



# Supporting Gender-sensitive Higher Education Access and Choice in Haryana, India: Policy Brief

## **Empowering young women – and young men through quality higher education (HE)**

Quality education is recognised in the UN's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 as essential for upward socio-economic mobility and as a critical element in escaping poverty. It helps to reduce inequalities and improve gender equality. It fosters more tolerant and peaceful societies. Prior to Covid-19, enrolment in educational institutions, particularly for young women, was growing steadily across much of the world. SDG 4 seeks equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university, and to eliminate gender disparities and ensure equal access to all levels of education for vulnerable groups. SDG 5 promotes gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls at all levels.

These aspirations are shared by India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (MHRD 2020) which highlights the role played by HE 'in promoting human as well as societal wellbeing and in developing India as envisioned in its Constitution—a democratic, just, socially conscious, cultured, and humane nation upholding liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice for all' (MHRD 2020: 9.1). HE offers 'personal accomplishment' and 'productive contribution' to society (MHRD 2020: 9.1.1.). As India moves towards becoming a knowledge economy and society, many more young people are aspiring to HE.

The NEP 2020 recognises the need for increased access, equity, and inclusion through a range of measures including greater opportunities for outstanding public education and that students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds require encouragement and support to make a successful transition to HE.

## **A major challenge – gender inequality**

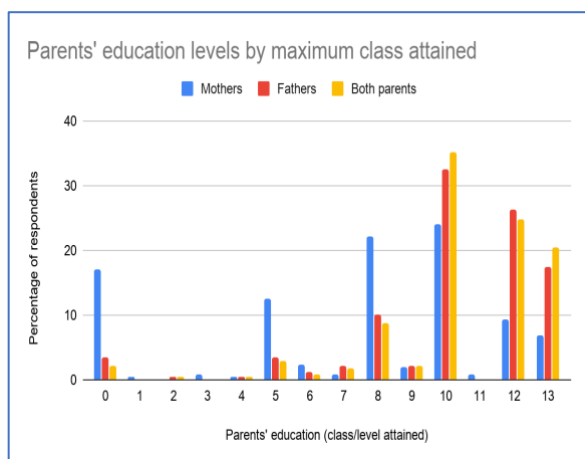
There is a *new generation of young people entering HE in India*. Many of these young people come from families and communities where there is little or no prior experience of HE, or of higher levels of secondary schooling. Choices about HE are being made without access to sufficient or accurate information. While gender parity of enrolment has been achieved, gender inequalities persist, for example in relation the choice of institution and courses. Gender influences the expectations and experiences of all young people, whenever and wherever decisions are being made about accessing HE, in Haryana and in India more widely.

This policy brief sets out the specific challenges relating to gendered barriers faced by young people and their families. It goes on to explore the ways in which HE institutions can take the lead in supporting new generations of young women and men to make informed choices about what is best for them, so that they can become active and engaged citizens who contribute fully to national development.

## **Challenges faced by families in educational decision-making**

Families play a key role in educational decision-making about HE futures of young people. In Haryana, gender influences many aspects of family decision-making about HE (Sahu et al. 2017, Mukhopadhyay 2019): whether and how a young person is able to go on to study; who is listened to and relied upon for information; choices of institution particularly their location; how family resources are assessed to support young people's study; and what the desired outcome of a university education may be.

*Lack of resources faced by families from lower socio-economic backgrounds (financial and college-going knowledge):* Fathers, mothers and other relatives are increasingly encouraging their children to take up HE opportunities. But parents (particularly single parents) generally do not have the resources (which are acquired through higher levels of education or through employment in professional occupations) to help them make informed choices about HE. They may not have personal experience or access to reliable sources of information; and their communities may have conservative views on gender. They also have limited financial resources.



**Figure 1:** Parents' education levels by maximum class attained among students in sampled Haryana government colleges

**Source:** (Henderson et al. 2021, p 21)

**Note:** '13' signifies any higher or further education attained beyond class 12.

*Gender conservatism in educational decision-making:* Parents seek advice from many sources within extended family networks, including older children, but also from colleagues, teachers, proprietors of cyber-cafes/internet shops. Parents may be particularly sensitive to neighbourhood rumour and hearsay about the value of and behaviour in HE institutions. They do not want their daughters' reputation undermined. They may be fearful of their daughters and sons leaving a local area which is familiar to them and in which they think they can, to some extent, control behaviour.

### **Gender conservatism: marriage and jobs**

Young men may prefer employment over HE, particularly seeking government posts, in the military, or relating to sport (in Haryana). They face pressure to 'skip' HE to earn immediately and contribute to siblings' weddings and education and/or to prepare for their own marriage. For young women, HE can support conservative assumptions relating to marriageability, rather than be valued for the wider social and economic opportunities it offers. The challenge is to ensure that the advantages (social and economic) of HE are fully appreciated by young people and their families in decision-making processes.

