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Ensuring education for all in Bihar: Highlighting the obstacles

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Ensuring education for all in Bihar: Highlighting the obstacles

The extent to which India will be able to successfully harness its demographic dividend depends significantly on the situation of its youth, notably on the levels of education and market-oriented skills they attain. While many states have made progress on the education front, many other states, including Bihar have lagged behind.

Looking at the current educational situation of youth in Bihar, this policy brief argues that significant investments in terms of appropriate policies and programmes are required to enable the state to achieve the Millennium Development Goals of universal primary education and elimination of gender disparity in primary and secondary education, harness its demographic dividend and enable its youth to participate in and benefit from global development.

The study

Data are drawn from the *Youth in India: Situation and Needs* study, a sub-nationally representative study undertaken for the first time in India of key transitions experienced by young people in six states of India, including Bihar. The study included a representative survey of youth in both rural and urban settings. Respondents included unmarried women and men and married women aged 15–24 and, in view of the paucity of married men in these ages, married men aged 15–29.

In Bihar, the survey was conducted in 2007. A total of 8,136 married and unmarried young men and women were interviewed in the survey. These included 1,115 married young men, 1,492 unmarried young men, 2,341 married young women and 3,188 unmarried young women. This brief is based on data obtained from 1,942 young men and 5,529 young women aged 15–24.

Achieving universal education: how far have youth in Bihar come?

Sizeable proportions of youth have never been to school

Findings from the Youth Study indicate that schooling was far from universal among young people, particularly young women in Bihar; indeed, one in six young men and as many as half of young women had never been to school. Even among the younger cohort (aged 15–19), one in eight young men (13%) and almost half (48%) of young women had never been to school.

While young women were clearly more disadvantaged than young men, findings indicate that among young women, the married and those in rural areas were far more disadvantaged than the unmarried and those in urban areas. Almost two-thirds of married young women (64%) had never been to school, compared to slightly over one-quarter of unmarried young women (27%). Likewise, over half of young women in rural areas (55%) compared to one in five of those from urban settings (22%) had never been to school.

Educational milestones are achieved by relatively few youth

Not only was school enrolment limited, but relatively small proportions of youth had completed such milestones as Classes 4, 7 and 10. Again, young women were particularly disadvantaged. Just over two-fifths of young women had completed Class 4 and almost one-third had completed Class 7. In contrast, slightly over three-quarters and three-fifths of young men had completed Classes 4 and 7, respectively. As with school enrolment, rural youth, particularly rural young women, were far more disadvantaged than their urban counterparts

Percentage of youth who had never been to school, according to age, marital status and place of residence

Percentage of youth who had completed Classes 4, 7 and 10

in terms of completion of Classes 4 and 7. Among rural young women, just 39% had completed Class 4 and 26% had completed Class 7, compared to 73% and 63%, respectively, among young women in urban areas.

Just one in three young men (30%) and one in eight young women (13%) had completed 10 or more years of education. Indeed, even among those aged 18 and above, only 36% of young men and 17% of young women had completed secondary school.

Of note is the striking difference in the proportion of young people who had completed 10 or more years of education by economic status of young people's households, as measured by wealth quintiles (with the first quintile representing households of the lowest wealth status and the fifth quintile representing households of the highest wealth status). Differences by economic status were much wider than either gender differences or differences by rural-urban residence. For example, among young men, just 10% of those from households in the poorest quintile had completed 10 or more years of schooling, compared to 54% of those from households in the wealthiest quintile. Among young women, just 2% of those in the poorest quintile, compared to 39% of those in the wealthiest quintile, had completed 10 or more years of education.

Percentage of youth who had completed secondary school, according to household economic status

What are the leading obstacles that inhibit youth from reaching educational milestones?

Poverty's grip keeps young people out of school

Leading among factors that inhibited school enrolment and completion were economic reasons (work on the family farm or business, wage earning work and family poverty, i.e., the family could not afford to keep the respondent in school) and among young women, a related factor, namely domestic responsibilities as well. While somewhat more young women than men reported economic reasons for never being enrolled in school, more young men than women so reported for discontinuing schooling. For example, almost three-fifths of young men (58%) and two-thirds of young women (65%) who had never been to school reported that they were not enrolled for economic reasons. In contrast, two-thirds of young men (68%) compared to about two-fifths of young women (37%) who had discontinued schooling before completing Class 7 reported that they had left school for economic reasons. It is notable that as progressively higher milestones were attained, economic reasons became progressively less prominent among young women, but more prominent among young men.

Domestic responsibilities were cited, in contrast, by more young women than men. Almost three-fifths of all young women and just one-eighth of young men who had never been to school cited domestic responsibilities as the reason. Domestic reasons were also cited by two-fifths of young women and one-fifth of young men who had discontinued schooling before completing Class 7. While domestic responsibilities became progressively less prominent obstacles to schooling among young women as progressively higher milestones were attained, no such pattern was observed among young men.

