POLICY BRIEF

OCTOBER 2023

NURTURING A VIBRANT GIRL CAPITAL IN INDIA

Acknowledgement

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Disclaimer

CONTEXT

Investing in girls is the foundation for nation-building. In India, eliminating gender disparities has the potential to deliver a remarkable 27% surge in GDP[1]. A vibrant girl capital promises substantial social return and can steer social transformation and prosperity.

Every fifth person in India is an adolescent, and the country has the world's largest adolescent population (10-19 years). As per Census 2011, the adolescent population stood at 253 million, of which 47% were girls. This demographic composition presents a unique opportunity for India to reap social and economic benefits, provided these adolescents are safe, healthy, educated, and equipped with life skills[2]. However, the key to unlocking this potential is ensuring that girls are not left behind.

Girls in India are increasingly permeating all spheres of public life. They are more likely to go to schools, stay there longer, gain meaningful skills and employment, access better health and nutrition information and services, and have their voices included in decision-making processes. Nevertheless, despite the commendable advancements, persistent challenges, including deeply entrenched social norms, hinder their progress. Adolescence is a transitional age group and tends to "fall through the cracks." Furthermore, issues such as the digital divide, limited accessibility to secondary-level public education, and malnutrition persist as formidable barriers exacerbated by the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

SCOPE OF THE POLICY BRIEF

International bodies and the Government of India define "adolescents" as individuals between ages 10 and 19. However, for this policy note, we have considered **girls in the age group 10 to 21**, encompassing adolescents (10-19) and early adulthood (19-21). We have included girls in their early adulthood as this is an important transition period in their lifecycle. This transitional age group requires attention to critical aspects of their development, specifically sexual, reproductive and mental health, higher education, skills and jobs/ livelihoods. Therefore, including the early adulthood years, specifically ages 20 and 21, will enable policies and programmes to adopt a more integrated and comprehensive approach to address their evolving needs.

This policy brief centres on four key themes: **Nutrition, Health, Education,** and **Skill Development**. It examines the provisions outlined in relevant policies and schemes, contextualising them within the framework of girls aged 10 to 21 years. While most policies and associated scheme guidelines acknowledge the specific needs of girls and young women, particularly those in socio-economically disadvantaged circumstances, there are some gaps in policy implementation and scheme design, particularly concerning girls in this age group.

[1] Solberg E, Lagarde C. It's Time to Let Women Thrive by Erna Solberg & Christine Lagarde [Internet]. Project Syndicate. 2018 [cited 3 April 2018]. Retrieved from: https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/women-labor-force-participation-by-erna-solberg-and-christine-lagarde-2018-01?barrier=accesspaylog

[2] UNICEF (ND). Adolescent Development & Participation. Retrieved from: www.unicef.org/india/what-we-do/adolescent-development-participation

1 NUTRITION

Adolescence is a time when rapid physical growth increases nutrient demands. Dietary behaviours established in adolescence have consequences for long-term health.[3] Adolescent girls require additional care as cultural norms often mean that they lack access to nutritious food, nutrition services, and education. Preventing malnutrition in school-age children and adolescents is an opportunity to enhance growth and development, improve learning, and establish positive dietary practices that break the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition[4].

Undernutrition (calorie and micronutrient deficiencies) contributes disproportionately to morbidity and mortality. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019-21 for India, shows that undernutrition among women aged 15-49 has reduced from 22.9% to 18.7%. However, one persistent nutritional problem that is still prevalent among Indian adolescents is anaemia. It adversely affects growth, infection resistance, cognitive development, and work productivity. As per NFHS-5, the prevalence of anaemia stood at 31.1% in adolescent boys (15-19 years) but 59.1% among girls of the same age group.

With changing diets and physical activity levels, overweight and obesity are also emerging problems, especially higher in urban areas. The consumption of processed foods high in fat and sugar is rising, and adolescents and early adults are becoming increasingly sedentary. Overweight and obesity in adolescent girls are associated with obesity in adult women, which increases the risk of non-communicable diseases.

This note considered the National Nutrition Policy 1993 and National Nutrition Strategy 2017 for policy analysis. Additionally, Mission Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0, Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman (PM POSHAN), Anaemia Mukt Bharat (AMB) were included in arriving at scheme recommendations.

