

# What Promotes and Sustains the Growth of Female Literacy in Himachal Pradesh: An Empirical Study

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## ARTICLE DETAILS

### Article History

Published Online: 07 September 2018

### Keywords

Human resource, economic empowerment, society.

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## ABSTRACT

Women constitute almost 50 percent of the country human resources and their contribution is vital for the progress of nation. Female is both the beneficiary of the development and contributor to the economy. The status of woman has gone through many changes since independence. With time her place in the society has also changed. Earlier she was trained only to become a good house wife, but now she has become a key component in the development of society.

Women education is one of the most important indices of overall development and growth of a society. It directly influences the age of marriage, life expectancy, participation in family income and above all economic empowerment and well being of a woman.

Himachal Pradesh has made a considerable progress in the matter of female literacy. The government of Himachal Pradesh has taken number of steps in order to raise literacy in general and women in particular. According to Census 2001, the state literacy rate is fourth highest with 68.10 percent among the states and the rate of growth of female literacy in Himachal Pradesh has been the highest as compared to Kerala, her neighborhood states like Haryana, Punjab and also the national average between 1971 to 2001 (Himachal Pradesh Development Report).

The government of Himachal Pradesh endorsed female literacy through its plans, policies and programmes. Social factors like parent's motivation, age of marriage and economic independence of female also facilitates their education.

Even though the literacy rate in Himachal Pradesh has expanded rapidly, the gender gap in literacy remains conspicuous by its presence. Also we notice that though the girl's enrolment is very high at primary level, the dropout rate is very high among girls at higher level of education.

In this paper we will attempt to recognize and investigate in detail the factors that have facilitated and fostered the growth of women education in Himachal Pradesh and also to understand in details the various reasons for the higher dropout rate and gender gap in literacy.

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## 1. Introduction

Himachal Pradesh is largely a mountainous region with a rugged and difficult terrain. Climatic conditions in some of the areas are also very tough like in Lahul & Spiti and Pooh sub-division of Kinnaur district. These places have cold desert like conditions. This is in sharp contrast with the Kangra valley which receives 1941.7 mm rainfall annually causing flash floods, land-slides and soil erosion.<sup>1</sup> Due to rugged undulations and tough terrain and varied climatic conditions it is truly a Herculean task to formulate a development strategy in Himachal Pradesh.

Despite of all these conditions, the success story of Himachal Pradesh in various sectors like health, literacy, tourism, horticulture is indispensable. Not so long ago, in 1961 Himachal Pradesh was considered as the backward state both economically and socially. The literacy rate in Himachal Pradesh was lower than the corresponding all-India averages in all age groups. It was one of the most educationally backward states. Since then, the state has made spectacular progress towards Universal Elementary Education. The state made a remarkable turn about and moved from the status of

one of the lowest literate states to one of the highest literate states in India.

It has also made remarkable improvement in the female literacy. For instance, the literacy rate among girls aged 15 to 19 years shot up from 11 percent in 1961 to 86 percent in 1991. The government of Himachal Pradesh has taken major steps in order to raise the educational status of the women in the state.

Though there has been a considerable progress in the literacy rate of the women and also they are the main contributor to the economy of Himachal Pradesh, women lack an equal access to various opportunities and other resources like education. Therefore this paper attempts to investigate the factors responsible for growth of female literacy in Himachal Pradesh as well as to recognize various reasons for gender disparity in education like drop-out rate and gender gap in literacy.

## 2. Methodology

The data for the present study has been collected from various sources which have been duly acknowledged. Information on women's literacy rate, girls enrolment at various

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<sup>1</sup> Himachal Pradesh Human Development Report, 2002, p 31

levels, drop-out rate have been collected from Department of Education, Statistical Reports, Selected Educational Statistics, Directorate of Education, Gazetteers on Himachal Pradesh.

### 3. Data Analysis and Observation

Women education is one of the most sensitive indices of social development. All the major parameters are related to the education. It is negatively related to population growth, infant and child mortality rate. On the other hand it has positive influence on age of marriage, life expectancy, participation in family income, and above all women's empowerment and her own well-being.

Educational policy moved since independence in tandem with other socio-economic programmes. In the last two decades, however, the focus of educational policies is not just to increase women's literacy rate but to empower them as well. The government has taken numerous measures and is continuing in its endeavor to raise the status of women in the society by educating them.

Himachal Pradesh has made considerable progress in the matter of Universalization of Elementary Education and has successfully raised the level of literacy and especially female literacy.

