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Secondary Education in the Indian State of Uttar Pradesh: Gender Dimensions of State Policy and Practice

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Revised draft
April 2005

Prepared for the UNRISD Project on Gender and Social Policy

DRAFT WORKING DOCUMENT
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Introduction

Linking gender and education to the social policy agenda is not straightforward. Many questions arise, most of which hinge on the kinds of impact education is expected to have on human behaviour, capacities and skills, and on gender identities and relations. In that sense, education within the wider social policy debate is linked to questions of society and citizenship, understandings about modernity and national identity, and the recasting of notions of masculinity and femininity at different historical moments of time. The content of education, the impact of policy choices adopted in the process of meeting universal education agendas, and the ways in which equity and social inclusion concerns are addressed through public institutions, are among the several issues that arise in relation to the reframing of social policy from a gender perspective.

A central proposition of this paper is that the focus on minimum ‘thresholds’ for public investment, in turn derived from the analysis of rates of return to education has contributed to the neglect of female post-primary education. Influenced by Human Capital theory (HCT), ‘gender’ and female education have been central framing discourses of education policy, resulting in substantial policy rhetoric and concern about women’s and girls’ education as a lever of development and progress. In India, acceptance of this global rhetoric has been mediated by particular policy choices, which have resulted in the neglect of the secondary sector, the rise of for-profit schooling at all levels of education, and a fragmented formal elementary education system, with particular implications for achieving gender parity and equality. This has resulted in a range of issues relating to female well-being being erased from the policy map. Girls disappear off the formal education policy agenda past the age of 14, at a crucial age when aspirations can be channelled into opportunities. In this paper, we focus on secondary schooling, which we believe best serves the interests of girls, especially if supported by policies that expand its availability, address socio-cultural constraints that exclude girls (both within society and within the school),

and keep its costs low. We argue that the lack of policy focus on secondary schooling for girls is linked to the curious contradictions between policy rhetoric, on the one hand, and policy prescriptions on the other, where development visions are not matched by policy decision making processes that can realise these visions.

Our choice of Uttar Pradesh (UP) as a case-study is guided by three factors. One, UP is the most populous state in the country, and also considered one of the most socially 'backward' in terms of development indicators. Two, there is recent and high quality research material on education in the state, on the political economy of education (Kingdon and Muzammil 2003), on sociology, gender and education (Jeffery, Jeffery and Jeffery, 2003), and more generally on education provision (Dreze and Gazdar 1996). Third, there has been a concerted attempt in the state to focus on reproductive health and fertility decline.² There are also innovative programmes for empowering women through education that operate outside the formal schooling system. Given the overall correlations drawn between fertility decline and female education, exploring secondary schooling for girls against the backdrop of this orientation towards fertility decline, on the one hand, and empowerment on the other, provides an opportunity to delve deeper in to the gender politics of investment in females.

In this paper, we report primarily on material garnered through secondary research, as well as field work undertaken to explore the status of secondary schooling in UP, particularly in relation to patterns of financial investment and provisioning of single-sex schools for girls. Our empirical research uncovered a vital consideration for gender policy analysis in education - the ways in which wider discourses get played out through particular policy processes at state level, which in turn are dictated by the compulsions of democratic politics as they are played out in India. In that sense, UP offers both an interesting case-study but

² Notably, through a large USAID funded programme in the state, Innovations in Family Planning Services (IFPS).

also an impossibly complex one, given the multiple political actors who inform the education policy agenda (see, for instance, Kingdon and Muzammil's (2003) fascinating account of teacher politics in Uttar Pradesh). Gender seems almost irrelevant in this tableau, although its very irrelevance is in itself a revealing insight into the ways in which rhetoric on gender equality that aims to please diverse publics, from vote-banks (perhaps) to union government and donor agencies, can mask actual practice. In that sense, the account that follows illustrates the 'reality' of policy making in a developing country context, not least the opaqueness of the concept of policy, and the difficulty of tracking what is or is not evidence of 'policy' in an intensely political policy making environment.

The political economy of market and commerce, on the one hand, and complex socio-cultural norms, on the other, find their own ways to influence the realm of policy and education system, often leading to inconsistencies between policy intents and practices adopted at ground level. An analysis of policy remains incomplete unless traced to its translation into implementation and practices at all levels. Policy practices need to be traced through penetrations and informal interactions at various levels, making it difficult to collect evidence following 'scientific' methods. Much of the empirical information presented in this paper is based on 'leads' gained through informal interactions. It is particularly difficult to track policy practices when there is a conflict between vested interests of socio-economic-political considerations and stated policy priorities, as we found to be the case with girls' secondary education in UP.

