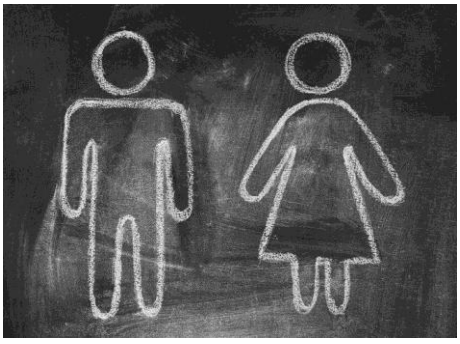
GrOW G2E

Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women
Pathways for Shared Prosperity

POLICY BRIEF

GENDER BIAS IN SCHOOL CHOICE

In India, despite the narrowing gender gap in enrollment, boys still have better access to private schools.



Overview

There has been a huge surge in private schooling in developing countries over the last two decades. In many countries, the quality of education is perceived to be better in private schools than in government schools. Households therefore increasingly prefer private schooling for their children. However, private schools, while better in quality, charge higher fees than government schools. This raises the concern that private schools may not be equitable in access for children from economically backward or socially disadvantaged groups. Even within the same household, gender disparity in educational investment may manifest through enrollment in private schools by boys while girls are sent to government schools. Such sorting by gender impedes one of the targets of UN's Sustainable Development Goals, which seeks to ensure that all boys and girls have access to free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education.

Key Results

- There is a significant gender gap in private school enrollment among school-age children.
- While overall enrollment rates of boys and girls have converged over time, gender disparity in school choice has a persistent trend.
- A larger cost-difference between private and government schools leads to a widening of the gender gap.

By

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The Growth to Empowerment (G2E) program within GrOW examines the impact of economic growth on women's economic empowerment.

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Background

The last few decades have seen major policy focus by both national and international actors to improve access to education. The Millennium Development Goals envisaged universal primary education and the elimination of gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2015. Gender parity was also one of the six goals of the global "Education for All" program led by UNESCO. In India, some major government initiatives like Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (Education for All) aimed to universalize elementary education and to reduce disparity across regions, gender, and social groups.

While the Indian government provided free education and improved enrollment rates at the elementary levels, the quality of education did not improve. With economic liberalization and growth in the services sector came greater demand for a skilled labor force. The inability of the government schools to deliver high quality education led to a mushrooming of schools established by private providers. Various studies show that while quality varies across private schools, they are usually perceived by families to be better than government schools. Unlike government schools, private schools charge fees; and are more expensive due to the cost of books, school uniforms, etc.

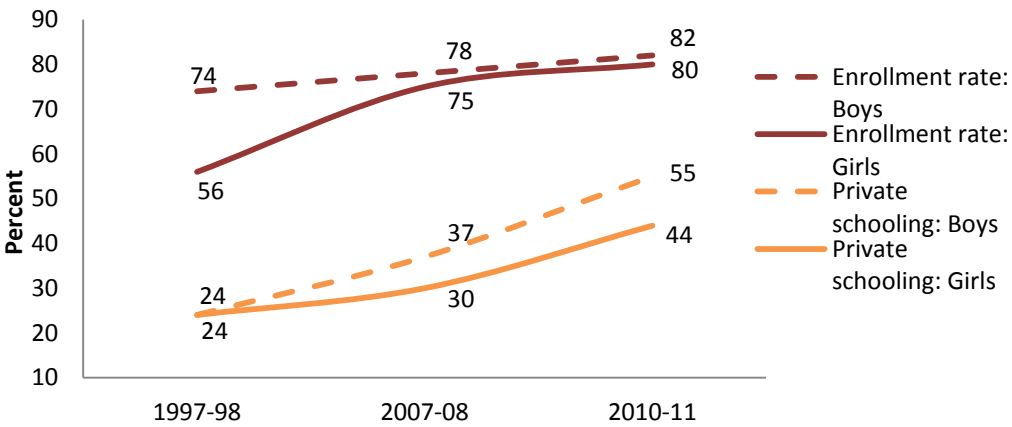
Due to prevailing cultural norms such as a patrilocal residence system, and low labor force participation of women in India, households tend to invest less in girls' education compared with boys. Recently, however, there has been substantial growth in enrollment rates where girls are catching up with boys. Despite this progress, some recent studies find that a pro-male gender bias in families' allocation of education expenditure continues to persist. In our study, we specifically test the hypothesis that the prevalence of this inequality arises from the choice of schools.

