

Improved access to education for girls is building a new India



On International Women's Day, as we celebrate the march of women towards equality in social, economic, cultural and political fields, I recall PM Narendra Modi's words that are a guiding principle for our policies: "Daughters are not a burden but the pride of the whole family. We realise the power of our daughters when we see a woman fighter pilot...when our daughters bag gold medals or for that matter any medal in Olympics."

As a father to three daughters, I understand the struggle women face in fighting gender stereotypes and bias, but also feel proud to see them overcome hurdles with strong determination. My eldest daughter Arushi is an Indian classical dancer, entrepreneur and film producer. Shreyasi continued the military tradition of Uttarakhand and joined the Army Medical Corps. Vidushi, the youngest, is committed to change in society and is a gold medalist in law.

The year 2020 is earmarked as a crucial year by UN Women to assess progress made globally on gender equality and human rights for all women since the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action. In tune with this year's theme of IWD, "I am Generation Equality: Realising Women's Rights", HRD ministry is playing a pivotal role in providing equal opportunities to women and better access to education.

"Due to lack of toilets, many girls had to drop out from schooling midway. Our daughters want to study, but the lack of toilets had forced them to drop out," the Prime Minister had said on being presented Goalkeepers Global Goal Award 2019 by Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM). Under SBM, 14,67,679 schools now have functional girls toilets, an increase of 4.17 percentage points in comparison to 2013-14. There

is an increase in enrolment of girls by 25 percentage points in 2018-19 in comparison to 2013-14 across all levels.

In her Budget speech, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman commended progress in gross enrolment ratio of girls in comparison to boys. "Gross enrolment ratio of girls across all levels of education is now higher than boys. MHRD has sanctioned 5,930 Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas which are residential schools for girls and have an enrolment of 6.18 lakh girls. Incentive amount of Rs 8.56 crore to the 28,547 beneficiaries girls has been sanctioned under National Scheme of Incentives. The scheme provides Rs 3,000 deposited in the name of eligible unmarried girls below 16 years and entitles them to withdraw it along with interest on reaching 18 after passing class X.

Further, under the "Udaan" scheme girl students of class XI and XII are provided with free online resources by CBSE for the preparation of admission tests for the premier engineering colleges in the country. The ministry aims to cover all government schools with girl enrolment with sanitary pad vending machines and incinerators in subsequent years.

MHRD has been playing a vital reform role for 'imprinting' equal gender notions along with providing equal access to education at school and higher education level. Presently, there are 16 universities exclusively for women, three in Rajasthan, two in Tamil Nadu & one each in Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Delhi, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Odisha, Uttarakhand and West Bengal. As per All India Survey of Higher Education report 2018-19, the total enrolment in higher education has been estimated 37.4 million with 19.2 million male and 18.2 million female students. Female students constitute 48.6% of the total enrolment, an increase of 4.6% in the past six years across all levels in Higher Education.

To increase the participation of women in STEM education, supernumerary seats have been created in IITs & NITs. As a result of creation of supernumerary seats in IITs and NITs, the total number of girls in NITs, has grown from 14.17% in 2017-18 to 17.53% in 2019-20 and in IITs from 8 % of total in 2016 to 18 % in 2019-20 for B Tech programmes.

These are significant achievements but a larger collective effort is still required to attain Sustainable Development

Goals by 2030 which aim to eliminate gender disparities in education. It is said, when you educate a girl child, you educate an entire family. Let us all come together to empower our girls and work towards a New India.