

Empowering the girl child through education
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Viewing education as the basic agent of change in the status of women, the National Policy on Education calls for the national education system to play a positive interventionist role in the empowerment of women.

In its effort to create a closer link between education and the life of people, the NPE had envisaged a two-pronged strategy:

First, the removal of disparities in access and the second the equalisation of opportunities through affirmative action programmes. These programmes would be specifically tailored to address the specific needs of those denied equality to date.

India is already home to the largest number of illiterates in the world. Of the 263 million illiterate Indians, 197 million are women. The literacy rate differential is also reflected in all other human development indicators. Women's access to health care, adequate nutrition, sanitation facilities, clean drinking water is significantly less than men's access.

Reflective of the low status of women is the most sensitive indicator of human development, the infant mortality rate. India has a skewed sex ratio, with 829 women to 1000 men in some parts of the country. During the field surveys for the gender studies, researchers found in some blocks of Haryana, sex ratios of 500 girls to 1000 boys in the age group 0-6 years.

Development thinkers across the ideological spectrum agree that education is one of the most significant factors in changing the status of women. The skewed sex ratio and the high infant mortality rate are as much a cause as an effect of the disparity in educational opportunities between boys and girls. According to the 1991 census, the female literacy rate at 39.42 per cent is about two-thirds the literacy rate of men at 63.86 per cent.

It is recognised that in rural India, of every 100 girls who enrolled in Class I only 1 entered Class XII. In urban areas, the situation is slightly better with 14 girls of every 100 making it to Class XII. A

majority of the girls in rural areas drop out in primary school. Of the 100 who enroll in Class I, only 40 join Class V, an attrition rate of 60 per cent.

Among disadvantaged groups, the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, linguistic and religious minorities and families living in difficult-to-reach areas, the drop-out rate is much higher.

The District Primary education Programme (DPEP) which aims to restructure primary education, so as to enhance enrollment, retention, achievement and school effectiveness, was created to reach out to the goals set out in the NPE and implement the strategy of decentralised planning, disaggregated target-setting of the Programme of Action 1992.

Now operational in 42 districts spread over seven states, the programme is being implemented in districts where the female literacy rate is below the national average or where the total literacy campaign has successfully generated a demand for elementary education.

The initiative is aimed at achieving the goal of UEE in a replicable, cost-effective and sustainable manner. Building on the experience of similar initiatives launched earlier, the programme emphasises an area-specific approach, which is contextual and sensitive to local conditions.

Integrating a gender perspective in all aspects of planning and implementation, the decentralised approach within DPEP actively encourages the involvement of local communities, particularly women, in all decision-making processes. The DPEP is committed to reducing gender disparities in enrolment, retention and levels of student achievement. It has marked gender focus with all planning and implementation processes sensitised to meet the special needs of girls' education and women's empowerment.

Providing Educational Opportunities to all Girls

One of the objectives of DPEP is the reduction of gender disparities in enrolment, retention and learner achievements. Providing all girls with access to educational opportunities is the primary goal of the programme. To achieve this, efforts are on to:

- Make the educational system more supportive to the needs of girls and women.
- Create an environment which enables women to demand education for themselves and their daughters.

In the seven states where DPEP is now operational, strategies to improve girls access to educational opportunities and women's empowerment are significant highlight of the overall planning and implementation process.

Some of the interventions are:

- Provision for alternative schooling
- Flexible school timings to suit the needs of girls
- Residential schools
- Gender-sensitive curricula and text-books
- Recruitment of women teachers
- Improved school buildings and the provision of toilets for girls
- Gender sensitisation of teachers, supervisors and project managers.

To ensure that these interventions achieve the programme objective of reducing gender disparities, an atmosphere supportive of education for girls and women needs to be evolved within the community. Towards this efforts are on to involve the village community in the day-to-day functioning of the school and to mobilise the local community to support the education of girls.

As part of this strategy efforts are on to mobilise women's groups in the village to actively support education for themselves and for the girl child. As a sustained input for bringing a gender sensitive vision to the village community and local school management, it is envisaged that women's groups would exert the right pressure for girls and women's education. In addition, the women's groups would be empowered to hold the local educational system accountable.

Some of the specific strategies devised to mobilise women are:

- The VECs, MTCs, PTAs be empowered to take on the responsibility of promoting education in their areas.
- The mobilisation of informed and active participation at the local level to build and sustain an environment supportive of girls' education.
- Community and women's organisations be involved in mobilisation; school management; monitoring; enrolment; retention; levels of achievement and classroom practices. Their mandate: to highlight the importance of girls education.
- Women's collectives be formed in villages and local activists trained to catalyse collective action around educational issues.
- Intensive capacity building of community and women's groups to focus on issues of education for girls.