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[3] UNICEF (ND) Adolescent Nutrition: Investing in an age of opportunity to break cycles of poverty. Retrieved from: https://www.unicef.org/india/what-we-do/adolescent-nutrition

[4] UNICEF (ND)Nutrition in Middle Childhood & Adolescence. Preventing malnutrition in school-age children and adolescence. Retrieved from: https://www.unicef.org/nutrition/middle-childhood-and-adolescence

Policy Observations

The National Nutrition Policy (NNP), introduced by the Ministry of Women and Child Development in 1993, was a seminal step in addressing nutrition-related public health concerns. During its inception, the issue of overnutrition received relatively limited attention compared to the prominence it commands today. Though new nutrition policies didn't come into being since 1993, the nutrition policy landscape has evolved. While the NNP 1993 understood the need to bring adolescent girls within the ambit of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and recommended that adolescent girls receive non-formal education, particularly nutrition and health education[5], the **National Nutrition Strategy of 2017** took the lifecycle approach to recognise the importance of healthy adolescents as the productive workforce of the future, contributing to the nation's growth. The initiation of POSHAN Abhiyaan in 2018 brought renewed political and programmatic focus to adolescent nutrition in India.

Several schemes were introduced to actualise the objectives outlined in the National Nutrition Policy. These encompass initiatives like the **National Nutrition Mission, the Anaemia Mukt Bharat, PM POSHAN** (erstwhile Mid-Day Meal Scheme), and the **Targeted Public Distribution System**. Adolescent girls have been prioritised in the **Scheme for Adolescent Girls (SAG)** to address the inter-generational problem of malnutrition.

While there is a growing commitment to address the specific nutritional needs of adolescent girls by recognising them as a critical demographic group in India's efforts to combat malnutrition and improve public health outcomes, challenges persist, including issues related to scheme implementation, access to nutrition services, cultural norms, and economic disparities.

The **PM POSHAN scheme**, for instance, restricts its meal provisions to students aged 6–14 years, thus excluding the crucial 15–18-year-old age group, which has implications for adolescent girls who require higher nutrient intake. Furthermore, the PM POSHAN scheme omits the provision of breakfast, which, widely regarded as the most vital meal of the day, can potentially enhance memory and concentration among school-going children. The scheme also lacks a mechanism for meal distribution during school closures. This issue becomes pronounced during crises, as evidenced during the pandemic, thereby disrupting the nutritional intake of vulnerable children.

The Scheme for Adolescent Girls (SAG) *covers adolescent girls aged 14 to 18 years, excluding the out-of-school girls in the age group of 11-14 years*. Similar deficiencies in accurately targeting the official adolescent age cohort of 10-19 years are discernible in other nutrition-related schemes.

An overarching issue for health and nutrition interventions for adolescents is the lack of data. NFHS does not collect health and nutrition data for school-age children (6-9 years) and early adolescents (10-14 years). Instead, girls aged 15-19 years are subsumed within the larger category of women in reproductive age of 15-49 years. This highlights an urgent need for disaggregated data concerning adolescent girls aged 10-19 years to inform policy formulation, intervention strategies, and programme implementation for this critical age demographic. Lack of data affects other crucial areas of health and nutrition, including the Weekly Iron Folic Acid Supplementation (WIFS) in schools and national/regional level data for estimating the prevalence of worm infestations in India[6], which is a significant cause of malnutrition and absenteeism of students in school.

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[5] Government of India, Department of Women & Child Development (1993). National Nutrition Policy. Retrieved from: https://wcd.nic.in/sites/default/files/nnp_0.pdf

[6] PIB Delhi (2020). Evidence Based Impact of National Deworming Day in India. Retrieved from: https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleseDetailm.aspx?PRID=1666053

Policy Recommendations

- **Institute mechanisms to understand adolescents' needs better:** Adolescents, particularly girls, face unique nutrition-related challenges due to societal norms and gender inequalities. Their requirements also change depending on their life situations and socio-economic conditions. Hence, there is a need to invest in research to understand better the specific nutritional challenges adolescent girls face in different regions and socio-economic contexts.
- **Transition from uniform food supplementation to a more systematic approach:** This entails the implementation of routine screening and targeted management protocols. Also, fostering innovation in developing affordable and nutritious food products for this demographic group. Such endeavours hold significant promise in effectively mitigating the current prevalence of anaemia among adolescent girls.
- **Shift from a lack of focused interventions in preventing over-nutrition to promoting prudent lifestyles and dietary practices** to prevent and manage over-nutrition and obesity through a multi-faceted approach.
- **Expand the PM POSHAN scheme to include 15–18-year-olds.** Currently, the PM POSHAN scheme excludes 15–18-year-olds and does not provide nutritious breakfast, which can benefit adolescent students, both girls and boys. Incorporating the provision of breakfast for school children under PM POSHAN is suggested. Also, consider budget uniformity, equivalent to PM POSHAN, for provisioning meals for out of school girls.
- **Encourage public-private partnerships to create strategies to re-market healthy, context-specific nutritional food as aspirational.** This will counter the demand for unhealthy foods and help inculcate dietary practices that improve nutrition outcomes.
- **Adopt the "Eat Right Toolkit":** Integrate the "Eat Right Toolkit" within the Mission Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0 programme and community health initiatives to educate adolescent girls on various aspects of nutrition.
- **Emphasise the inclusion of Millets:** Include millets in school meals and government nutrition programmes due to their nutritional richness, climate resilience, and cultural relevance. This strategic inclusion aligns with the broader objective of enhancing the dietary diversity and nutritional value of adolescent girls' diets.