As Jean Dreze in 1999 has said, "the schooling revolution has raised the literacy status in general and women in particular in Himachal Pradesh. Fifty years ago educational level in Himachal Pradesh was no higher than Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Today, Himachal Pradesh is second only to Kerala in terms of school participation and literacy rate in the younger age group".<sup>2</sup>

The rate of growth of female literacy in Himachal Pradesh has been the highest as compared to Kerala, her sister state Punjab and even the national average between 1971 and 2001.<sup>3</sup> This clearly reveals that after becoming a full fledged state in 1971, the literary status of women of Himachal Pradesh has risen considerably.

The Female literacy rate has been discussed in following table:

**Table I showing Female Literacy Rate of Himachal Pradesh from 1971 to 2001.**

Year	Female Literacy Rate
1971	20.23
1981	37.72
1991	52.13
2001	68.08

Source: Census of India, Provisional population Totals, Paper 1 of 2001, Himachal Pradesh.

Above table indicates the growth of female literacy from 1971 to 2001. In 1971, it was only 20.23 percent. It was raised

to 37.72 percent in 1981. In the last two decades we see a substantial growth in literacy rate. From 20.23 percent in 1971, it was raised to 68.08 percent in 2001. The growth rate is about 3.36 percent from 1971 to 2001 which is more than Kerala and other neighbouring north Indian states.

**Table II showing District wise Female Literacy Rate (in %), from 1981 to 2001.**

Districts	1981	1991	2001
Bilaspur	34.76	56.55	70.53
Chamba	13.59	28.57	49.70
Hamirpur	45.17	65.90	76.41
Kangra	39.98	61.39	73.57
Kinnaur	20.71	42.04	N.A.
Kullu	18.96	38.53	61.24
Lahaul & Spiti	15.44	38.05	60.94
Mandi	27.45	49.12	65.36
Shimla	29.48	51.75	70.68
Sirmour	19.79	38.45	60.93
Solan	28.91	50.69	67.48
Una	40.62	61.01	73.85
Himachal Pradesh	31.46	52.13	68.08

Source: Himachal Pradesh Human Development Report, 2002.

Above table reveals the district wise female literacy rate from 1981 to 2001. It is very evident from the data that in each district there is a substantial increase in female literacy. Out of all these districts, four districts namely Kullu, Chamba, Lahul & Spiti, and Sirmour were covered under DPEP scheme, i.e. District Primary Education Programme. Government gave special priority to these districts because of their physical features. They are basically far flung areas with difficult terrain. The growth of literacy rate reflects the improving trends in these districts.

**Table III showing Enrolment of both Boys and Girls in Schools for the year 2001.**

	Boys	Girls	Total
High Secondary (IX-XII)	55721 (58.85 %)	38955 (41.4 %)	94676
High (IX-X)	98165 (53.51%)	85276 (46.5%)	183441
Middle (VI-VII)	184065 (52.4%)	167408 (47.6%)	351473
Primary (I-V)	339172 (51.17%)	323601 (48.8%)	662773

Source: Selected Educational Statistics, Government of India, 2000-2001

Above table shows that girls' enrolment at primary level is as high as that of boys. The state has achieved gender equity in terms of enrolment at primary level. The gap between enrolment of girls and boys however increases as they move towards higher level of education. It increases from 2 percent at the primary level to 4 percent at middle level, 6 percent at high, and 17 percent at high secondary level. However, steps should be taken to increase girls' enrolment at all the levels.

### 4. Factor Responsible for Growth of Female Literacy

The PROBE (Public Report On Basic Education) investigators, in explaining the success story of Himachal

<sup>2</sup> Himachal Pradesh Development Report, Planning Commission, Government of India, p 196.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p 197

Pradesh especially in primary education of females, have found;

- Highly motivated parents in educating their children because they are aware of the profound affect education can have on the quality of life. Almost 99 percent of respondent considered girl's education important for better quality of life.
- 90 percent of parents support compulsory education for all children including both boys and girls.
- Primary levels of education also manifested low gender bias.<sup>4</sup>

The Education Department reports that the new literates now ensure that their children are sent to school. Additionally, a sense of awakening is also reported by the Department among women who themselves are literate.<sup>5</sup>

Another enabling factor could be the social structure of Himachal Pradesh which tends to be less patriarchal than in other states of north India. It is noted that female labour-force participation rates in Himachal Pradesh are quite high. This tends to reduce the economic dependence of women on men; this helps them in making their own decisions and enhancing their bargaining power. It in turn boost their influence in the family, therefore, schooling decisions are likely to be less male-centered.<sup>6</sup>

The proportion of female teachers in schools is also a deciding factor in higher enrolment of girls in schools especially at primary and elementary levels. The proportion of female teachers in Himachal Pradesh is indeed much higher than any other state in north Indian states i.e. more than 40 percent at primary level.<sup>7</sup> This likely to facilitate school participation among girls, as parents are more comfortable and secure to send their girl child to those schools where there are more of female teachers.

