

What is the gender gap in education? | Explained

What do figures from the Unified District Information System for Education and the All India Survey on Higher Education indicate? Are girls more likely to complete secondary education when they have access to it? What needs to be done to ensure girls, and boys, don't drop out?

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According to the WEF's June report, updated figures in educational attainment indicators have caused India's gender parity levels to dip from the previous year. Image for representation. | Photo Credit: The Hindu

The story so far: The World Economic Forum (WEF) report of 2024 on global gender gaps recently ranked India at 129 out of 146 economies, with a decline in the education sector being one of the reasons for India's rank slipping a couple of places this year.

EDITORIAL | Two steps back: on India and the Global Gender Gap report 2024

Where does the gap lie?

According to the WEF's June report, updated figures in educational attainment indicators have caused India's gender parity levels to dip from the previous year. "While the shares of women are high in primary, secondary and tertiary education enrolments, they have only been modestly increasing, and the gap between men and women's literacy rate is 17.2 percentage points wide, leaving India ranked 124th on this indicator," the 18th edition of the report said, recording a score of 0.964 in the education category. In the 17th edition, published in 2023, however, India had attained a perfect 1.000 score in terms of educational parity, ranking 26th in that category. The main indicators being tracked are enrolment levels in primary, secondary and tertiary education, as well as the adult literacy rate.

Asked about India's regression from the perfect score, WEF's Insight and Data Lead Ricky Li said that source data for Educational Attainment indicators is collected by UNESCO, whose figures are subject to data updates on a periodic basis. "In the 18th edition of the Index, the values used in the computation of India's Educational Attainment gender parity score correspond to [the] 2022 and 2023 periods. The 17th edition included data from 2018, 2021, and 2022," he told *The Hindu*. "An important aspect of the data to consider when interpreting the gender parity is the corresponding period, as a seemingly significant change in score could be reflecting an update in the values corresponding to the indicator," he added.

What do Indian statistics show?

The Union Education Ministry tracks school and college enrolment data using two major collection systems: the Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE+) and the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE). The UDISE+ report for 2021-22 shows that 13.79 crore boys were enrolled in school, in comparison to 12.73 crore girls, meaning that girls make up 48% of the school population. However, this varies at the different stages of school education. In preschool or kindergarten, girls make up 46.8% of enrolled children. By primary school (Classes 1 to 5), this rises to 47.8%, improving still further in upper primary or elementary school (Classes 6 to 8), when girls make up 48.3% of enrolled children. Clearly, some girls drop out of school at that stage, when the right to free education ends after Class 8. The gender gap widens in secondary school (Class 9 and 10), with girls dropping to 47.9% of enrolled children.

However, girls who do have access to secondary education are more likely to stick to the finish: the higher secondary level (Class 11 and 12) has the lowest gender gap of 48.3%.

That trend continues into higher education, according to the AISHE report for 2021-22. In that year, **the gross enrolment ratio (GER) for women in higher education — meaning the percentage of the population between 18 and 23 years enrolled in colleges and universities — across the country was 28.5, slightly higher than the male GER of 28.3.** Female enrolment in higher education has seen a 32% increase since 2014-15. Neither the UDISE+ nor AISHE have yet published data for 2022-23.

What is the impact of a slew of packages to incentivise girls to get an education?

The biggest impact has come from simply building more schools. If a primary school exists within one or two kilometres of a child's home, parents are more likely to enrol their children, especially girls. "There has been enormous growth in the number of schools, especially since the mid-90s, which is when you also saw a spike in the enrolment of girls nationwide," says Vimala Ramachandran, a former Professor at the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration and the first national director for Mahila Samakhya, a flagship Central government programme on education for rural girls and women. She notes regional differences, pointing out that in Gujarat, where the government built few secondary and higher secondary schools, leaving these largely to the private sector, girls make up only 45.2% of students in secondary classes, far behind much poorer States like Jharkhand (50.7%), Chhattisgarh (51.2%), Bihar (50.1%) and even Uttar Pradesh (45.4%).

Another important factor is the **presence of women teachers. An adviser on child rights to a State government which has made progress in enrolment says the areas with low enrolment are mostly those with primary schools employing only one or two teachers. "If a school has only a male teacher, parents are not comfortable sending their daughters there,"** he said.

Transport to and from school can also be a barrier, and free bus passes for schoolgirls in States like Haryana, Punjab and Tamil Nadu, as well as schemes to give free cycles to girls in Bihar and other States have improved enrolment, though it did not work as well in Rajasthan. Sanitation issues remain a major obstacle for girls education in higher classes, especially after puberty, and may cause a large number of dropouts after Class 8. Though the Union and State governments have funded the construction of washrooms in schools, there is no funding for cleaning and maintenance, which is often left to lax local bodies.

What is the next challenge?

A number of States have successfully closed the gender gap in higher classes, to the extent that there are worries about boys dropping out before completing school. In West Bengal for instance, girls make up 55.7% of higher secondary students, and there are similar situations in Chhattisgarh (53.1%) and Tamil Nadu (51.2%). The State government adviser notes that this could partly be attributed to the Right to Education Act stipulating that students cannot be failed till Class 8. “Girls who make it to Class 9 are usually interested in studying, but some boys who make it to the secondary level and then fail simply drop out. There may also be higher pressure on poorer boys to earn a living,” he says, warning that boys must not be allowed to slip through the cracks.

At the college level, although the female GER is higher than the male GER, the picture changes when looking at regional and discipline-wise data. For instance, women students make up only 42.5% of those enrolled in STEM subjects from undergraduate to Ph.D levels, and the challenge lies in encouraging more girls to opt for these disciplines. Adult literacy is also still a matter of concern, with only 64.63% of women who are literate, in comparison to 80.88% of men, according to the last Census data from 2011. This calls for steps to improve foundational literacy in schools as well as to take education to rural women to close the gender gap.