Scheme Recommendations

- **Make Poshan Tracker[7] the common platform to track anaemia and be linked with other Women and Child Development (WCD) programmes.** The proposed integration is essential to bridge data gaps for nutrition interventions and for more straightforward implementation.
- **Establish a mechanism to deliver meals to children when schools are closed.** This will ensure that the nutritional intake of students is sustained without disruptions.
- **Prioritise the availability of drinking water, sanitary facilities, and prevent open defecation as part of deworming programmes.** This proactive approach can potentially curb infections and illnesses associated with unhygienic practices, subsequently enhancing overall school attendance rates.
- **Strengthen regular nutrition counselling for adolescents in schools and communities.** As per a report from Karnataka, nutrition was the topmost topic for which adolescents sought advice from counsellors under the national adolescent health programme in the first quarter of 2022. Additionally, more girls sought nutrition counselling than boys[8]. Trained teachers or counsellors could be deputed to provide nutrition counselling.
- **Enforce regulations to limit advertisements of unhealthy foods**, especially those targeting children and adolescents. Introducing front-of-pack nutritional labelling can add a layer of transparency and informed choice to consumers. Educate adolescents to decipher essential nutritional information and comprehend ingredient lists, enabling them to make informed dietary choices through improved food label literacy.
- **Ensure inclusion of fortified staples in government nutrition programmes.** Encourage the inclusion of fortified staples like rice, wheat flour, oil, milk and salt in the government nutrition programmes for adolescent girls uniformally across the States.
- **Foster greater collaboration among various government departments, ministries, and non-governmental organisations** to ensure a coordinated and holistic approach to addressing the multi-faceted nutritional needs of adolescent girls.

[7] The 'Poshan Tracker' is a mobile based application rolled out by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Govt. of India in 2021 Technology under Poshan Tracker is currently being leveraged for dynamic identification of stunting, wasting, under-weight prevalence among children and last mile tracking of nutrition service delivery.

[8] D'Souza P. (2022). Nutrition Major Concern of Kids Who Sought Counselling | Bengaluru News - Times of India

2 HEALTH

Adolescence is characterised by rapid brain development and deep physical, biological, emotional, and cognitive transformations. For adolescent girls, puberty leads to drastic bodily changes, marking their transition from girlhood to womanhood. Discriminatory social and gender norms gain prominence in girls' lives, with several adolescent girls being pushed into marriage, resulting in underage pregnancies and childbirth. As per NFHS-5, 6.8% of women aged 15-19 had begun childbearing; among currently married women aged 15-19, more than half (53%) had begun childbearing. These factors contribute to adolescent girls needing additional support navigating context-specific sexual, reproductive and menstrual health concerns. Girls are also more likely than boys to experience depression, emotional issues, and anxiety disorders[9], indicating a need for particular attention to their mental health.

The following policies and schemes on Health have been considered for this policy brief:

- The National Health Policy 2017, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare
- National Mental Health Policy 2014, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare
- National Health Mission 2005, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare
- Rashtriya Kishore Swasthya Karyakram (RKSK), launched in 2014 by Ministry of Health & Family Welfare
- The School Health & Wellness Programme (Under Ayushman Bharat, launched in 2018 by Ministry of Health & Family Welfare and Ministry of Education)
- Menstrual Hygiene Scheme 2011, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare

[9] Rajkumar, E., Julia, G., Sri Lakshmi K., N.V. et al. Prevalence of mental health problems among rural adolescents in India: A systematic review and meta-analysis. Sci Rep 12, 16573 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-19731-2

Policy Observations

The National Health Policy (2017) notably lacks a dedicated section addressing the specific concerns of adolescents and clubs them within the broader areas of reproductive, maternal and child health. The policy does not proffer particular attention to adolescent girls, failing to highlight their multi-faceted requirements encompassing reproductive and sexual health, menstrual health, and mental well-being.

