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Primary School Enrolment of Girls in India: Progress, Disparities and Challenges

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Abstract

Girls' enrollment in primary education is an important measure of educational inclusion, gender equality and human-capital development. There has been significant progress made in India in terms of constitutional and legal commitment, extensive public programmes, expansion of school infrastructure and efforts to increase the direct and indirect cost of schooling. However, gender parity at the national level can mask disparities in patterns of age-appropriate enrolment, school-management choice, state-level performance, retention rates, infrastructure limitations and household constraint. The study analyzes the progress, gender gaps and ongoing issues in girls' primary school enrolment in India on the basis of secondary data and published evidence up to 31 December 2024. The primary data source has been the Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) 2023-24, with support from the previous UDISE+ (2022-23), the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2022, evidence from the National Sample Survey, government policy documents and peer-reviewed literature. Data is analyzed using descriptive, comparative, ratio, trend and policy analyses. There were 51.62 million girls enrolled in primary school in 2023-24. The primary Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for girls was 94.3 and for boys was 91.8, with the Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) for girls being 80.6 and boys 77.5. Nevertheless there are significant interstate disparities and there was the school-management segmentation, with gender parity (c. 50.2%) in government schools, and less than parity (c. 44.0%) in private unaided recognised schools. The results show that India has largely addressed its basic national-level gender gap in primary enrolment, but it has yet to reach universal, age-appropriate, gender-equality and sustained participation. Policy going forward needs to shift from numerical parity to high-level parity in enrolment, attendance, retention, learning and transition.

Keywords: girls' education; primary education; school enrolment; gender parity; UDISE+; educational inequality; India; elementary education

Introduction

Girls' education has emerged as one of the most important dimensions of educational development and gender equality in India. Access to primary education strengthens individual capabilities, improves health awareness, enhances future economic opportunities and contributes to social empowerment. At the household and societal levels, the education of girls is also associated with better child welfare, reduced vulnerability and stronger intergenerational human-capital formation. Historically, however, girls in India faced multiple barriers to schooling arising from poverty,

household responsibilities, social norms, inadequate school infrastructure and unequal educational investment. Research has shown that parental education, household economic conditions, school availability, teacher deployment and public support programmes significantly influence girls' school participation (Drèze & Kingdon, 2001).

India has progressively strengthened the legal and policy framework for universal elementary education. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 established free and compulsory education as a statutory entitlement for children aged 6–14 years (Government of India, 2009). Programmes such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and, subsequently, Samagra Shiksha expanded school access, infrastructure and equity-oriented interventions, while school-meal programmes helped reduce the direct and indirect costs of schooling for economically weaker households. The National Education Policy 2020 further emphasised universal access, equity, foundational literacy and numeracy, and the reintegration of out-of-school children into formal education (Ministry of Human Resource Development [MHRD], 2020; Ministry of Education [MoE], 2022a). These initiatives have contributed significantly to the expansion of girls' primary education.

The progress achieved in India is also linked with international commitments to inclusive and equitable education. Sustainable Development Goal 4 seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all, while SDG 5 focuses specifically on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls (United Nations, 2015). These goals indicate that educational equality cannot be assessed merely by the number of children enrolled in school. Meaningful participation requires age-appropriate enrolment, regular attendance, retention, learning achievement and successful progression to higher educational stages. International research has similarly warned that high enrolment does not automatically indicate educational success if children attend irregularly, fail to acquire foundational competencies or leave school before completing the expected cycle (UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2018).

Recent official statistics demonstrate substantial progress in girls' primary-school participation in India. According to UDISE+ 2023–24, approximately 107.84 million pupils were enrolled at the primary stage, including around 51.62 million girls and 56.22 million boys (MoE, 2024b). Girls recorded a Gross Enrolment Ratio of 94.3 compared with 91.8 for boys, while the Net Enrolment Ratio stood at 80.6 for girls and 77.5 for boys. The corresponding Gender Parity Index based on GER was approximately 1.03. These figures indicate that the historical national-level gender gap in primary participation has narrowed considerably. However, the female NER remaining below universal coverage shows that gender parity should not be interpreted as the completion of universal primary education.

National averages also conceal important regional and institutional disparities. Primary enrolment ratios vary considerably across states, meaning that favourable gender parity may coexist with relatively low levels of overall participation in some regions. School-management data reveal another significant pattern, as girls constitute a larger proportion of enrolment in government

primary schools than in private unaided recognised schools. Earlier studies have suggested that household educational expenditure and school-sector choice can sometimes favour boys, especially where private schooling involves higher financial costs (Azam & Kingdon, 2013). Nevertheless, such differences should be interpreted cautiously because income, school availability, location, demographic composition and state-specific educational structures also influence household decisions regarding school choice.