Research Activities Provide Sharper Focus

DPEP strategies for girls' education and women's empowerment are sharper and more focussed. The shift from the stage of pious postulates to a more experiential and informed understanding of specific interventions within a defined time spectrum has been made possible by a series of research activities.

The activities include baseline diagnostic studies at the sub-district level for assessment of learner achievement levels and gender studies to clearly bring out the areas of disparity and discrimination among boys and girls.

The second major input has been to draw on the existing experience of innovative programmes within the country and to draw from them strategies for girls education and women's empowerment.

The strategies so identified are gender sensitive and based on the specific needs of girls and women. DPEP is also drawing on their unique implementation methods. This is evident in the integration of the Mahila Samakhya experience, use of alternative schooling methods and in the generation of innovative teaching-learning materials.

The third has been to elicit and integrate pool of expertise from amongst women educationists, activists, academics, development workers and non governmental agencies who have experience in the education of girls and women, into the DPEP management and advisory structures.

Baseline Studies on Learner Achievement

Baseline studies were conducted in 42 districts to achievement; baseline studies were conducted in all seven states. The findings are based on data collected from 850 schools, interviews with 2712 teachers, 14,341 students studying in the last year of primary school, 13,021 students in Class II and 1,099 drop-outs. Students in the last year of primary school were tested for reading comprehension and maths using standardised achievement tests reflecting curriculum objectives. The basic literacy and numeracy skills of children in class II were tested. Among drop-outs, the study attempted to learn the level of retention.

It was found that the average achievement levels in both reading comprehension and maths among both boys and girls was well below 50 per cent of the maximum score in many districts. Differential in achievement levels between boys and girls is insignificant though overall boys outscored girls. The status report was remarkably similar in all six states. However, in three districts of Haryana and in Karnataka, girls outscored boys on all tests.

The achievement differential between children from socially disadvantaged groups and the rest was also minimal. SC girls

outscored all girls in one district of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka and in two districts of Maharashtra.

The poor learner achievements in Class II are an area of principal concern in DPEP. Studies have found that the highest percentage of drop-outs occur in the first two years of primary schooling.

The studies on girls education and women's empowerment, conducted in 21 districts spread over six states, attempted to understand prevalent attitudes towards the empowerment of girls and women through education. The studies mapped the levels of gender disparities in access, enrolment and retention; provided information on the causes of non-enrolment and the high incidence of drop-outs among girls and the status of girls education in these six states.

Conducted in eight villages of each block in every project district, the gender studies included a mix of structured interviews with key respondents and group discussions. In all 15,000 parents and neighbours, 650 teachers, 1,100 students, 600 drop-outs and never enrolled children and 500 officials participated in the exercise. In each block, researchers interviewed between 30-40 teachers, 50-60 girl students, 20-30 drop-outs / never enrolled children and between 20-25 school administrators and community leaders.

The studies also found large interdistrict variations in enrolment and retention rates. In some states, like Assam, there were also significant diversity at the sub-district level. Across the country, girls appear to be dropping out or never entering a school as they are expected to work at home or in the fields. Household chores and the care of siblings were highlighted as factors keeping girls out of school. In addition, parents reported the high incidence of teacher absenteeism and their lack of motivation as another cause of keeping girls out of school.

In tandem, the gender and baseline studies have provided sub-district data which helps in formulating area-specific plans. They have helped identify retention of girls as a primary goal of the programme. The studies have shown, enrolment rates are rising and many districts are close to achieving universalisation of enrolment. However, even in areas where enrolment rates are near universal the drop-out rates particularly amongst girls, remain extremely high.

An Effective Synergy of Goals

Addressing the needs of girls has been a major concern in all educational programmes and schemes. The 1991 census found that the decennial growth rate of female literacy in the country was 9.54 per cent. The literacy rate among men grew at a slower rate of 7.76

per cent. The demand for education by women received a fillip through the TLC. The mobilisation of women through the Total Literacy Campaign, part of the larger National Literacy Mission, has been one of the most significant achievements of the programme. Women made up over 60 per cent of the learners in many of the districts. The Total Literacy Campaign experience has shown a rise in women's enrolment. Today TLCs are in operation in 336 districts. Following up on TLCs, post-literacy campaigns have been launched in 130 districts, nationwide.