The Rashtriya Kishore Swasthya Karyakram (RKSK) has established provisions for establishing Adolescent Friendly Health Clinics to cater to adolescents' health needs. However, adolescents, particularly girls, are reluctant to access healthcare facilities. This reluctance is driven by concerns related to privacy infringement and apprehension regarding potential judgment from family and community members. Additionally, the term 'clinics' carries a stigmatised connotation, further deterring adolescents from seeking healthcare services.

The Menstrual Hygiene Scheme (2011) endeavours to provide sanitary napkins to adolescent girls at subsidised rates through Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs). However, the efficient execution of this initiative faces impediments such as procurement and supply chain challenges, elevated costs, and a lack of enthusiasm among ASHAs. In 2020, the Central Government introduced 100% biodegradable sanitary napkins, named 'Suvidha', available at subsidised prices through Jan Aushadhi Kendras (government-run pharmacies). However, the distribution of these Kendras is primarily concentrated in urban locales. Notably, no central scheme exists for the free provision of sanitary napkins in schools, although some States have initiated schemes for free distribution.

The National Health Policy (2017) and the National Mental Health Policy (2014) carry little emphasis on mental illness among the young population. While mental health policies and programmes exist, including the recent Tele-MANAS (Tele Mental Health Assistance and Networking Across States) initiative, a comprehensive strategy is absent to address the escalating mental health challenges young individuals face in India. The guidelines for Health and Wellness Centres (HWCs) describe mental health services as 'desirable' rather than 'essential,' indicative of the lower priority afforded to mental health issues in primary care settings.

At the State level, most States lack explicit policies dedicated to Child and Adolescent Mental Health (CAMH), except for Kerala, which has embarked on initiatives to enhance mental health within the youth population. Despite several programmes touching on adolescents' mental health, their efficacy is compromised due to deficient technical capacity, low motivation, and inefficient management practices. The fragmentation of healthcare governance contributes to a lack of clarity regarding mandates and roles, particularly concerning population and community-based interventions, leading to gaps in service delivery.

Furthermore, discussions concerning the social determinants of mental health often overlook principles of equity and social justice, particularly about marginalised groups such as the homeless or sexual minorities and individuals who have endured neglect and abuse during childhood. Finally, excluding mental health indicators on adolescents from Health Management Information Systems (HMIS) underscores the failure to integrate adolescent mental health comprehensively within the broader healthcare framework.

Policy Recommendations

- **Develop an 'Adolescent Health Policy' as a policy addendum/supplement in the National Health Policy articulating adolescents' health needs and entitlements, particularly emphasising girls.** The absence of attention on the specific and diverse health needs of adolescent girls within the national health policy reflects the lack of targeting of a crucial age group of girls.

Scheme Recommendations

- **Re-brand Adolescent Friendly Health Clinics (AFHCs)**. The AFHCs are established under the Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram (RKSK). For adolescents, the term 'Clinic' has a negative connotation and deters them from visiting such a facility. Re-brand Adolescent Friendly Health Clinics as Adolescent Friendly Health Centres to improve adolescents' participation. For example, Uttar Pradesh has branded AFHCs as '*Saathiya Kendra*'.
- **Shift AFHCs from health facilities to schools.** Adolescents, especially girls, hesitate to visit the AFHCs due to concerns about privacy and fear of judgment. Therefore, AFHCs could be shifted from public health facilities to safe spaces, ensuring privacy and confidentiality in non-healthcare settings like schools. Further, they need to be positioned as centres that go beyond sexual and reproductive health services and be seen instead as health promotion hubs.
- **MoHFW could issue directives to State governments allowing them to creatively design content under the Ayushman Bharat -School Health & Wellness Programme (AB-SHWP) as per the State's context.** AB-SHWP curriculum covers critical thematic areas, but the content around reproductive health is weak. Allowing States to incorporate relevant content that creates awareness among girls around child marriage, reproductive health, preventing pregnancies, and emotional well-being in the AB-SHWP Curriculum based on the State's context and challenges will be a good policy measure.
- **Consider incorporating mental health services tailored to adolescents within the health service delivery.** This includes providing counselling and creating support groups, besides mental health education under the AB-SHWP in schools. Further, reducing mental health stigma is crucial to encourage adolescents to seek help when needed. Tele-MANAS facilities can be leveraged for psychosocial therapy to school children in need.
- **Including age-specific mental health indicators in the existing Health Management Information System is vital** for meaningfully integrating mental health within the larger health ecosystem.
- **Prioritising capacity building of the Health and Wellness Ambassadors under the Ayushman Bharat-School Health and Wellness Programme for promoting emotional and mental well-being** along with practical skills of identifying red flags, providing psychological first aid and initiating appropriate referrals for school children.

