap.org/resources/india-and-mdgs-towards-sustainable-future-all)

More information

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Prepared by [UN ESCAP](http://www.unescap.org/) on behalf of the United Nations Country Team in India

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