Other programmes have also been emphasising the participation of women in educational planning and implementation. As part of Operation Blackboard 50 per cent of all future recruitment of primary school teachers will be women.

Under the Non-Formal Education Scheme, NFE centres run exclusively for girls get 90 per cent assistance. Now 40 per cent of all NFE centres set up will be exclusively for girls.

These integrated nation-wide schemes which have a strong gender focus are implemented in tandem with smaller innovative programmes. One of the largest is Mahila Samakhya, or Programme for women's equality through education. The programme does not aim at service delivery. It views education "as an on-going process of empowerment, which transcends mere literacy".

This vision of the Mahila Samakhya experience is being dovetailed with DPEP. It has established the validity of gender-sensitive approach to women's education based on the priorities and felt needs of rural women as articulated by them.

Launched in 1988, Mahila Samakhya is operational in 15 districts spread over four states. First started in Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat, the programme was extended to Andhra Pradesh in 1992. In all the 2075 villages, spread over 15 districts, where women's sanghas or collectives have been formed, there has been a perceptible difference in the attitude of women towards education and to their own place in society. Here 'learning and change go hand in hand'.

Since 1991, the Mahila Samakhya approach has been adopted by the Bihar Education Project. The programme is operational in 1500 villages spread over seven districts.

In Madhya Pradesh, the programme is being launched in one block of three DPEP districts. In Karnataka, the Mahila Samakhya Programme in Raichur district pre-dates the launch of DPEP.

Assam is interested in the Mahila Samakhya design and is planning to launch initiation activities in 1995-96. Maharashtra is also considering the Mahila Samakhya approach in the Mahila Prabodhan Programme of DPEP.

The Samakhya strategy is particularly relevant for DPEP. The goals of the two programmes can be synergised quite effectively. Strategies can be evolved for environment building, awareness generation amongst women especially. Strategies for the actual management of educational initiatives so as to make schooling more effective and accountable to the local community can also be evolved.

Some of the salient aspects of the Mahila Samakhya approach which can be easily replicated in DPEP are:

- Interventions be based on women's needs.
- Strategies emerge from priorities set by village women.
- Mobilise and build an informed body of opinion among women for education.
- Ownership of the programme by the women of every Sangha or village women's collective.
- Evolve an informed gender-sensitive agenda and pressure group for education within the community.
- Actively participate in educational management and monitoring of village-based pre-school and non-formal education centres, monitor teacher attendance and girls enrolment.
- Create a forum for convergence of services, to support sibling care, health and economically productive activities, to address the needs of girls and women holistically
- Establish local accountability of educational projects to community, parents, particularly mothers.
- Creation of project management structures that are gender-sensitive at all levels and play a facilitative role for grassroots-based activities.

DPEP has also observed the experiences of the Shiksha Karmi project in Rajasthan. Shiksha Karmis are para-teachers, women and men motivated to educate children but without the formal qualifications to become primary school teachers.

Some Shiksha Karmis have only completed upper primary school. Yet their desire to learn and teach and willingness to put the needs of children, particularly girls first has made a perceptible difference to the attitude of communities, parents and children towards education. The learning centres, where they teach have flexible timings, decided by the teacher in partnership with the community. This allows girls and boys to study at their own pace and to a convenient time.

With the objective of facilitating girls access to school, the project

addresses the problem of teacher absenteeism, particularly in remote, difficult-to-reach village.

Functional in 1066 villages spread over 25 districts, the programme has placed 2514 para-teachers in 67 blocks. These teachers reach out to 1,02,454 children in the 6-11 age group.

The programme is particularly interesting as the management structure has been designed to allow NGOs and the state machinery to work as partners. The NGOs are involved in training of trainers, they supervise the training of the Shiksha Karmis and also monitor the work of the para-teachers in villages.

The Shiksha Karmis are usually from the local area, in many cases from the same village. There is a strong sense of ownership and also accountability to the community. Though not as qualified as regular teachers, the Shiksha Karmis have proved to be more motivated and willing to experiment with innovative classroom practices and teaching-learning methods.

Their presence and the people's confidence has led to significantly higher enrolment and retention rates of girls in these villages.