Methods and Data

The study uses longitudinal data on rural households at three time points in Uttar Pradesh, a northern state of India. The first round survey was done by the World Bank's Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS) in 1997-98. The same set of households was re-surveyed in 2007-08 and again in 2010-11 by the author. The data consist of detailed information on villages, households, and individuals including their demographics and education status. The study focused on children in the 6-16 year age group from each survey to analyze school choice decisions.

For any study that aims to detect within-household gender bias in resource allocation, it is imperative to consider that households have varied preferences which are often not observable. It is a well-known fact that there is a strong preference for sons over daughters in the Indian society. Girls systematically end up in larger families because parents adjust their fertility behavior given their desire to have at least one son. A comparison between boys and girls across all households may show gender gaps even in the absence of discrimination simply because girls belong to larger families where fewer resources are spent per child. The study therefore employs various regression and econometric methods, such as household fixed effects, to take into account unobserved household differences and examine intra-household gender disparity in school choice decision. Essentially, we investigate how the probability of enrolling in a private school vis-à-vis government school varies between boys and girls keeping all other factors unchanged. We further analyze the extent to which the relative cost of private versus government schooling explains gender differences in school choice.

Figure 1. Trends in overall enrollment and private school choice for boys and girls



Main Results

- **Pro-male bias.** There is a substantial pro-male bias in the choice of private vis-à-vis government schools for children in the school going age-group. The gender gap is significant for both primary and post-primary school-aged children.
- **The gender gap remains.** While the gap in overall enrollment has diminished, gender disparity in school choice perpetuates over time. Figure 1 shows that enrollment rates of boys and girls have converged over time, which is however not the case for private school choice. In 1997-98, when fewer children attended private schools, boys and girls were equally likely to be enrolled in these schools. As private schooling has increased over time, the gender gap in school choice has become starker. In 2010-11, there is about a 10 percentage point difference in the probability of private school enrollment between boys and girls.

- **Cost plays a role.** A larger cost difference between private and government schools leads to a widening of the gender gap. Because private schools are more expensive than government schools households are reluctant to send girls to private schools. The difference in average cost between the two types of schools explains more than 80 percent of the gender gap. We also find that households face a trade-off between quality and cost. As the relative quality of private schools (in comparison with government schools) increases, households tend to enroll girls along with boys in private schools. However, with better quality comes higher cost, which discourages them from enrolling girls in better quality private schools.

Policy Lessons

- Given the inadequacy of the existing government schooling system to improve the quality of education, expansion of private schooling is considered a more efficient way forward. However, if the upward trend in female education is driven by the provision of free public schooling, unregulated expansion of private schools may deprive girls of good quality education.
- Since improving the quality of government schools is seemingly a daunting goal, some researchers suggest public-private-partnership models as a feasible alternative. The design of such policies needs to pay special emphasis on gender inclusiveness and ensure that girls get equal educational opportunities as boys.

Further Reading

Sahoo, Soham (2016). “Intra-Household Gender Disparity in School Choice: Evidence from Private Schooling in India”, *Journal of Development Studies*, 1-17. https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2016.1265943

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The **GrOW initiative** funds 14 research projects aimed to empower women to participate in economic activities, providing evidence that can inform social and economic policies to improve poor women's lives, while promoting economic growth.

Research Project – G2E (Growth to Empowerment) is a project of the GrOW initiative: Pathways for shared prosperity: Understanding the links between women's economic empowerment and growth.

Information
https://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/532926.html

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