3 EDUCATION

Investing in girls' education transforms communities, countries, and the world. Girls who receive education are less likely to marry young and more likely to lead healthy, productive lives. They earn higher incomes, participate in the decisions that most affect them, and build better futures for themselves and their families. Girls' education also strengthens economies and reduces inequality. It contributes to more stable, resilient societies that allow all individuals – including boys and men – the opportunity to fulfil their potential[10].

India has made significant progress in enrolling girls in school. In 2021-22, over 122.9 million girls were enrolled in primary to higher secondary levels, showing an increase of over 800,000 girls in the education system (UDISE 2021-22). The Gender Parity Index (GPI) for Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) shows that the representation of females in school education is in line with the representation of girls in the population of corresponding age groups.

Nevertheless, critical challenges to educating adolescent girls at the secondary and higher secondary levels remain as they are at considerable risk of dropping out. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these. As per UDISE 2021-22, the net enrolment ratio for girls gradually fell from 91% at the elementary level to 48% at the secondary level to 35% at the higher secondary level. Deep-rooted societal norms and parental attitudes continue to impede girls' education as per NFHS-5 findings. Many parents do not see the value of educating girls as they perceive that it will not lead to any economic benefit.

The government has introduced several progressive legislations, policies, and schemes to address these challenges and promote girls' education.

The following policies and schemes on Education are considered for this policy brief:

- National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, Ministry of Education (MoE)
- The Right to Education Act (RTE) 2009
- Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (launched in 2018 by MoE). It subsumes the three erstwhile Schemes of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) and Teacher Education (TE).
- Pre-matric and post-matric scholarships (these scholarships are implemented as Centrally Sponsored Schemes by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Ministry of Tribal Affairs and Ministry of Minority Affairs)

[10] UNICEF (ND). Girls Education : gender equality in Education benefits every child. Retrieved from: https://www.unicef.org/education/girls-education#:~:text=Girls%20who%20receive%20an%20education,strengthens%20economies%20and%20reduces%20inequality

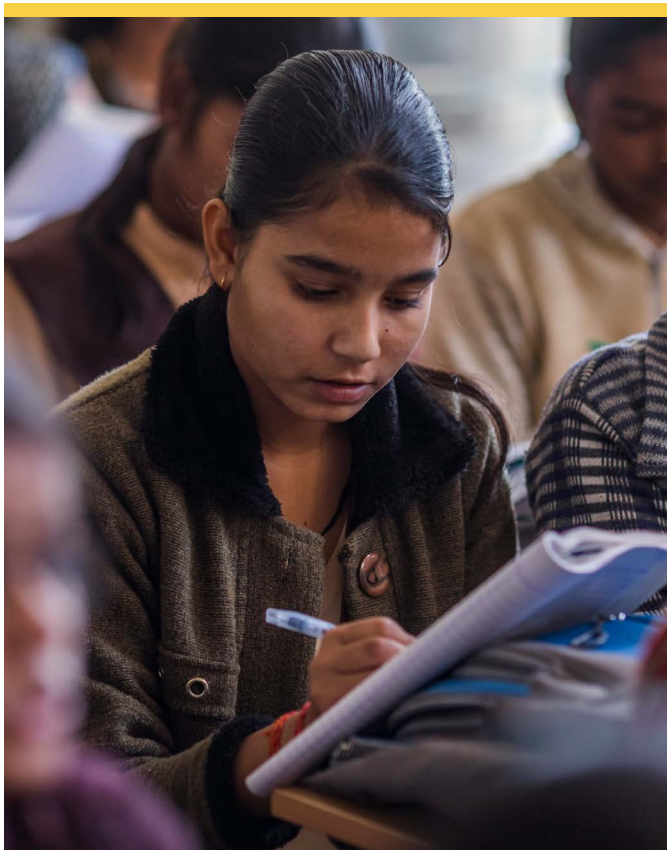
Policy Observations

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aims to attain complete enrolment for all children up to 18 years and emphasises the importance of universal access to education across all levels. Nevertheless, the NEP does not outline a specific strategy to expand the Right to Education Act 2009, which covers students from 6-14 years. Notably, girls from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds who are heavily dependent on the government system are left behind.

The policy does recognise the imperative of fostering gender inclusivity within the realm of education and posits the establishment of a **Gender Inclusion Fund**. This fund is envisaged to address local context-specific barriers to female and transgender children's access to education. However, funds for gender inclusion are mostly spent on infrastructure, recruitment, and routine provisions. For example, under Samagra Shiksha, *the opening of schools in the neighbourhood, free uniforms and textbooks, additional teachers and residential quarters for remote/hilly areas, and the appointment of additional teachers*[11].