The experience of the Lok Jumbish or People's Movement for basic education in Rajasthan has also been incorporated in the overall DPEP vision. Lok Jumbish has evolved an innovative education management structure in which the planning process begins in the VEC. Thus decentralisation and delegation of authority is built into the programme structure. In its attempt to ensure the village owns the programme, Lok Jumbish has built partnerships with local communities and NGOs to mobilise the community and involve them in micro-planning exercises at the village level. Lok Jumbish has also set up an experimental non-formal education programme which has shown positive results in increasing enrolment of girls. The project has adopted the Mahila Samakhya approach and has organised 294 women's groups by the end of Phase-I.

The experience of the Bihar Education Project has been particularly relevant for DPEP. The decentralised planning model was first fully laid out in the formulation of the BEP. In terms of people's mobilisation, the focus on redressal of gender disparities and location-specific planning, DPEP has been a successor to the BEP.

The other most significant experience has been the adoption of the Mahila Samakhya approach as a key component of BEP. Working with women's group, the BEP-MS programme found the demand for information and knowledge led quite early to a demand for education, particularly for children.

Jag Jagi, an educational innovation of MS in Bihar, means becoming aware and coping with the world. Thus empowerment through

education is viewed as women taking control of their lives and dealing in the public space on their own terms. Today over 4160 girls and 2932 women make the Jag Jagi centres a forum for sharing and learning. As part of Jag Jagi, women are involved in creating a supportive environment for girls education. The 'school readiness programme' includes ma-beti melas, (mother daughter fairs), girl child fairs and sports and cultural meetings for girls.

The rise in demand for quality education led to the establishment of Bal Jag Jagi or children's creative centres. While freeing girls from the care of younger siblings, these centres also introduce a desire for learning to a young age in all children.

Realising that ensuring girls remain in school and attend classes regularly is of primary importance, Samooh women (women's collectives) informally patrol the village. Girls found outside school are promptly sent back and the mothers fined. This social monitoring has led to a sharp rise in retention rates in these villages. The sense of ownership has transformed the functioning of many schools in the 20 districts in Bihar.

Through their participation in the VEC and through informal monitoring, the Samooh women are able to curb teacher absenteeism; ensure teachers are in school on time and that the school functions in a manner supportive of children's needs. A format for regular monitoring of the school has been prepared and Samooh members complete this task effectively.

Large Scale Resource Mobilisation Effort Launched

In the DPEP plans, initially the approach to address gender concerns had been compartmental and fragmented. However, with a more holistic understanding of gender perspective and the exercise with innovative projects, efforts to mainstream gender in every aspect of planning and implementation is gathering pace. There are concerted efforts to address the overt problems of girls' access to and participation in the education system.

For this, a large-scale resource mobilisation effort has been launched. State-level advisory teams on gender have been constituted. Invited experts from a range of fields: academia, women's groups, children's rights activists and educationists act as a sounding board for ideas. The group is also an unofficial monitor of the pace and direction of the programme in reducing gender disparities.

These resource groups have been meeting regularly and have introduced fresh thinking and helped the state teams view all DPEP plans and interventions through a gender lens. Mainstreaming gender in DPEP processes involves:

- Ensuring that the plans, all strategies and the interventions which emerge operate to reduce gender disparities.
- Consciously integrating a pro- girl child slant into all strategies and interventions.
- Prioritising the gender-specific components targeted to benefit girls and women.
- Identifying groups with special needs:
 - SC/ST girls
 - Disabled girls
 - Gifted girls

To help state project teams operationalise this commitment to mainstreaming gender, DPEP has actively involved a large body of informed opinion on gender at the national, state, district and subdistrict levels in formulating plans, chalking out strategies, designing implementation procedures. Through local workshops, seminars and meetings, women's development workers activists and non-governmental agencies and academics have been brought together to interact, advise and develop the DPEP strategy and interventions to reduce gender disparities; empower women; mobilise local communities to make a positive intervention in favour of girls' education. Also there are efforts to involve informed opinion builders in the monitoring of the programme to each stage and on every level. At present a national resource group on gender is being constituted, which will support the efforts of state and district resource teams.

These resource groups help project teams access the necessary information and local knowledge to translate plan objectives into implementable strategies. For the project teams the inputs at every stage of plan preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation will help ensure quality service delivery at the village level. Convergence with other departments such as health, women and child development, water, sanitation, forests and social welfare can also be streamlined. This will aid the participation of the local community in the programme and create a sense of ownership of the primary school to begin with and later the programme.