Marriage practices in Himachal Pradesh are tend to be less restrictive, again facilitating the female education. Similarly late marriage is socially acceptable in Himachal Pradesh. Only 10 percent or so Himachali women marry before the age of 18 years, compared to more than 40 percent in Haryana.<sup>8</sup>

## 5. Government's Role in Promoting Girls' Education

The favourable nature of the social context in Himachal Pradesh would not have gone far on its own in the absence of bold state initiatives to promote the universalization of elementary education.

The real breakthrough in women education occurred from 1960's onwards, with the gradual formation of Himachal Pradesh as a separate state and the adoption of independent economic and social policies. These policies included a major

<sup>4</sup> Himachal Pradesh Human Development Report, 2002, p 107.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p 107.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Dreze, Amartya Sen, 2002, "India Development and Participation", Oxford University Press, New Delhi, p 181.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p 182

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p 182.

emphasis on developing the rural infrastructure especially roads and schools.

One major step that government took in schooling revolution was providing primary schools within the walking distance from the habitation. As parents feel a little reluctant on sending their girl child to far flung areas to study, the government has made the schools easily accessible.<sup>9</sup>

The accessibility to primary as well as middle schools has been discussed in the following table.

**Table IV Showing District wise Average Radial Distance per Primary School and Middle School in Kilometers.**

District	Primary Average Radial Distance Per Primary school (Km)	Middle Average Radial Distance Per Middle school (Km)
Bilaspur	0.79	1.48
Chamba	1.39	2.69
Hamirpur	0.84	1.28
Kangra	1.01	1.73
Kinnaur	3.28	5.39
Kullu	1.59	3.30
Lahaul & Spiti	4.59	8.87
Mandi	0.86	1.63
Shimla	1.01	1.85
Sirmour	0.97	1.96
Solan	0.90	1.66
Una	0.97	1.57
Himachal	1.29	2.36

Source: Himachal Pradesh Human Development Report, 2002.

From the above table we can conclude that the government is providing one primary school within the distance of 1.29 kms on an average and one middle school within the distance of 2.36 kms. It is obvious from the table that in most of the districts of Himachal Pradesh, either the schools are provided less than one kilometer from the habitation, others are not far than 1.5 kilometers. Only in Lahul and Spiti and in Kinnaur schools are at longer distance because these areas have scattered habitations and these are geographically far flung areas.

Along with this step government has also provided various schemes to girls to encourage them to attend the school. The government of Himachal Pradesh has taken a number of steps to raise the educational status of women in the state. Some of these are:

- Formation of Village Education Committees (VECs) with one third women members, and making them responsible for universal enrolment and retention of children in schools.
- A girl child scheme was launched on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1997 involving a gift amount and a scholarship at the age of six.
- 2745 Mother-Teacher Association have been formed till 31<sup>st</sup> March 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Himachal Pradesh Development Report, op.cit., p 139.

4. Exemption of tuition fee to Himachal domicile girl students in all institutions within the state irrespective of income of parents.
5. Free text books to the girls of DPEP districts and free uniform to all tribal schools.
6. Girls' attendance scholarship at rupees two per month for upto 10 months.
7. Poverty scholarship is also being given to the girls at rupees 4 per month.
8. A state has also sponsored a scheme i.e Maharishi Balmiki Chhatrvriti Yojana, under which all girl students belonging to Balmiki community will get rupees 9000 per annum beyond matric.<sup>10</sup>

The Government of Himachal Pradesh launched the National Literacy Mission in 1992 for eradication of adult illiteracy.<sup>11</sup> Since women account for an overwhelming percentage of the total number of illiterates, the National Literacy Mission is for all practical purposes a Mission of imparting functional literacy to women. Total literacy campaigns launched since 1988 under the aegis of the National emphasis on making efforts to: -

- Create an environment where women demand knowledge and information, empowering themselves to change their lives.
- Inculcate in women the confidence that change is possible, if women work collectively.
- Spread the message that education of women is a pre-condition for fighting against their oppression.
- Highlight the plight of the girl child and stress the need for Universalisation of Elementary Education as a way of addressing the issue.<sup>12</sup>

All these initiatives and policies taken by the government have helped in fostering and maintaining a high rate of literacy among girls. Having charted out the facts of female literacy and its success story, we can not ignore the gaps like high drop-out rate among girls at higher and secondary level, and also the gender gap in literacy. These are the areas of high concern and can not be ignored.