The National Education Policy 2020 also underscores the critical importance of establishing **digital infrastructure** and connectivity to **narrow the digital gap**. This divide is particularly pronounced when addressing the accessibility of digital resources for girls and women. However, the policy lacks a specific plan featuring discernible milestones and time frames for mitigating this issue. On a positive note, India has more women graduates (43%) enrolled in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) than some developed countries like the USA, Germany, and the UK[12]. Nonetheless, various empirical studies and news reports from different States have highlighted the pervasive absence of science laboratories in many schools, with many lacking functional computer laboratories.

Furthermore, the policy highlights the importance of introducing vocational education for students starting from class 6 in schools. This facet of reform has been included under Samagra Shiksha. However, there are implementation challenges for vocational education in schools, such as a fixed unit cost for tools and equipment, regardless of the specific trade, which may engender inefficiencies. Though vocational training is offered in selected schools, such training is not well integrated with the curriculum. Schools also exhibit a discernible gender bias in selecting vocational courses, typically offering limited options with batch sizes restricted to 40 students in most States. This limitation perpetuates the reduced participation of girls in vocational education courses. Also, when girls opt for such courses, their choices are often confined to traditional vocations such as tailoring, beauty and wellness.



[11] PIB Delhi (2023). National Education Policy provides for setting up of a Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF) specially for girls and transgender students to provide them equitable quality education. Retrieved from: https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1944287

[12] Times of India (2021). India has more women STEM grads than US, UK or France. Retrieved from: https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-has-more-women-stem-grads-than-us-uk-or-france/articleshow/84571128.cms

Policy Recommendations

- **Increase policy focus on secondary education to benefit universal access to school education for girls, the goal of universal secondary education by 2030**. Expand the provisions of 'free and compulsory education', as guaranteed by the Right to Education Act, 2009, to encompass adolescents aged 15-18.
- **Examine possibilities of making vocational education in schools mandatory**. It is suggested to make vocational education mandatory, rather than offering it as an optional component, within the National Curriculum Framework for schools. This shift can foster a more comprehensive and practical skill development approach within the educational landscape.
- **Extend the focus of the Gender Inclusion Fund beyond mere infrastructural requisites**. A holistic approach, including inclusive curriculum development, teacher sensitisation programmes, and adopting gender-responsive pedagogy, is vital to ensure gender inclusion in schools.
- **Integrate child protection mechanisms for girls in schools to make them more visible and accessible to girls**. Prioritise transforming schools into one-stop centres for girls, women, and transgender people to access all gender-related support and services.
- **Incorporate entitlements of girls, women, and transgender people in the curriculum and teachers' training modules**. All deliberate practices within educational institutions should overtly reflect these values, promoting inclusivity and equity.
- **Institutionalise adolescent girls' participation in policy discussions** through formal and informal platforms. Their opinions and experiences should be incorporated into policy formulation processes.
- **Create a clear roadmap with timelines and budget allocations to bridge the digital divide and expand access to digital learning for girls**. Substantial investment is needed to bridge the digital divide and create digital infrastructure.
- **Develop a clear phased plan for bridging the digital divide** by prioritising girls' schools and schools with a high enrolment rate. This strategic approach can ensure that girls are afforded equitable access to digital resources and educational opportunities.

Scheme Recommendations

STEM Education (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics)

- **Introduce scholarships for girls pursuing STEM education at secondary and higher levels to promote gender equality and diversity in these fields**. By alleviating financial constraints through scholarships, girls can be incentivised to engage more actively in STEM disciplines.
- **Prioritise building more science labs in schools** since the absence of well-equipped labs or the presence of inadequately equipped facilities may hinder the realisation of the National Education Policy's vision of shifting the education paradigm from rote learning to creative and experiential learning.
- **Allocate funds specifically for the construction/ improvement of school labs** for government, government-aided, and residential schools, focusing on girls' schools.
- **Strengthen teacher training programmes and provide the resources** to enable schools to have dedicated, qualified science and mathematics teachers so all students can receive STEM education.

Scholarships

- **Introduce indexing of pre- and post-matric scholarships to annual inflation**. Given that economic constraints are one of the primary reasons for girls dropping out of school, annual indexing will offset the impact of inflation on girls' dropout.
- **Align gender-wise scholarship coverage with the gender ratio in the schools**. The recent efforts to rationalise scholarship schemes may potentially affect girls disproportionately. Despite increasing scholarship entitlement across various schemes, budgetary allocations have not risen proportionately, reducing the number of recipients benefiting from these scholarships. From an intersectional lens, these scholarships hold particular importance for girls, especially those in disadvantaged communities.