The contemporary challenge therefore extends beyond bringing girls into school. High enrolment must be translated into age-appropriate participation, regular attendance, learning, retention and successful transition to subsequent stages. ASER 2022 reported very high enrolment among rural children aged 6–14, yet also documented significant deterioration in foundational learning following the COVID-19 disruption (ASER Centre, 2023). Similarly, UDISE+ data show major improvements in girls' toilets and electricity availability, but continuing gaps in functional facilities, digital access, computer availability and disability-friendly infrastructure (MoE, 2024b). These conditions indicate that formal enrolment is only one component of educational inclusion and that the quality and continuity of schooling remain equally important.

Against this background, the present study aims to examine the progress and current status of girls' primary-school enrolment in India using reliable secondary data available up to 31 December 2024. It seeks to analyse gender parity, age-appropriate participation, interstate and school-management disparities, dropout and retention patterns, and the role of school infrastructure and socioeconomic conditions in shaping girls' educational participation. The study also evaluates the continuing challenges and policy requirements for achieving universal and equitable primary education. Accordingly, it addresses the following questions: to what extent has India achieved gender parity and universal age-appropriate primary-school participation for girls; what regional and institutional disparities continue beneath national averages; how do retention, infrastructure and household conditions influence participation; and what policy interventions are required to move from numerical parity towards sustained, inclusive and meaningful educational participation?.

Literature Review

Foundational research on girls' education in India shows that school participation is shaped by a combination of household, social and institutional factors. Drèze and Kingdon (2001) found that parental education, household resources, work opportunities, social background, teacher availability, school meals and infrastructure significantly influenced girls' participation in rural north India. Kingdon (2007) later noted that although school access had expanded considerably, concerns regarding attendance, learning and public-school performance persisted. Katiyar (2016) similarly linked gender disparities in education with wider socioeconomic and regional inequalities, suggesting that the nature of educational disadvantage changes as basic school access improves.

Household allocation of educational resources remains an important dimension of gender inequality. Azam and Kingdon (2013) found evidence of pro-male bias in educational expenditure, particularly through school-sector choice, with families more likely to spend on private schooling

for sons while daughters were often enrolled in government schools. The disparity was more pronounced in rural areas. Kingdon (2020) further documented the rapid expansion of private schooling in India, indicating that gender differences in school choice may increasingly influence the quality and type of education received by boys and girls.

School-level interventions also play an important role in improving girls' participation. Adukia (2017) found that improved sanitation facilities increased enrolment, with separate toilets becoming especially significant for older girls. Afridi (2011) showed that cooked school meals improved attendance in lower grades, while Singh et al. (2014) highlighted the nutritional and social-protection benefits of the Midday Meal Scheme. Muralidharan and Sheth (2016) found that female teachers could improve girls' learning outcomes, whereas Muralidharan and Prakash (2017) demonstrated that Bihar's bicycle programme significantly increased girls' continuation into secondary education by reducing mobility constraints.

Social norms and household responsibilities also influence girls' educational trajectories. Beaman et al. (2012) demonstrated that exposure to female political leadership raised parental and adolescent aspirations and reduced gender gaps in educational attainment. UNICEF Innocenti (2024) further highlighted girls' greater involvement in unpaid domestic and caregiving work, which can reduce attendance, study time and educational engagement. Goel and Husain (2018) found that gender differences in dropout had narrowed across cohorts, but educational losses remained significant, particularly after the primary stage. These findings indicate that enrolment alone cannot fully capture the barriers faced by girls.

Research on school choice and learning further cautions against equating enrolment with educational quality. Singh (2015) found that private-school advantages in learning varied across subjects and contexts, while Singh and Sarkar (2015) emphasised the importance of teaching quality in both public and private schools. ASER 2022 reported very high school enrolment among rural children aged 6–14 but substantial declines in foundational reading and arithmetic compared with 2018 (ASER Centre, 2023). This supports the broader argument that educational progress must be assessed through learning, attendance and retention in addition to formal registration (World Bank, 2018).

