

# Education for Gender Equality & Women's Empowerment in India – The MDG Perspective

**Marjorie Fernandes**

**Abstract:** This paper is concerned with education for promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in India from the perspective of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), specifically MDGs 2 and 3. The MDGs are specified in terms of quantitative targets and indicators at the national level and the official data support the conclusion that India is on-track (implying that the MDGs are achievable by 2015) with respect to most of the targets and indicators of MDGs 2 and 3. However, this conclusion is not valid for every State of India. Also, the qualitative aspects (which may be more important than the quantitative aspects) have been ignored by the official data. The poor quality of education due to various factors has policy implications for the achievement of gender equality and women's empowerment.

**Keywords:** Education for Gender Equality/Women's Empowerment; Targets and indicators of MDGs 2 & 3; State-level Disparities and Qualitative Aspects of Achievement of MDGs 2 & 3 in India

## 1. INTRODUCTION

With 2015 – the target year of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – fast approaching, countries all over the world are accelerating their pace for attaining the MDGs which aim to remove/reduce various problems of human development like poverty, hunger and malnutrition, disease, illiteracy, gender discrimination, etc. This paper is concerned with the MDG perspective on education for promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in India.

Of the various MDGs, MDG 2 (achieve universal primary education) and MDG 3 (promote gender equality and empower women) are specifically related to the theme of this paper. In contrast to the under-achievement with respect to some MDGs like MDG 1 (eradicate extreme poverty and hunger) and MDG 4 (reduce child mortality), MDGs 2 and 3 seem to be mostly achievable by 2015 or even earlier in India. This is true only if the achievement of the various MDGs is assessed in terms of their specified quantitative targets and indicators for the country as a whole. This paper shows that when making an overall assessment of India's performance in education and gender equality and designing policies and strategies to overcome shortfalls, it is important to not only consider the national-level MDG (quantitative) targets and indicators but also take into account both the regional (State-level) variations and qualitative aspects.

This paper is divided into four sections. Starting with this introductory Section I, Section II considers what MDGs 2 and 3 entail and assesses their achievement in India. Section

III shows that such achievement is of limited value as it does not take into account regional/State disparities and qualitative aspects. Section IV presents the main conclusions as well as some implications for policy-making for ensuring that education can promote gender equality and women's empowerment in India.

## 2. MDGS 2 & 3 – WHAT THEY ENTAIL & THEIR ACHIEVEMENT IN INDIA

### 2.1. What MDGS 2 and 3 entail

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) come from the Millennium Declaration, signed by 189 countries, including 147 heads of State and Government, in September 2000. The eight MDGs are as follows:

Goal 1: Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger

Goal 2: Achieve Universal Primary Education

Goal 3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women

Goal 4: Reduce Child Mortality

Goal 5: Improve Maternal Health

Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and Other Diseases

Goal 7: Ensure Environmental Sustainability

Goal 8: Develop a Global Partnership for Development

Eighteen targets were set as quantitative benchmarks for attaining the goals and 53 indicators were categorized according to targets for measuring progress towards individual targets. The various MDGs are inter-related to some extent in the sense that the progress in the achievement of a particular MDG affects and is affected by the progress in the

<b>GOAL 2: ACHIEVE UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION</b>	
<b>TARGET 2.A: <i>Ensure that by 2015 children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary education.</i></b>	Indicator 2.1: Net enrolment ratio in primary education (NER) Indicator 2.2: Proportion of pupils starting grade one who reach the last grade of primary education(ASR) Indicator 2.3: Literacy rate of 15-24 year-olds, women and men (Youth Literacy)
<b>GOAL 3: PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWER WOMEN</b>	
<b>TARGET 3.A: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education, no later than 2015.</b>	Indicator 3.1: Ratios of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education (GPI) Indicator 3.2: Share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector Indicator 3.3: Proportion of seats held by women in national parliament

achievement of the other MDGs. Of the various MDGs, only MDGs 2 and 3 are considered as they are specifically related to the theme of this paper.

The targets and indicators relating to MDG 2 and MDG 3 are shown in the table below. It is to be noted that the targets and the indicators are considered for the country as a whole and are quantitative in nature without reference to disparities within the country and qualitative aspects.