Vocational Education

- **Introduce differential unit costs for schools opting for non-traditional courses for girls**. Offer courses like financial management, legal studies, fundamental digital skills, and courses on the National Stock Exchange.
- **Shift from a limited batch model (defined number of students per grade irrespective of the total enrolment in that grade) for Vocational Education (VE) towards a saturated model**, where all students in the respective grades in the school get to enrol in the VE courses. Such an approach promotes universal access to vocational education, ensuring that no student is excluded from its benefits.
- **Introduce incentivisation for industries that offer On-the-Job Training (OJT) and apprenticeships to girls**. This will bring more girls into the industries and at the same time, help boost the economy.

4 SKILL DEVELOPMENT

After completing education, young adults are set to join the workforce and play a pivotal role in advancing the nation's growth and development. It is crucial to emphasise the significance of skilling, particularly for girls, as it empowers them to build confidence and equips them with the necessary technical knowledge to secure employment and generate income, enabling them to take control of their lives.

However, many young adults find themselves unemployable, as they do not have the requisite skills and training needed in industries. Concurrently, a deficit of skilled labour exists in our industries and service sectors. Despite the Periodic Labour Force Survey (2021-22) indicating a marginal decline in the overall unemployment rate, from 4.2% to 4.1%, the situation remains concerning. The survey reveals that urban females face a higher unemployment rate of 7.9% than their male counterparts at 5.8%. This glaring disparity underscores a gap between the demands of the job market and the sectoral and geographical skills offered.

The following policies and schemes on Skill Development are considered for this policy brief.

- National Policy for Skills & Entrepreneurship 2015, Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship
- Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), flagship scheme of the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, launched in 2015
- National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (NAPS) (launched in 2016)
- Deen Dayal Upadhyay Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDUGKY) (launched in 2014 by Ministry of Rural Development)

Policy Observations

The Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship (MSDE) introduced the National Skills Development and Entrepreneurship Policy in 2015, establishing a framework centred on outcome-driven strategies to bridge the workforce skill gap and meet the demands of employers. Within this policy framework, there is a pronounced commitment to addressing gender disparities through several initiatives, including the creation of specialised mobile training units designed to cater to the unique needs of women, the provision of flexible afternoon training batches, and the customisation of training programmes to align with localised requirements. Nevertheless, there exist opportunities for further refinement within the policy.

One avenue of enhancement worth considering is the inclusion of provisions related to access to childcare facilities to support greater women's participation. Additionally, while the policy emphasises the importance of ensuring a safe and gender-sensitive training environment, it is essential also to address the safety concerns of girls who must regularly commute to skill centres, particularly in non-residential training programmes.

The policy commendably emphasises the prioritisation of non-traditional courses for girls and women. However, it is essential to recognise that all skill development schemes operate with specific enrolment targets, and enrolling girls can prove to be a more challenging endeavour than enrolling boys, often resulting in the unintentional exclusion of girls from these schemes.

Furthermore, an analysis of various training initiatives reveals that women and girls tend to participate predominantly in traditional vocational fields. For instance, data from the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) during the implementation of the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) from 2016 to 2020 demonstrates substantial variability in girls' participation across sectors. Participation rates range from as low as 6% in construction and 11% in the Automotive industry to as high as 98% in Beauty & Wellness and 96% in Apparel[13].

Moreover, the current landscape of female participation in Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) indicates a considerable gap, with only 16.83% of active ITIs being dedicated to female trainees in 2021. This is compounded by a mere 6.6% of female candidates opting to enrol in these institutions during the same year. Additionally, the proportion of female instructors among the total instructional staff was just 15.83%[14]. These statistics underscore the imperative for heightened efforts to foster inclusivity and promote increased participation among women in vocational education and training programmes.

Policy Recommendations

- **Establish a framework that mandates regular assessments of industry needs to identify emerging skill requirements**. These assessments should inform necessary curriculum updates, encompassing technical and life skills. Give particular attention to sectors exhibiting growth potential where female representation is lacking. The findings from these assessments should

[13] NSDC (2020). Gender Analysis. Retrieved from: https://skillsip.nsdcindia.org/sites/default/files/kps-document/Gender%20Analysis_PMKVY-STT_June%202020.pdf

[14] Aayog, N. (2023). Transforming Industrial Training Institutes, retrieved from: https://www.niti.gov.in/sites/default/files/2023-02/ITI_Report_02022023.pdf

serve as a foundation for necessary updates and revisions to the curriculum.