International evidence also shows that aggregate gender parity can conceal inequalities associated with poverty, location, disability and other forms of disadvantage (UNESCO, 2020). Although the literature on girls' education in India is extensive, many influential studies rely on older datasets, focus on specific states or interventions, or examine only a limited set of indicators. The transition of UDISE+ to student-wise data from 2022–23 also creates a methodological break in the national series. The present study addresses this gap by combining UDISE+ 2023–24 data with household surveys and recent academic literature to examine enrolment, GER, NER, retention, school-management patterns and regional disparities in a more integrated manner.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive, analytical and comparative research design and is based entirely on secondary data. The analysis focuses mainly on the latest reliable national statistics available up to 31 December 2024, particularly UDISE+ 2022–23 and 2023–24, while earlier data are used for historical and policy context. Since UDISE+ shifted to individual student-wise data collection from 2022–23, earlier aggregate figures are not treated as directly comparable with the recent series (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2024b). The principal source of data is UDISE+ 2023–24, supplemented by UDISE+ 2022–23, ASER 2022, the National Sample Survey 75th Round on education, and relevant government policy documents including the Right to Education Act, National Education Policy 2020 and Samagra Shiksha framework (ASER Centre, 2023; MoE, 2024a, 2024b; National Statistical Office [NSO], 2020). Peer-reviewed studies and reports from recognised national and international institutions are used to support interpretation and discussion.

The study applies percentage analysis, gender ratios, descriptive statistics, trend comparison, regional comparison and thematic policy analysis. Girls' share in primary enrolment is calculated as the proportion of girls in total enrolment, while the Gender Parity Index is estimated by dividing female GER by male GER. A GPI value of 1 indicates parity, a value above 1 indicates a higher female GER, and a value below 1 indicates a higher male GER. Long-term CAGR is not calculated across the methodological break in UDISE+ data. The analysis is primarily descriptive and comparative; therefore, observed associations are not interpreted as causal relationships unless supported by appropriate evidence from previous empirical studies.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Girls' Primary-School Enrolment and Gender Composition

India had 107.84 million pupils enrolled at the primary stage in 2023–24, comprising 56.22 million boys and 51.62 million girls. Girls therefore accounted for about 47.87% of total primary enrolment (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2024b). This share below 50% should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of educational discrimination because the underlying male and female child populations are not numerically identical. Population-adjusted indicators such as the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) and Gender Parity Index (GPI) provide a more appropriate basis for assessing gender differences in participation.

Table 1. Primary-School Enrolment by Management and Sex, India, 2023–24

School management	Boys	Girls	Total	Girls' share (%)
Government	30,980,180	31,238,561	62,218,741	50.21
Government aided	2,512,851	2,498,468	5,011,319	49.86
Private unaided recognised	21,108,522	16,549,832	37,658,354	43.95

Other schools	1,618,787	1,330,510	2,949,297	45.11
All schools	**56,220,340**	**51,617,371**	**107,837,711**	**47.87**

Source: Author's calculations based on Ministry of Education, UDISE+ 2023–24 Existing Structure.

School-management data reveal an important form of institutional disparity. Girls constituted slightly more than half of primary enrolment in government schools but only about 44% in private unaided recognised schools. This pattern is consistent with earlier evidence that household educational expenditure and school-sector choice may favour sons when private education requires greater expenditure (Azam & Kingdon, 2013). However, the difference should not be attributed solely to gender discrimination because income, school availability, location, fees, demographic composition and state-specific patterns also influence school choice. The evidence nevertheless indicates that overall gender parity can coexist with differences in the type of institution attended by boys and girls.

Enrolment Ratios, Gender Parity and Age-Appropriate Participation

National participation indicators present a comparatively favourable picture for girls. In 2023–24, girls recorded a primary GER of 94.3 compared with 91.8 for boys. Their NER was 80.6 compared with 77.5 for boys, while the Adjusted Net Enrolment Ratio (ANER) was 88.0 for girls and 84.1 for boys. Girls also had a lower primary dropout rate of 1.7% compared with 2.1% for boys and a marginally higher retention rate of 85.7% compared with 85.1% (MoE, 2024b).

Table 2. Selected Primary-Education Indicators by Sex, India, 2023–24 (%)

Indicator	Boys	Girls	Total
Gross Enrolment Ratio	91.8	94.3	93.0
Net Enrolment Ratio	77.5	80.6	79.0
Adjusted Net Enrolment Ratio	84.1	88.0	85.9
Dropout rate	2.1	1.7	1.9
Retention rate, Class I–V	85.1	85.7	85.4

Source: Ministry of Education, UDISE+ 2023–24 Existing Structure.

The female-to-male GER ratio was approximately 1.03, indicating that the traditional national-level gender disadvantage in primary participation has largely narrowed. Girls exceeded boys by 2.5 percentage points in GER and 3.1 percentage points in NER. However, gender parity should not be confused with universal participation. GER includes children enrolled at the primary stage irrespective of age and can therefore exceed 100, whereas NER measures children of the official primary-school age enrolled at that stage. ANER additionally includes official-age children who

have already progressed to a higher educational level. Consequently, the female NER of 80.6 and ANER of 88.0 indicate that age-appropriate participation remains incomplete even though girls perform slightly better than boys on national ratios.