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Of those who had never enrolled/discontinued schooling, percentage of youth who cited economic constraints, including the burden of domestic responsibilities

Unfavourable attitudes to education deter many

Unfavourable attitudes and perceptions of youth and their parents regarding education (for example, that education was unnecessary or the respondent was not interested in schooling) were also a key factor that inhibited many youth from getting enrolled in the first place or continuing schooling. Two in five young men and one in four young women who had never enrolled in school cited attitude and perception-related reasons. Similarly, one in three young men and one in four young women who discontinued schooling before completing Class 7 as well as Class 10 reported attitude and perception-related reasons for discontinuation.

Of those who had never enrolled/discontinued schooling, percentage of youth who cited unfavourable attitudes regarding schooling

School-related issues are significant, particularly for young women

Although school-related issues were infrequently cited as the reason for never attending school, one in five young women (and 7% of young men) reported that distance to school and school quality were key reasons for never attending school. School related reasons became more important factors accounting for discontinuation among young women who discontinued their education before Classes 7 and 10, respectively. For example, 26% of those who discontinued their education before completing Class 7 and 39% of those who

discontinued their education after completing Class 7 and before completing Class 10 reported that such school related factors as distance and poor school quality had prevented them from continuing in school. Fewer young men reported school related obstacles as reasons for school discontinuation (12%).

Of those who had never enrolled/discontinued schooling, percentage of youth who cited school-related barriers

Pressure to marry early adds to young women's disadvantage

Many young women but hardly any young men reported that marriage had interrupted their schooling. Indeed, one in seven young women who had discontinued their education before completing Class 7 and one in three of those who had discontinued their education in Classes 7–9 reported doing so in order to marry.

Are schools equipped with basic amenities?

Findings suggest that irrespective of the level of education that youth have reached, the schools they attended lacked basic amenities. Although drinking water was available in most schools, toilet facilities, so essential for girls in particular, were not available to many—as many as 31% of young men and 27% of young women studying in Classes 1–7 and 33% and 18% of young men and women, respectively, in Classes 8–10 did not have toilet facilities in their school. Library facilities were even less likely to be

Of those who had discontinued schooling, percentage of youth who cited early marriage/engagement as the reason

available. Indicative of the indifferent quality of education, many youth, moreover, required private coaching—over two-thirds (71%) of young men and over one-half (54%) of young women studying in Classes 8–10.

Programme recommendations

Findings indicate that several challenges remain in ensuring universal access to primary and secondary education and thereby achieving Millennium Development Goals of universal primary education and eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education. The recently enacted Right to Education Bill has made education compulsory for all children. Moreover, several central and state government programmes are ongoing, ranging from the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* to the *Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan* and the mid-day meal scheme, that are intended to encourage school enrolment and retention. What is required now are that policy commitments are met and programmes are effectively implemented. While the achievement of universal school enrolment and primary school completion are key goals, the importance of high school education in enabling youth to make a successful transition to adulthood underscores the need, at the same time, for efforts to overcome barriers to high school completion.

Address economic pressures

Efforts must be made to address the economic pressures that dissuade parents from enrolling their children in school and from keeping them in school once enrolled. Conditional grants and targeted subsidies that encourage school enrolment and completion among disadvantaged groups need to be considered.

Raise aspirations of youth and parents regarding education

Activities are needed that are directed at parents that raise their aspirations for the education of their children and encourage greater parental involvement in their children's education. There is

also a need to incorporate livelihood skills building models within the school setting and provide opportunities for those in school to gain market-driven job skills that will raise the aspirations of youth regarding their education and career.

Address school-related barriers

Activities must address school-related barriers, notably, distance to school, and poor infrastructure and quality of education. Particularly relevant school level barriers for young women were distance to school and absence of such essential infrastructure as toilets. Attention must be paid to ensure that schools, particularly at primary level, are accessible to all youth and that basic amenities are available in all schools. The state government has launched various schemes to address the barrier posed by distance (for example, the *Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojana*); however, it is important that the effectiveness of these schemes is evaluated and promising lessons are assimilated and scaled up. Given the large proportions of youth reporting that schooling had been interrupted because they were required for work on the family farm or business or for housework, efforts are needed to adjust school timings, or to establish evening schools. Such efforts will enable children to accommodate their work commitments without sacrificing their education. Moreover, investments in improving the quality of the schooling experience are needed that focus on providing better training of teachers and ensuring greater accountability among teachers.

Eliminate the practice of early marriage

Findings indicating that early marriage was an important reason for school discontinuation among young women—even among those who discontinued their education before completing Class 7—emphasise the fact that programme commitments outside the education sector are also critical to the achievement of universal school enrolment and completion. Specifically required are programmes that seek to critically examine norms and practices surrounding marriage and to eliminate the practice of early marriage. Explorations of subsidies and cash transfers that link school retention with delayed marriage among girls are needed.

Provide a second chance to obtain a basic education to young women left behind

Findings suggesting that married young women and rural young women remain considerably disadvantaged in terms of school enrolment and completion call for interventions that would give these sub-groups a second chance to obtain a basic education.

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