Under MDG 2, the single target and all the three indicators are related to education, which is not surprising as MDG 2 itself is related to education. The role of education in human development goes well beyond what is encompassed by MDG 2 which is concerned with the achievement of universal primary education. However, the importance of achieving MDG 2 needs to be recognized as primary education is important not only in its own right but also as a base for secondary education which in turn is a base for higher education. It is also important for achieving the other MDGs. The importance of primary education is brought out as follows:

A completed primary education is a basic human right and is necessary for enjoying many other rights. It is transformative and empowering, and a means for accessing broad economic, social, political and cultural benefits. Primary education is a powerful driver for realizing all of the MDGs and for sustainable development more generally. (UNDG, 2011: 73).

Under MDG 3, the single target and one out of the three indicators are related to education although MDG 3 could be expected to involve broader dimensions than education – as partly reflected by the other two indicators under MDG 3, viz. women's employment and political representation. However, the absence of corresponding targets on these two issues has meant they have received less attention, and are less likely to be prioritized. The employment indicator is limited to women's share of wage employment in the non-agricultural sector. It excludes the vast number of women working in agriculture and informal employment. Similarly, the political representation indicator focuses on the national parliament and not the State and local level decision-making bodies in which women can make significant contributions. Both these indicators are considered only cursorily in this paper which focuses on education.

A whole range of measures are required to promote gender equality and empowerment of women, but the single most effective measure is education (Fernandes, 2008). Education of women is a powerful tool and is significant for achieving MDG 3.

Education will lead to empowerment securing the means of creating a social environment in which one can make decisions for social and individual transformation. It develops intrinsic capacity, inner transformation of one's consciousness to overcome barriers, access resources and change traditional ideologies. Empowerment therefore is possible only with access to education as a fundamental right. ... The attainment of gender parity in primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education can be a major gain for women in acquiring access to the wider world of learning and development of skills, economic independence, authority of decision making and self-determination. (GoI, 2012: 47, 50)

While it is desirable to increase the level of education for all people and women in particular, even increasing the literacy rate, particularly the female literacy rate, can contribute to development and women's empowerment in significant ways. MDGs 2 and 3 are inter-related. Thus, eliminating gender disparities in primary education is a part of MDG 3 but it is also a necessary part of achieving universal primary education or MDG 2. MDG 3 also includes the elimination of gender disparities in post-primary (secondary and tertiary) education which is even more critical than primary education for gender equality and women's empowerment. Again, the literacy rate of 15-24 year-old women and men (which reflects the effects of increased primary enrolment in the recent past) is part of MDG 2 and is related to MDG 3, especially for disadvantaged women who most need to be empowered.

## 2.1. Achievement of MDGs 2 & 3 in India

The Government of India Report, viz, *Millenium Development Goals: India Country Report 2011* (GoI 2012) provides the latest official data on various targets and indicators relating to the MDGs. The data enable us to assess for the country as a whole the extent to which the MDGs have been achieved so far as well as the likely progress in their achievement by 2015. Statistics available from Population Censuses, the nationwide household surveys like National Family Health Survey (NFHS), National Sample Surveys (NSS), and Administrative Records have been used in the report to portray the statistical measures for the MDG indicators. In the absence of annual data, time series of data for the MDG indicators (the data being available for at least two time points since

### MDG 2: ACHIEVE UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION

Indicator	Achievement in		
	Initial Year	Mid-Term (2007-08)	Latest Year
2.1 (NER)	83% (2000)	95.9%	>98% (2009-10)
2.2 (ASR)	62% (1999)	72%	76% (2008-09)
2.3 (YL)	76% (2001) (Male-84%, Female-68%)	86% (Male-91%, Female-80%)	>96% (2011)

### MDG 3: PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWER WOMEN

3.1 (GPI-Primary)	0.76 (1990-91)	0.98	...
(GPI-Secondary)	0.60 (1990-91)	0.85	...
(GPI-Tertiary)	0.54 (1990-91)	0.70	...
3.2 (Women's share in employment)	18.6% (2004-05) (Rural-17.9%, Urban-19.2%)	.... (Rural-19.6%, Urban-17.6%)	18.6% (2009-10)
3.3 (Women's share in Parliament seats)	Between 9.1% and 10.96% in the last	15 General Elections to Lok Sabha -India ranks 98 <sup>th</sup> in the world.	