'Hidden' Gender Sensitive Components

The strategies identified to reduce gender disparities in education are two pronged : the design and implementation of interventions specifically tailored to help girls access education, and interventions which will make the system more responsive to the needs of girls. In addition, several strategies adopted in DPEP also indirectly benefit

girls: improved teacher competence, classroom environment benefits, improved educational management and better teaching-learning and textual material. These strategies too have gender-sensitive components, which are 'hidden', but which provide the necessary slant to the interventions to meet the special needs of girl children.

To operationalise the plan to mainstream gender, project teams have examined budget allocations to learn what percentage of each rupee spent reaches the girl child directly or indirectly. In addition, the effort to set up state resource teams is being replicated at the district, block and indeed the village level. The local talent can be drawn upon for micro-planning exercises using a girl child-centered approach.

The thrust areas are:

Catalysing an Enabling Environment

The evolution of supportive community is the foundation for a process of empowerment of the girl child.

For this, multi-media campaigns to raise awareness of the need for education are planned with the girl child as the focus. In addition, environment building activities such as orientation of the VECs, women's groups by using gender-sensitive materials is envisaged.

Support services like ECCE, primary health care need to be strengthened. In Assam, the gender study found that a significant proportion of girls drop out because of ill health.

Providing Necessary and appropriate Infrastructure

Availability of school near their home is a basic requirement for girls. The provision of separate toilets is being taken up as part of DPEP. To reduce over-crowding, more classrooms are being constructed. In addition, more women are being recruited as primary school teachers. To ensure girls feel secure, Haryana plans to construct compound walls around schools. In Tamil Nadu, a system of local escorts to take girls to and from school is being experimented with.

Flexible school timings to suit girls and availability of alternative schooling facilities are also being experimented with. Educational incentives for schools with high enrolment of girls are also being considered. These incentives would be in addition to the already existing state-level schemes for enhancing enrolment and retention of girls.

Pedagogical Improvements

In all seven DPEP states, the curricula is being revised, text books are being rewritten and designed to eliminate gender bias. There are now efforts to go a step further and introduce positive and progressive role models for girls through texts all illustrations. Special gender

sensitisation programmes are planned for text-book writers and designers. Karnataka is experimenting with definition of minimum levels of learning in an equity context.

Training with a Gender Perspective

Through training, the gender stereotypes and role biases are sought to be removed. This is viewed as an on-going exercise which involves all levels of managers, administrators, supervisors, teachers, VEC members and members of PTAs and Mahila Mandals.

In addition, all training programmes are seeking to integrate gender in every component so as to spotlight the importance of the gender perspective in all aspects of work. Capacities at all levels are to be built up particularly at training institutions to handle a regular and recurrent input on gender sensitisation.

Education Management and Monitoring

Critical to the efforts to integrate gender in DPEP is monitoring and management of the programme delivery system. For this, the management information system has to integrate a gender perspective. Data collection and analysis must include disaggregated information related to the girl child.

The MIS for the project is to include gender sensitive monitoring indicators. This will allow progress and responsiveness of the project and the system as a whole to issues of gender to be measured.

Qualitative indicators to measure development of community organisations and women's mobilisation and support for education are to be evolved.

Recruitment and placement policies need to go beyond encouraging women to become primary school teachers and appointing women as coordinators of girls education and women's empowerment. Rationalisation of transfer and placement decisions are issues of concern in all DPEP states. They are to be addressed in manner where the impact of women in decision making, as role models and active determinants of classroom transactions can be enhanced.

Women need to be more visible in decision-making positions and in positions of authority. State societies are increasingly conscious of this and recruitment profiles are showing that more women are being inducted to management positions.

Evaluation of Strategies and Interventions

For project teams at all levels, self appraisal of efforts to mainstream gender will be the first and most crucial step in the monitoring process. This will be particularly helpful in supervision of individual efforts. The gender monitoring cell being set up in states like Karnataka and

Assam will guide school inspectors, headmasters, and other levels of educational managers in identifying areas of achievement and lacunae in service delivery. Supervision procedures incorporating girl child-sensitive indicators are to be developed. The availability of gender-sensitive monitoring guidelines, self-appraisal methods and supervision indicators make it easier to evaluate systemic responses to address disparities. The introduction of gender issues in the evaluation framework for every level is being operationalised.

Need for Large-Scale Community Involvement

The in-depth analysis of the status of primary education also led to the recognition of the need for community involvement on a massive scale to achieve the goal of education for all by the turn of the century. As the NPE acknowledges, "neither linear expansion nor the existing pace and nature of improvement can meet the needs of the situation".