- **Encourage establishing robust and enduring partnerships between training providers and industry stakeholders**. This collaboration should be regarded as a central policy objective. Such partnerships are instrumental in facilitating increased participation of girls in skill training programmes. Additionally, the policy should consider provisions for including creche facilities within skill training centres to address childcare needs and implement enhanced safety and security measures, pivotal for fostering a conducive learning environment.
- **Establish a mechanism to prevent girls from dropping out of the skill training system**. In instances where dropouts occur, the system should be equipped with the flexibility and resources required for effective reintegration.
- **Explore spending a part of the Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Cess towards setting up centres of excellence** for skill development targeting unskilled female construction workers to transform them into skilled workforce having access to decent jobs.

Scheme Recommendations

- **Prioritise the implementation of residential skill training programmes within the ambit of all schemes to effectively address issues of accessibility of skill centres and safety concerns associated with commuting to Skill Development Centres**. This strategic shift will broaden the scope of skill training accessibility, particularly benefiting girls from underserved regions. Additionally, special provisions, such as transportation support and hostel facilities, should be a priority to cater to the specific needs of girls and women.
- **Conduct a comprehensive review of scheme targets, explicitly focusing on incorporating gender-based enrolment objectives**. To close the gender gap in skill development, incentives may be contemplated to improve girls' participation in skill training programmes.
- **Promote non-traditional courses for girls**. This can be accomplished by introducing differential payment incentives for trainers who offer courses in non-traditional and emerging sectors. Such a measure is pivotal in advancing gender equality, mitigating gender disparities in the workforce. To further reinforce these efforts, serious consideration should be given to engaging the services of women-led training providers.
- **Prioritise promoting digital literacy and imparting 21st century life skills among female students enrolled in skill development centres**. This initiative can enhance their employability and prepare them for the dynamic demands of the contemporary job market.
- **Increase the number of operational Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) dedicated to girls and women**. This expansion can foster inclusivity and heightened participation among women in vocational education and training programmes.
- **Address the limited industry participation observed under the National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (NAPS), particularly in rural areas**. To rectify the disproportionate involvement of girls', it is recommended to contemplate incentivising industries to offer apprenticeship opportunities specifically to girls and women.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this policy brief underscores the critical importance of investing in the holistic development of girls. Girls are not just the nation's future; they hold the latent potential to galvanise societal transformations and boost the nation's economy. However, despite significant progress concerning girls' well-being, a concerted amalgamation of measures is required to propel their rights and prospects, such as ensuring girls receive adequate nutrition and healthcare services, including comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education and services to safeguard their physical and emotional well-being.

Further efforts are required to eliminate barriers that prevent girls from enrolling and staying in school. Ensuring that all girls have access to quality education from primary to tertiary level is the key to unlocking the potential of girls and women. This entails providing compulsory and free education for girls up to the age of 18, as well as scholarships and other financial assistance to help girls from disadvantaged backgrounds pursue higher education. Equally important is ensuring the curriculum is relevant to girls' lives, aspirations, and career prospects.

Economic empowerment is another critical imperative. Vocational training and skill development programmes should be promoted, giving girls the tools to access economic opportunities and achieve financial independence. Financial literacy and inclusion efforts can further support their economic growth.

At the community level, a conscious effort should be made to transform household mindsets, emphasising the importance of providing equal quantities of nutritious food, health benefits, and education opportunities to girls. Public awareness campaigns and advocacy efforts are needed to challenge deeply ingrained societal norms perpetuating gender inequalities. Changing attitudes and beliefs can help create an environment where girls are valued and empowered. It is also crucial to work with boys and address their mindsets. This involves educating them about gender equality so that they challenge harmful gender norms and biases. This can be done through appropriate curriculum and also at the community level.

Furthermore, comprehensive age-specific data collection and monitoring systems are fundamental to track progress and identify areas needing improvement. Collaboration among government agencies, NGOs, and the private sector is vital for effective policy implementation. Governments, communities, and individuals must work together to create an enabling environment to nurture the full potential of girls.

Moreover, girls must be actively engaged in decision-making processes affecting their lives. Their voices and perspectives are invaluable in shaping policies and programmes that truly cater to their needs.

Ultimately, to unlock the full potential of India's adolescent girls and empower them to become agents of change, there must be a commitment to providing adequate funding for programmes and schemes designed to nurture girl capital. This financial investment is an investment in the future of India, where educated, healthy, and empowered girls will play a pivotal role in driving social progress and economic growth.

Nurturing girl capital, therefore, requires a comprehensive approach that addresses their diverse needs and challenges. It involves a multi-faceted approach that removes barriers, promotes empowerment, and fosters an environment in which girls can thrive and contribute to the progress of their communities and nations.

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