Families make choices about the feasibility and value of HE based upon practicalities and assumptions, which are different for daughters and sons, relating to commutability, i.e. the ability to negotiate the time taken to reach college, distance to travel, forms of transport and concerns of safety while travelling to college.

The proximity to home of rural and semi-urban colleges can be significant in encouraging students, particularly from socially and economically disadvantaged communities in rural locations, to access HE. But such considerations of commutability can also constrain educational aspiration and choice.

### **Supporting young people and their families in decision-making**

Making informed decisions is challenging for family members when they lack reliable sources

of information. There is little *informed publicly provided support* available to families. Young people struggle with navigating admission processes. They use informal means to gather information about HE because specific institutional sources of information are not produced. They are not able to rely on institutional resources, such as websites, teachers, or college staff. Lacking access to a computer at home, they use cyber cafes to assist them. This advice may not be based on reliable and informed sources of information. The advice can reflect or reinforce the conservative gender values of the local communities.

### **Government colleges are very important**

Government colleges are key institutions providing HE to young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds and/or rural or semi-urban areas (Varghese et al. 2019, Tierney and Sabharwal 2016). They have lower fees than other institutions (such as private colleges) and thus are more affordable. Local colleges, where provided, enable students to study nearer home thereby avoiding hostel fees. However, there is still an urban bias in the location of public and private HEIs (Varghese et al. 2018). In areas where there are low levels of community knowledge about HE, government colleges can serve as knowledge hubs within local areas.

*Limited awareness of their own potential to serve as HE knowledge hubs:* Currently, government colleges have limited interactions with the local areas in which they are situated. There is a reliance on formal mechanisms of recruitment, on the reservations policy and other state schemes (e.g., no fees for women) to ensure equality of access. There is limited information released about the colleges through, for example, web pages or brochures. Young people are making decisions often without setting foot in a college, reinforcing the influence of informal sources of information and increasing the likelihood of receiving unreliable information about college processes including admissions.

This also results in gendered inequalities: for example, more young men have direct access to outside sources of knowledge, such as internet cafes, than young women who must send a brother or other relative or be accompanied by a chaperone.

### **Consequences**

Young women as well as young men from disadvantaged backgrounds are now aspiring to and accessing HE. While there may be gender parity, there are still many gender-based assumptions which affect the choices available to and made by both young women and young men (Henderson, Sabharwal and Thomas, submitted). They lack access to informed, gender-sensitive information and support. This leads to gendered inequalities of opportunities and a reduction in life chances, particularly for young women.

Families of potential first generation HE students want to be – and are already – involved in every stage of the educational experiences and expectations of young women and men. Recognising the need for and providing support to all members of families to make informed decisions about HE will widen educational opportunities for young people and contribute to gender-sensitive and inclusive policy making on HE.

Government colleges are facilitating educational choices and access for first generation learners, but they have the potential to play a greater role in the communities where they are located, to provide greater information and promote gender-sensitive decision-making in families. Colleges can develop and implement measures designed to widen access (*see the blue textbox on page 5 and the Outreach Activity Resource referred to on page 6 of this policy brief*). With financial support from state funding bodies, and assistance with developing this role, colleges can become even more important agents of change.

### **Strategies for consideration**

To support the NEP 2020 widening participation objectives, **state-level policy makers** can:

***Address challenges of gender inclusion in HE expansion*** by developing and adopting gender audits (Halvorsen 2019) to assist policy making on inclusive HE expansion.

***Address challenges faced by families and young people*** in making informed choices through provision of good quality publicly accessible information.



This can be achieved by

- a. providing this information to community groups and to schools to address the need of families to have access to readily available information about school choice, HE choice (including on subjects), and job prospects. Importantly, this should cover aspirational educational trajectories for all young people, and in particular offer young women positive options and futures.
- b. ensuring that state-funded educational schemes and interventions are more widely publicised, e.g., producing short videos/podcasts on the range of HEIs, including their facilities and courses, and the range of supportive measures available.
- c. supporting HEIs to organise consultation with young people and different stakeholders in the community, thereby connecting families, schools and colleges.
- d. connecting *Anganwadi* workers and other localised services with schools and colleges to promote informed educational choices from an early age.