The formation of village education committees who will be the first owners of the primary school and to whom the educational system will be accountable is progressing. The VEC is the most critical actor in the DPEP programme. With responsibility for day-to-day management of the school, the performance of the VEC members will largely decide the effectiveness of the programme.

In many states, like Haryana and Karnataka, half the seats in the VEC are reserved for women. While all members of the VEC will be provided training on gender concerns, there are efforts on to involve the women members in closely monitoring classroom practices and teacher attitudes to pinpoint and address gender bias. They will also be asked to ensure girls attendance and participation in school. The performance of girls in achieving MLL competencies will also be monitored by the VEC, particularly the women members.

The setting up of Panchayati Raj institutions under the 73rd and 74th Amendment to the Constitution ensures decentralisation of authority right down to the village level. The VEC being a part of the wider Panchayati Raj framework will be able to hold the education system accountable. The involvement of women as decision makers in the Panchayati Raj institutions will also provide wider range of role models for girls and facilitate the process of empowering girls through education. The process of involving gender-sensitive resource persons and the local community is being conducted at multiple stages.

State-level and District-level Strategies

In Kerala, study sharing workshops have been conducted in all three DPEP districts and at the state level. The suggestions made by participants have been the foundation of the planning process. The district advisory committees which include a cross-section of civil

society studied the suggestions which came from the study-sharing workshops and proposed specific interventions tailored to the special needs of girls.

In addition, the DPEP is using the traditional meeting place of women in a village, the Grihasadas. With much of the attention already focussed on children's needs, it was easier to introduce the idea of equal access to education. Also called the Mathru Sangamam, the mother's meeting place idea is now being extended in all project districts in Kerala. In the study-sharing workshops, participants suggested the provision in transport to take girls to and from school. The opening of ashram schools for tribal girls was also mooted.

The Kerala project expects to involve child psychologists in school management, to better understand the needs of children, particularly girls. The efforts to improve the school environment are being supplemented by the supply of revised handbooks and workbooks. These provide a wider range of gender roles and also provide teachers with ideas on gender-sensitive classroom practices.

In Maharashtra, a new programme called the Mahila Prabodhan Programme (MPP), has been set up. Working to create a positive attitude towards girls, the MPP works through village level women's groups. Attempting to highlight the chain linking health, economic activities and education in the lives of women, the *sahayogini* or cluster community mobiliser works to rise awareness of the necessity for girls' education for an improved quality of life.

The *sahayoginis'* work is monitored by the *sanchalika* in every district. They are encouraged to innovate and try out new community mobilisation strategies. The work of the *sanchalikas* and the *sahayoginis* in the field is backed by the availability of source books in Marathi on women's empowerment and on gender sensitisation.

In the long term, the state Project office hopes to launch the mahila Samakhya programme in the Marathwada region, where all five DPEP districts are located.

Maharashtra has also set up a state-level gender resource group which will work with the project office to achieve DPEP objective of reducing gender disparities in enrolment, retention and learner achievement.

In Tamil Nadu, the state government has a broad-based programme of incentives for girl children. Aimed at changing the perception of parents towards girls, many of the incentives aim to encourage parents to enroll and keep girls in school.

The DPEP project in the state thus concentrates on complementing these programmes by interventions that will help identify never enrolled girls and girls who have dropped out and help them join an

educational programme.

Through school mapping exercises, efforts are on to identify areas with extremely low female enrollment and retention.

Compulsory registration of all school-age children is being taken up in one Panchayat union of each DPEP district. This innovation will be supported by the provision of local escorts for girls in every village. Strengthening of the mother-teacher councils is expected to create the necessary environment to keep girls in school. In addition, a state-level resource group has been set up to help the project team plan and implement strategies to facilitate girls' participation in the educational system.

In neighbouring Karnataka, the Mahila Samakhyā programme has been successfully operating in 5 districts of which Raichur district is also covered by DPEP.

The lessons learnt from the Mahila Samakhyā experience have proved useful in planning both state-level and district-level strategies and interventions. Based on the Appraisal Mission's recommendations and the results of the baseline and gender studies, the state project office has been working to improve retention rates and the achievement levels of girls, particularly those from socially and economically disadvantaged families.

The strategy-building exercise began with a study-sharing exercise in Mandya district. The suggestions made by experts and resource persons have been incorporated in the district and state plan, state-level gender resource team has been formed. In its first meeting, the group suggested incorporation of gender perspective in all training programmes rather than isolate the gender component.