1990 to 2010) have been used to trace the path that the data have traveled through so far and are likely to take thereafter till the 2015 mark.

The following table summarizes the achievement of MDGs 2 and 3 in India in terms of their targets and indicators.

### 3. STATE-LEVEL DISPARITIES & QUALITATIVE ASPECTS

#### 3.1. State-level Disparities

A nationwide average can mask significant disparities within the country. Acceptable performance in the achievement of the MDGs at the national level may be the result of poor performance in some States being compensated by good performance in other States. The acceptable national-level performance, however, does not alleviate the suffering experienced by people in the lagging States. Hence, there is a need to monitor the MDGs by indicators at the State level and not merely the national level. The Government

#### MDG 2: ACHIEVE UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION

Indicator		Achievement
2.1 (NER)	All-India	95.9% (2007-08)
State-level		Between 82.2% and 100% (28 out of 35 States with >95%; 7 States with <95% - of these, Bihar, Arunachal Pradesh & Meghalaya with <85%)
2.3 (YL)	All-India	76% (2001); Male-Female Literacy Gap: 16% (2001)
State-level		Between 56.8% (Bihar) and 98.3% (Kerala); Male-Female Literacy Gap: <16% in 23 out of 35 States Note: States with lowest combined youth literacy rates have biggest Male-Female Literacy Gaps; some of these States like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh are also States with large populations

#### MDG 3: PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWER WOMEN

3.1 (GPI-Primary)		Already achieved by 2007-08 in 15 out of 35 States and almost achieved in 16 more States
(GPI-Secondary)		Already achieved by 2007-08 in 13 out of 35 States and almost achieved in 8 more States; 4 States with a GPI between 0.58 and 0.67 are far below.
(GPI-Tertiary)		Only 8 States have achieved gender parity by 2007-08; 8 relatively smaller States have significant disparity in favour of females Note: Only Kerala, Delhi and Andaman & Nicobar have achieved GPI=1 (or>1) in all the 3 levels of education.

of India Report, viz. *Millennium Development Goals - States of India Report 2010* (GoI 2011b) provides the official data on various targets and indicators relating to the MDGs at the State level. The data bring out the uneven development over different parts of the country vis-à-vis States within India towards achieving the MDGs.

The following table brings out the State-level disparities in the context of the all-India level of performance of the various indicators.

### 3.2. Qualitative Aspects

“India is on-track or even ahead of targets on nearly all indicators related to universalization of primary education. .... Significantly good and on-the-track progress during the last five years in eliminating the gender disparity in the primary and secondary levels of education has paved the way for equality of women's participation in higher education.” (GoI, 2011: 8, 9) Confining the analysis to the quantitative measures of targets and indicators relating to MDGs 2 and 3 can lead to a sense of complacency as the country is well on the track to achieve (if not already achieved) the goals by the year 2015. The shortfalls of a few percentage points remaining at present in the performance of some indicators may seem to be easily overcome by 2015, given the performance of the past few years. Taking the case of the NER, for example, when so much increase has already taken place, the gap of 5% or less may seem to be covered easily in the remaining years before 2015. However, it is this last 5%, which covers the most marginalized and vulnerable sections of the population and therefore the most difficult to reach, that would require the most arduous efforts and time without any guarantee of success. This is true for children belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, physically and mentally challenged children, children in remote habitations, children of migrant parents, etc. (Govinda, 2011)

It is important to distinguish between the quantitative and qualitative aspects of education. Thus, increased enrolment in schools does not necessarily imply actual learning or education of a good quality. For example, the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) points out that almost half the children in Class V cannot read a Class II text nor do sums in mathematics in the rural areas (Pratham, 2011). Similarly, based on field surveys, the PROBE II (2010) reports the lack of teaching which in turn implies a lack of learning and poor quality of education:

In rural North India, about half of the time, there was no teaching going on in primary schools in 1996-97. Ten years later (2006), nothing had changed in this respect .... School participation has improved dramatically.... This surge in school participation reflects a range of positive initiatives during the last 10 years.

The lack of learning is not confined to rural schools. A number of studies corroborate the lack of learning in schools, irrespective of whether they are government or private, rural or urban, although the extent may vary between different schools.