## 6. Gender Gap and Drop-out Rate

The gap between male and female literacy rate in Himachal Pradesh is 17.94 percent which is three times higher than that of Kerala.<sup>13</sup> Also the drop-out rate is 1.54 percent, 6.2 percent and 18.03 percent at I-V, VI-VIII, IX-XII level respectively. Drop-out rate among girls at various levels of education has been discussed in the following table.

**Table V showing the drop-out rate among girls (1999-2000)**

Stage	Drop-out rate (%)
I-V	1.54
VI-VIII	6.2
IX-XII	18.03

Source: Directorate of Education, Himachal Pradesh, 1999-2000

The fact that the use of education facilities has not been available or has not made available to both the sexes is evident from the percentage of gender gap in literacy and also from the drop-out rate. Various reasons can be responsible for both. Poverty, child labour, distance from the schools, and quantum of the homework are major reasons for drop outs.

Economically not rich, parents prefer to give all the advantages to the boy in the family. Girl in the family is therefore expected to leave her studies to facilitate her brother due to money constraints.

From the above table it is evident that drop-out rate is higher at secondary level. At primary level it is not that alarming. Reason behind this is the distance between the secondary school and their homes. Often girls have to go to another village to attend the school. Due to this the parents don't prefer to send their girl child out of their village for higher studies. Therefore they drop out from the school and discontinue with their studies.

As the girls grow up, they are more often involved in the household chores. Mothers mostly expect girls to help them at home. Due to involvement in the household chores as well as in the field work, they are unable to give sufficient time to their studies resulting in dropping out from the school.

Another reason could be the conservative views of parents regarding girl's education- and that marriage prospects of highly educated girl tend to be greatly reduced. That's why they believe in having elementary education for their girl child and at higher level they tend to drop out.

Moreover it is amply revealed that incentives can promote enrolment but cannot effectively raise participation and school attendance unless and until the motivation of pupils and parents is raised and also equally backed up by active community support.

## 7. Conclusion and Suggestions

The combination of state commitment and community involvement including parental motivation, has succeeded in preserving accountability in the school system and in higher growth of literacy rate among girls in the state. The schooling revolution in Himachal Pradesh has done a great deal to make it a better place to live in. In the wake of transition from lowest literate state to one of the highest literate states, it has actually become a lesson for other states in India.

Women education which has caught up government's attention in last few decades has proven to be a successful story in Himachal Pradesh. The Government has realized that higher level of women's education, the better will be their understanding of and participation in the development process of the society and the nation.

Though we see a general growth in female literacy in the last four decades, the gender gap in literacy and higher dropout rates among girls remain the area of concern. Therefore, the level of education among women in general needs to be raised in the states. The gender gap in literacy should be reduced to

<sup>10</sup> Himachal Pradesh Human Development Report, 2002, pp 109-110.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p 106.

<sup>12</sup> Janartha, T. C., 2000, Himachal Pradesh District Gazeteer: Kullu, Shimla: Controller, Printing and Stationary Department, p 341.

<sup>13</sup> Himachal Pradesh Development Report, op.cit., p 141.

below 5 percent and dropout rate should also be reduced specially at secondary level.

Government should provide more schemes to the girls to attract them. Secondly schools should be open within the distance not more than 2 km from their homes. Burden of homework should also be reduced at the elementary level.

Adult, non formal and functional literacy programmes would be helpful in reducing gender gap in literacy. Special attention and emphasis needs to be paid to those districts with lower literacy rates and high gender gap in literacy like Chamba, Kinnaur, Kullu.

More girls should be motivated and encouraged to continue to higher level of education. For this Guidance cells and motivation programs should be organized in school.

Government should transfer the responsibility of elementary education to urban local bodies in order to empower the education among girls. Parents also needed to be guided in retaining their girl's child in the high school.

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