In addition a gender monitoring cell has been set up which will meet every quarter. This cell will examine all DPEP interventions through a gender lens to learn if they have helped girls participate in education.

With the SCERT, Minimum Levels of Learning with gender equity are being developed. Also, supplementary learning material is being written and illustrated. This will remove gender bias and will also provide positive, progressive and diverse role models for both girls and boys.

In Karnataka, every DPEP district has come up with distinct ideas to eliminate special problems. Thus in Beigum and Kolar, survey of the needs of disabled girls is on. In Raichur, the survey of disabled girls' needs will be accompanied by a campaign to raise awareness of the need for education. The DIET in Mandya is creating a resource group on monitoring all interventions from gender perspective. In Kolar, lady inspectors are being appointed to supervise the progress

of DPEP especially in reducing disparities in access to educational opportunities between girls and boys. In Belgaum, district resource centre will also provide karate training to interested girls, as a means of developing feeling of self-worth.

In Raichur district where the Mahila Samakhya programme is operational, the Sakhis and Sahayoginis are also being involved as resource persons on training and community mobilisation,

Assam in the north-east of India faces a unique set of problems. While overt discrimination against girls is unknown, the retention rates of girls in school are extremely low. In addition, the TLCs are still being conducted in the state and their impact on enhanced demand for elementary education is still to be noticed.

The strategy to improve girls' participation in education is thus quite different in Assam. Other than the baseline and gender studies, the census data has been used to identify problem villages and blocks. The analysis of the census data by the state project office found wide variations within a district. The attempt is thus to ensure that intra-district and intra-block disparities are addressed and eliminated in phased manner.

The special problem areas like tea gardes, riverine areas and minority community enclaves are also being considered separately in the planning exercise. In these areas, where cultural or environmental factors are keeping girls out of school, special efforts are being made. The local moktas, or madarasa is being used in primary schooling centre.

In 12 villages of Baganbani block in Dhubri district which has a large shifting population, the concept of Shiksha Sevikas is being experimented with.

The Mahila Samakhya programme is being launched in one block in each of three DPEP districts as part of the effort to empower women and girls through education. Based on the Jag Jagi experience in Bihar, girl child festivals are being planned at the sub-district level.

All these ideas have been taken up after the study-sharing workshops which have been conducted in three districts. To keep the link between research, training and field experiences and to assess the progress of DPEP in improving the status of girls through education, between 20-30 per cent of the research allocation will be specifically tailored to projects on the needs of the girl child.

A state-level resource group has been set up to work with the project team on strategies to reduce gender disparities through DPEP.

Another venture to link women's empowerment with girl's education is being tried in the north Indian state of Haryana. To get mothers more involved in children's education, particularly the

education of their girls, it is proposed to ensure the presence of mothers in all future parent-teacher association meetings. In addition, mother-daughter fairs are being planned where films on girls education will be shown, children's literature with new role models will be displayed and there will be an opportunity for mothers and daughters to interact with other women and girls.

The effort to mainstream gender in every aspect of planning and implementation begins in the village. At least 50 per cent of the members of the Village Education Committee must be women in the state. Through the efforts of the VEC, the schools, particularly the lead school in every cluster is being viewed as a community centre for gender sensitisation of the community.

Gender Focus in DPEP Specific Interventions for Girls

The District Primary Education (DPEP) has been taken up in 42 districts of 7 States, all of which are educationally backward, with low levels of female literacy. The decentralised implementation plans include specific interventions for girls.

DPEP is a major initiative aimed at achieving the goals of UEE in a replicable, cost-effective and sustainable manner. The programme builds on the need to effectively reconstruct primary education, as a whole, instead of a piecemeal implementation of schemes. The major strengths of this programme are its sensitivity to local conditions rather than a rigid framework, the approach is contextual and is tailored to meet local situations and needs. Planning and management are decentralised and the emphasis is on involving local communities. A gender perspective has been incorporated in all aspects of planning and implementation, and is an integral part of the programme.

Programme goals include a specific focus on reduction of gender disparities in education, as reflected in lower enrolment, retention and achievement of girls, particularly those from socially and economically disadvantaged groups. The programme seeks to integrate all the measures needed to achieve UEE in the specific context of a district. The effort is to:

- Manage the process of bringing about change in the educational system.*

- *To make the educational system more sensitive and responsive to the needs of girls and women.*
- *To enable women to demand education for themselves and their daughters.*

Interventions for girl's education initiated under the programme include:

- *Alternative schooling.*
- *Flexible school timings to accommodate girls' needs.*
- *Residential schools.*

Gender-sensitive curricula and textbooks.