The poor quality of education can be attributed to a number of factors like

- Significantly lower public spending (a little over 3% of GDP in recent years) on education in India as compared to other emerging economies has resulted in a

poorly functioning public education system which caters to the poorest families as the better-off families rely on private educational facilities.

- A significantly high proportion (around 90%) of the low public expenditure on education is incurred on teachers' salaries, leaving little money for other inputs which have a direct bearing on the quality of education. Such inputs include physical infrastructure like school buildings and classrooms, separate toilets for girls, drinking water facilities, teaching equipment, computers, books, etc. as well as the 'softer' purposes of teachers' training, research, evaluation, monitoring and supervision, etc. This is true even for a rich State like Punjab (Ahluwalia, 2010).
- Considering that teachers are a very critical input of education, aspects like teacher absenteeism, backlog in hiring teachers, inadequate teacher training (both pre- and in-service), lack of teacher-motivation, vested interests of teachers' trade unions, etc. impinge on the quality of education. Tackling the issue of an adequate number of teachers, who are appropriately trained and motivated, is perhaps one of the most important ways to promote education, both quantitatively and qualitatively.
- The significant increase in enrolment in 'unrecognized' private schools which have proliferated in the rural areas and less-developed urban areas has negative implications for the quality of education as they are not monitored by the government. Their teachers are paid considerably less and have no opportunities for in-service training as compared to the teachers in government and 'recognized' private schools. Despite the fees charged by them, they are still able to attract students because they are supposed to teach in English (regarded as important for future employability) and have more favourable pupil-teacher ratios than government schools which may be free.
- Excessive centralization of control over educational services at the State level and hence low accountability at the local level is another reason for poor educational outcomes. The problem gets exacerbated when there is political interference in the management of schools (including the appointment and transfers of teachers) and lack of regulatory mechanisms.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS & POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This paper is concerned with education for gender equality and women's empowerment in India from the perspective of the MDGs which are specified in terms of quantitative targets and indicators for the country as a whole. India seems to be on-track or ahead in most of the indicators and targets of MDGs 2 and 3. However, this conclusion is valid for the country as a whole and not for every State of the country; disparities between States remain and will not be wiped out by 2015. The lack of availability of further disaggregated data prevents the sub-State level analysis which may be critical for designing

effective policies for education and gender equality/women's empowerment. While official data is restricted to the quantitative aspects, studies by individual researchers, NGOs etc. throw light on the poor quality of education due to various reasons. As the quality of education is critical in determining the contribution of education to gender equality and women's empowerment, policies to specifically tackle the various factors responsible for the poor quality of education need to be implemented. Such policies include:

- increasing public expenditure on education and ensuring its proper allocation and utilization;
- providing adequate physical infrastructure like school buildings and classrooms, separate toilets for girls, drinking water facilities, teaching equipment, computers, books, etc. as well as the 'softer' purposes of teachers' training, research, evaluation, monitoring and supervision;
- ensuring the appointment of an adequate number of teachers, especially female teachers, who are appropriately trained and motivated;
- regulation of the 'unrecognized' private schools;
- decentralization and effective devolution of power which is critical for attaining better design, delivery and evaluation of education (e.g. elected representatives of local governments and parents of children in government schools can be brought together into village education committees which are given powers over resource allocation, management and monitoring of these schools);
- removal of political interference in the management of schools (including the appointment and transfers of teachers)

A general policy implication for education to contribute to gender equality and women's empowerment in the real sense is that emphasis should not be on mere acquisition of good marks or certificates through rote-learning; instead, the emphasis should be on understanding, problem-solving, etc. Unless due attention is given to the content and process of education and its delivery mechanisms, it is unlikely that education will contribute to development or women's empowerment in a positive way. For example, teachers who are insensitive to unequal gender relations and conduct classes in subjects which are hardly relevant to the needs of the learners (whether for enabling them to earn a livelihood through skill-provision or for generating the required awareness about their problems and solutions) cannot be expected to contribute to women's empowerment. Similarly, literacy by itself is meaningless unless it is linked with the praxis of conscientization and social mobilization, as advocated by Paulo Freire, the legendary Brazilian educator.

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<sup>1</sup>(Recently retired) Associate Professor, Department of Economics, Janki Devi Memorial College, University of Delhi, India; email ID: [mmaf07@yahoo.co.in](mailto:mmaf07@yahoo.co.in)