State policy and practice on female secondary schooling in Uttar Pradesh

In this paper we focus primarily on the resourcing, management and provisioning of secondary schooling in UP, with a view to assessing implications for gender equitable secondary schooling. Characterised by very low participation rates and a slow pace of change in educational indicators over the years, secondary education has not received desired attention in terms of either policy initiatives or

resource allocation. The increase in real per student expenditure in nominal terms at secondary level has not kept pace with that in the elementary education. The major proportion of state expenditure has been on maintaining the existing provisioning, mainly on teachers' salary in government and aided sectors with little emphasis on expansion of services. Instead, private investment has been encouraged by relaxing the norms and conditions required for recognition of schools and therefore compromising on the range and quality of facilities available. A policy initiative in the form of infrastructure grants to direct private investment to expand provisioning for single-sex girls' exclusive schools has been diluted by allowing boys also to be admitted. A gender-differentiated scheme of studies offering 'feminine' subjects to girls further reinforces gender stereotypes. In an environment where the majority of out-of-school children are girls belonging to disadvantaged socio-economic groups and girls' education is not a social norm, increased privatisation proves counter-productive. These issues are elaborated and discussed in the following sub-sections.

a) Gender and Secondary Schooling in Uttar Pradesh

Secondary education in UP is characterised by an overall low participation rates and sharp gender differentials. While the participation rates are lower, gender disparities are higher than the national average in the state. The overall Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) was close to 25 percent during the late 1990s, this being only about 15 percent for girls. The Gender Parity Index (GPI) for GER is only 0.45 in the state as against 0.65 for the country as a whole (Table I). Only about 27 percent of girls enrolling in grade I reach grade X and only about 60 percent of these complete the grade (Table II). Despite substantial increase in enrolments, the GERs are not improving in the state reflecting the fact that the rate of increase in enrolment is barely enough to keep pace with the rate of increase in the population.

An interesting feature of girls' schooling participation in UP is that though notable gender differentials exist in favour of boys in transition rates from primary to upper primary and from upper primary to secondary, especially the latter, the trend changes when it comes to the transition rate between secondary and senior secondary (Table III). A significantly smaller proportion of boys studying in class X continue with their senior secondary schooling as compared to the proportion of girls studying at the same level. Pass percentages are also higher for girls at both grades X and XII, explaining to some extent the higher transition rate at that level (Table IV). A high proportion of boys join the labour force at this age, which also is partially responsible for their discontinuation from schooling after grade X.

Relatively low transition rates from primary to upper primary, and upper primary to secondary for girls indicate that the secondary schooling participation patterns cannot be understood in complete isolation. It is especially true for the fact that the largest drop-out takes place within primary level and only 38 percent of girls enrolled in grade I reach grade V (Table II). As a corollary to this, the GERs at upper primary level are significantly lower than that at the primary level (Table V). A combination of high drop out within primary stage, better academic performances at secondary level and a high transition rate from secondary to senior secondary indicates that though a relatively small proportion of girls continue with their post primary schooling, those who continue perform better in examinations and a greater proportion among them is likely to complete the senior secondary level. However, higher transition rates for post-secondary stage might be indicative of gender differentiation taking a different shape where girls do not have equal opportunities to join the labour market.

b) The Resource Gap

A perusal of the trends in the intra-sectoral distribution in education financing pattern makes it obvious that starting from the 1960s, school education as a

whole received more emphasis in terms of financial allocation. This was a shift from the relatively greater emphasis being laid to higher education in the past. However, within school education, the relative stress in favour of elementary education as against secondary education has been greater especially since 1980s. The low priority accorded to secondary education, we argue, adversely affected the expansion of state-sponsored schooling facilities for girls at post-primary level thereby affecting their participation. The absence of gender-segregated data for finances stops us from taking the analysis further.

Table VI shows that school education occupied about 60 percent of total expenditure in the sector during 1951-52, which went down to about 53 percent in 1960-61. It then increased to more than 72 percent in 1970-71 and went on to occupy nearly 88 percent of the total education budget in 2001-2002. However, the increase was largely due to enlarged expenditure on elementary education and the relative share of secondary education remained static around 30-34 percent of total education expenditure during the 1980s and 1990s. What is more revealing is that nearly 95-98 percent of the total expenditure on secondary education has been the non-plan expenditure, i.e., the expenses incurred on maintaining the system and only about 2-5 percent is being spent annually on plan head or the new activities such as expansion of coverage by opening new schools or improvement in the quality of teaching by providing more facilities or organising professional development activities for teachers (Table VII).

The proportion of plan expenditure or the new investments, on the other hand

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