Recent movement in the indicators also requires careful interpretation. Primary GER declined from approximately 96.2 in 2022–23 to 93.0 in 2023–24, while total primary enrolment fell from about 112.42 million to 107.84 million. These changes should not automatically be interpreted as dropout because demographic change, cohort size, age-grade alignment, migration and improvements in student-level data validation may also affect administrative totals. The evidence therefore suggests that India has reached substantial gender parity, but universal and age-appropriate participation remains unfinished.

Regional Disparities in Girls' Enrolment

National averages conceal considerable geographical variation. In 2023–24, girls' primary GER was 82.5 in Gujarat, 84.0 in Uttar Pradesh and 84.4 in Bihar, compared with 97.1 in Tamil Nadu, 113.8 in Assam and 112.6 in Telangana. In each of these selected states, girls' GER exceeded that of boys, but the absolute level of participation varied widely.

Table 3. Primary GER in Selected States, 2023–24 (%)

State/India	Boys	Girls	Total	Female-to-male GER ratio
India	91.8	94.3	93.0	1.027
Gujarat	78.7	82.5	80.4	1.048
Uttar Pradesh	82.0	84.0	82.9	1.024
Bihar	82.5	84.4	83.4	1.023
Tamil Nadu	94.6	97.1	95.8	1.026
Assam	107.6	113.8	110.5	1.058
Telangana	110.0	112.6	111.2	1.024

Source: Ministry of Education, UDISE+ 2023–24 Existing Structure; ratios calculated by the author.

These figures demonstrate that gender parity and universal participation are separate policy issues. A state may record a favourable GPI while both boys and girls remain below desirable enrolment levels. Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar illustrate this form of relatively low-level parity. Conversely, GER values exceeding 100 in Assam and Telangana do not mean that more than 100% of eligible children are enrolled; they usually reflect over-age or under-age participation and differences between enrolment counts and estimated official-age populations.

Regional inequalities therefore require more attention than national gender averages alone. Poverty, geographical remoteness, migration, school accessibility, language, disability and differences in state educational systems can influence attendance and progression even when the female-to-male enrolment ratio appears favourable. Aggregate national statistics may therefore conceal substantial district- and subgroup-level disadvantage.

Household Evidence, Retention and Learning

Household surveys provide an important complement to administrative data. ASER 2022 reported that the proportion of rural children aged 6–14 enrolled in school increased from 97.2% in 2018 to 98.4% in 2022. Government-school enrolment among children in this age group increased from 65.6% to 72.9%. Among girls aged 11–14, the proportion not enrolled declined from 4.1% to 2.0%, while among girls aged 15–16 it declined from 13.5% to 7.9% (ASER Centre, 2023).

Table 4. Selected Rural School-Participation Indicators, 2018 and 2022

Indicator	2018 (%)	2022 (%)	Change (percentage points)
Children aged 6–14 enrolled in school	97.2	98.4	+1.2
Children aged 6–14 enrolled in government school	65.6	72.9	+7.3
Girls aged 11–14 not enrolled	4.1	2.0	−2.1
Girls aged 15–16 not enrolled	13.5	7.9	−5.6

Source: ASER Centre, Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2022.

The apparently higher ASER enrolment rate should not be treated as contradictory to the lower UDISE+ primary NER because the two indicators measure different concepts. ASER records whether rural children aged 6–14 are enrolled anywhere in school, whereas NER measures official primary-age children enrolled specifically at the primary stage. Delayed entry, repetition or early advancement can therefore produce a high general enrolment rate alongside a lower primary NER.

Retention data similarly suggest that the contemporary problem has shifted from initial access towards sustained progression. Girls' primary dropout rate of 1.7% was below the male rate, while their retention rate was slightly higher. However, the overall primary retention rate of 85.4% and the primary-to-upper-primary transition rate of 88.8% show that not all children who enter the system progress smoothly through it. For girls, household responsibilities, safety, distance and mobility constraints may become increasingly important as they move towards upper-primary and secondary stages.

Learning outcomes further qualify the positive enrolment picture. ASER 2022 found that while rural enrolment remained exceptionally high, the proportion of Class III children able to read a

Class II-level text declined from 27.3% in 2018 to 20.5% in 2022. This illustrates that enrolment alone cannot be regarded as sufficient evidence of educational progress. Continued participation must be accompanied by foundational learning if enrolment is to translate into meaningful educational advancement.