**Address challenges of commutability.**

This can be achieved by the Department of Higher Education

- a. further liaising with the Department of Transport and Infrastructure, students and colleges to consult on bus routes, bus stand locations and bus requirements for college access (e.g., to ensure that bus personnel are trusted by families and provide a positive environment for women students; continued maintenance of donated buses), and treat consultation with students and mapping of the catchment area as *essential* in this process.
- b. considering provision of more colleges where there are no colleges within an appropriate catchment area: 1 hour of travel and/or 70-100km distant from students' homes. In the absence of nearby colleges, ensure that good, safe, affordable, and quality hostel facilities are available as an alternative to long commutes.

**Address challenges of supporting good quality local HE provision, particularly for first generation HE learners.**

This can be achieved by

- a. providing sufficient funding and resources to further develop *the role of local colleges* to recruit high-quality teachers on permanent contracts; maintain and develop facilities; develop a high-quality offer for students (e.g., extra activities, prizes and scholarships); in line with the NEP, develop greater institutional autonomy to facilitate and expand outreach activities dedicated to HE access and choice.

To recognise the importance of **local colleges** as potential agents of change, **college principals and HE teachers** can:

**Address challenges faced by families and young people in making informed choices.**

This can be achieved by colleges

- a. engaging with families more directly, recognising the impact on decision-making of the relationships between young people and the various members of their family and that young people accessing HE need both emotional as well as informed support from their families.
- b. building a more public (and attractive for students and their families) presence in catchment areas: through regular visits to, or even 'adopting' villages to increase understanding of and trust in HE, and consultation between college teachers and local leaders, such as village sarpanches, in local communities.
- c. undertaking guided visits of the colleges for students and their families.
- d. liaising with schools to ensure that young people are receiving the information they need and that young people are aware of their options.
- e. formalising the role of student ambassador (in colleges): to support HE information dissemination in their communities and schools; and guided visits to the college.

- f. developing an outreach office with responsibility for overseeing and conducting all outreach activities. Such activities could include working with student ambassadors and their equivalents in schools; producing materials (e.g., short videos on facilities and courses; leaflets; newsletters) and actively supporting information and marketing campaigns via different channels including those used by young people (social media) and those used by family members (newspapers, television, radio); liaising with local internet cafes to ensure that young people applying from these settings have access to up-to-date information; overseeing admissions process; training personnel involved to be informative and welcoming to applicants and their families; providing step-by-step guidance and ensure wide availability of the guidance (online, at schools, internet cafes, college itself) particularly assisting unsupported young people who are making decisions about HE; using college ambassadors (in collaboration with schools) to provide support on applications (see the *Outreach Activity Resource referred to on page 6 of this policy brief*).

skill training at school to enable them to be more involved in discussions of their futures within the family. Schools can recognise the potential contribution of *student ambassadors*. They can organise for students and their families to attend *school-based fairs* with colleges, providing information 'help desks'.

#### **Improving informed decision-making: a government college 'taster' day**

A co-ed government college in rural Haryana organised a 'Taster Day' for the students of nearby government schools to allow high school students to experience the atmosphere of a college; to give students access to important information on how to access college (admission, application forms, fees, documents needed), what courses are available in this college, what scholarships can students apply for as well as what facilities are available to students upon enrolling (NCC, NSS, Sports, Computers). The majority of students said it helped them in choosing the right course for them and completing the admission process without errors.

To recognise the importance of schools in supporting informed and gender-sensitive decision-making by young people and their families, **schools** can:

#### **Address challenges faced by young people (and their family members) in making informed choices.**

This can be achieved by

- a. supporting schools to designate a specific member of staff to collaborate with the college outreach office and ambassadors to facilitate dissemination of reliable, accurate information about HE options to young people and, where possible, their communities.
- b. provide *counselling* for students, at appropriate times e.g., well before public school examinations, to provide young people with awareness of their HE options; encourage them to identify reliable sources of information including on the range of support available. Schools should be aware that young women need to receive negotiation

#### **Conclusion**

Access to HE is unequal and based on gendered inequalities, which are often mediated at home as families are involved in making educational decisions. This gendered inequality based on socio-cultural gender conservatism is simultaneously influenced by social class, caste, religion and regional inequalities. Policy makers, schools and HEIs, especially government colleges, can make positive contributions to enhance how families and students make informed choices to access HE through outreach activities and community engagement. This will help students, families and communities to overcome different kinds of social and economic deprivations, gain personal achievements and productively contribute towards society.

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This Policy Brief is accompanied by an Outreach Activity Resource which provides guidance for colleges on conducting an HE outreach event [[https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/law/research/projects/rlaaa3083/output/fair\\_chance\\_for\\_education\\_outreach\\_activity\\_resource\\_published.pdf](https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/law/research/projects/rlaaa3083/output/fair_chance_for_education_outreach_activity_resource_published.pdf)]