- *Recruitment of women teachers.*
- *Improved school buildings with toilets for girls.*
- *Educational incentives.*

Gender sensitisation for teachers and project managers.

Apart from these specific strategies designed to enhance girl's access, enrolment and retention in the school system, the programme recognises the crucial importance of enabling local communities, particularly women, to play an active role in every aspect of the programme:

- *Formation of village-level women's collectives and training of local women activists to catalyse collective actions around educational issues.*
- *Empowerment of local bodies such as Village Education Committees, Mother-Teacher Associations and women's groups, to enable them to take the responsibility for promoting education in their areas.*
- *Intensive capacity building for community and women's groups to focus on issues of education for girls.*
- *Involvement of the community and women's organisations in mobilisation and school management, and in monitoring enrolment, retention, levels of achievement and classroom transactions, with emphasis on girls.*
- *Mobilising informed and active participation at the local level to build and sustain an environment supportive to girls' education.*

A special training module has been designed to sensitise project managers, supervisors and education administrators on the importance of girls education and women's empowerment.

With 19 districts, Madhya Pradesh has the largest DPEP project in the country. Four major workshops have been conducted in the state in the last year to share relevant and specific strategies for girls education and women's empowerment. Beginning with an overview of the status of girls' education, the series of workshops focussed on the Mahila Samakhya experience; integration of ECCE with primary education. The last workshop in the series examined methods to integrate a gender sensitive approach in all training programmes.

These workshops also provided a pool of resource persons who could be called on to help the state or district-level project offices. A state-level gender core team has been constituted which meets six times a year. Monitoring progress of girl's education and providing support to the various project units is their primary task. Similar teams have also been set up in every district. These teams work closely with the state and district project officers in charge of girls education. The groups include educationists, NGOs, teachers, academics and members of the project team.

Mobilising women to advocate education as a pre-requisite for empowerment is a major concern in the state. The Mahila Samakhya programme has been launched in three DPEP districts. In every district, one block with low female literacy has been chosen.

One of the more interesting aspects of the Madhya Pradesh experience has been the concerted attempt at convergence of services. The health, women and child development, rural development, forests and water departments have all been tapped to address the difficulties which keep girls out of school.

The convergence of services at the community level is strengthened through the involvement of villagers. Community involvement is expected to create a sense of ownership for the programme and the internalisation of the strategies for girls education and women's empowerment. Women's conventions are organised in every district, block and village. The conventions provide the preliminary awareness of the need for girls' education. This is followed-up with back-to-school and enrolment drives.

The enrolment drives are supported by a series of initiatives to keep girls in school. The Shishu Shikshan Kendras serve a dual purpose. By caring for siblings in the 0-3 age group, they free girls from a major chore. At the same time, children are exposed to a learning environment at a very early age.

To cater to children with special needs, particularly girls - from

migrant families, drop-outs, never-enrolled, a system of alternative schooling has been developed.

The model developed in Madhya Pradesh is more flexible than the centrally-sponsored NFE programme. Here districts have the flexibility to choose their own teaching-learning material from the prescribed lists. The districts have the right to augment, supplement teaching-learning material to address local needs. School timings can be changed to suit the convenience of students. Vacation timing and schedule are also flexible. Some of the alternative schooling centres can also be exclusively for girls depending on local demand. These efforts are being supported by initiatives to strengthen the state and district level resource institutions.

Review of Interventions

The annual work plans which incorporate these strategies and interventions were reviewed at a National Workshop held in New Delhi on June 1 and 2, 1995. The two-day meeting allowed state project teams to interact with select resource persons, identify and address lacunae in planning and refine strategies to improve girls participation in the educational system.

What emerged was a confirmation that DPEP is a programme which has a clearly defined gender focus and seeks to reach out to out-of-school girls, especially those from socially and economically disadvantaged families. DPEP seeks to create an environment that is supportive of and accommodates the needs and priorities of the girl child. This vision of DPEP has also enabled ownership of the programme to vest with the local community. The communities can help evolve area-specific, contextual strategies and interventions to reduce gender disparities in enrolment, retention and learner achievement. At the same time the local communities can enforce public accountability of educational facilities at the local level.

The restructuring of primary education in the country through DPEP thus seeks to catalyse a significant improvement in human development indices and secure the future for every girl child. *