Infrastructure and Conditions Supporting Girls' Participation

School infrastructure has improved considerably, particularly in relation to sanitation and electricity. UDISE+ 2023–24 recorded 1,471,891 schools, of which 96.4% reported girls' toilets and 92.9% functional girls' toilets. Electricity was available in 91.8% of schools and functional in 89.7%. However, only 57.2% reported computer facilities, 53.9% internet facilities and 34.4% toilets for Children with Special Needs (CWSN).

Table 5. Selected School Infrastructure Indicators, India, 2023–24

Facility	Schools reporting facility	Share of all schools (%)
Girls' toilet	1,419,242	96.4
Functional girls' toilet	1,366,750	92.9
Electricity connection	1,350,813	91.8
Functional electricity	1,319,792	89.7
Computer facility	841,327	57.2
Functional computer for pedagogical purposes	748,918	50.9
Internet facility	792,992	53.9
CWSN toilet facility	506,695	34.4

Note: Percentages are based on 1,471,891 schools. CWSN refers to Children with Special Needs.

Source: Ministry of Education, UDISE+ 2023–24 Existing Structure.

The difference between reported girls' toilets and functional girls' toilets indicates that infrastructure policy must focus increasingly on maintenance and usability rather than construction alone. Adukia (2017) demonstrated that sanitation can influence enrolment and participation, particularly for girls, making functional facilities relevant to retention as well as school access. Digital infrastructure represents a newer form of inequality, as approximately half of schools lacked internet or functional pedagogical computers. The particularly low availability of CWSN toilets also highlights an intersectional challenge for girls with disabilities.

Major Findings

The analysis shows substantial improvement in gender parity in primary education. In 2023–24, girls recorded a GER of 94.3 and NER of 80.6, higher than the corresponding male figures of 91.8 and 77.5, while the GER-based GPI was about 1.03. However, universal age-appropriate participation has not yet been achieved, as girls' NER and ANER of 88.0 remain below full coverage. Around 51.62 million girls were enrolled at the primary level, accounting for 47.87% of total pupils.

Important disparities persist across institutions and regions. Girls constituted about 50.2% of government primary-school enrolment but only 44.0% in private unaided schools. Female GER also varied widely across states, from the low-to-mid 80s in Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar to above 110 in Assam and Telangana. Girls' dropout rate was lower than that of boys, and retention was slightly higher. Despite major improvements in sanitation and electricity, gaps remain in digital access and disability-friendly infrastructure. Overall, the challenge has shifted from simple enrolment expansion towards ensuring age-appropriate participation, retention, learning, inclusion and successful transition to higher levels of education.

Recommendations

Policy should move beyond numerical gender parity and focus on universal, age-appropriate, sustained and meaningful participation of girls in primary education. National and state monitoring systems should combine GER and GPI with NER, attendance, retention, dropout, transition and learning indicators. District-level identification of girls who are not age-appropriately enrolled should receive priority, particularly among migrant households, remote communities and children with disabilities. School infrastructure policy should emphasise functionality rather than mere availability. Regular audits of girls' toilets, drinking water, electricity, disability-access facilities and digital connectivity are needed, together with remedial support for children experiencing learning difficulties. Government-school quality requires special attention because girls form a substantial share of public-school enrolment. Improvements in teacher availability, classroom practices, school leadership and foundational learning should therefore be treated as essential components of gender equity.

States should also strengthen girls' transition from primary to upper-primary and secondary education through safe transport, bicycles where appropriate, nearby schooling facilities and residential support in remote areas. School meals and nutrition programmes should continue for vulnerable households, while educational policy should be coordinated with social protection and measures that reduce girls' unpaid domestic responsibilities.

Conclusion

The study shows that India has made substantial progress in reducing the traditional gender gap in primary education. In 2023–24, about 51.62 million girls were enrolled at the primary stage, while their GER of 94.3 and NER of 80.6 exceeded the corresponding male figures of 91.8 and 77.5. Girls also recorded a lower primary dropout rate than boys. These indicators confirm that national

gender parity has largely been achieved, but they do not demonstrate universal age-appropriate participation. Significant inequalities remain beneath national averages. Female enrolment varies considerably across states, and girls are much more strongly represented in government schools than in private unaided schools. Infrastructure, household responsibilities, disability, school quality and transition difficulties also continue to shape educational opportunities. High enrolment therefore cannot be equated automatically with sustained attendance, learning or completion.

The central policy challenge is consequently to move from an access-and-parity approach towards a framework centred on universal participation, retention, learning and successful progression. Future success should be judged not merely by whether girls match boys in enrolment ratios, but by whether every girl can enter school at the appropriate age, attend regularly, acquire foundational skills, complete primary education and continue to higher stages without avoidable social, economic or institutional barriers.

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