



# Absence of Altruism? Female Disadvantage in Private School Enrollment in India

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**Summary.** — Women make up one-half of the world’s population, though two-thirds of the world’s non-literate adults are women, which highlight the pervasive denial of the basic human right to education experienced by women across the globe. While there is a sizeable literature on gender discrimination in girls’ schooling, we know very little about girls’ access to private schooling, despite its rapid growth around the world in recent years. Using two nationally representative datasets from household surveys conducted in India in 2005 and 2012, our paper aims to bridge this gap by examining the role of gender in private school choice. We argue that the gender of the child is potentially endogenous in India because parents continue to have children until they have a son. To redress this potential endogeneity, we exploit the variation in private school choice among 7–18 year olds born to the same parents within the same household in an attempt to minimize both child-invariant and child-varying household-level omitted variable bias. We then explore the nature of female (dis)advantage across different types of households, communities, and years with a view to assess the role of parental preferences in this respect and its change, if any. The analysis thus allows us to provide new evidence for the causal effect of gender on private school choice in India. Significant female disadvantage exists in both survey years, though the size of this disadvantage varies across sub-samples and years. Female disadvantage is significantly higher among younger (relative to eldest) girls and also in northern and north-western (relative to western) regions, but it is lower among girls from poor (relative to rich) households, Christian (relative to Hindu high caste) households, and those with more educated mothers. Our results are robust, irrespective of whether or not we restrict the sample to those born to a household head. We infer that the observed within-household variations in female disadvantage across sub-samples reflect variations in non-altruistic parental preferences linked to deeply held cultural norms (for example, sons acting as old-age security and the exogamy of girls), access to schools and other public goods, and also job opportunities and returns to schooling for girls, thus posing considerable challenges in the attempt to secure “education for all.”  
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**Key words** — private school enrollment, female disadvantage, parental altruism, household fixed-effects model, India

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Women make up one-half of the world’s population. Without their engagement, empowerment, and contributions, we cannot hope to achieve rapid economic growth or effectively tackle global challenges such as climate change, technology adoption, food security, and conflict. However, two-thirds of world’s non-literate adults are women, a damning statistic that highlights the pervasive denial of the human right to education experienced by women and girls across the globe. Education can empower women, justifying the need to secure “education for all,” an essential component of the Millennium Development Goals. It is therefore important to understand what limits girls’ schooling. While there is a sizeable literature on gender discrimination in girls’ schooling (see, for example, CEDAW, 2012), we know little if anything about girls’ access to private schooling, despite its recent rapid growth around the world. Naturally, our knowledge of gender discrimination in schooling will remain incomplete without a good understanding of the nature and extent of gender discrimination in private schooling. In an attempt to bridge this gap in the literature, we examine the role of gender in private school choice.

Gender is likely to have an ambiguous effect on private schooling. On the one hand, private school growth may lower the extent of the gender gap in schooling: first, private schools may be more suited to the needs of girls if, for example, they ensure local access to schools, as well as to more female teachers; second, parents who choose private schools for their

children are likely to be more motivated and altruistic and hence less likely to discriminate between boys and girls. On the other hand, private schools require fees and thus may increase the extent of discrimination against girls in a country in which parents rely on sons for old-age security and dowries, exogamy, and female disadvantage in labor markets are pervasive, reducing the value of investments in girls. We use 2005 and 2012 India Human Development Survey (IHDS) data to examine the nature, size, and variations of female disadvantage across households, communities, and also time, if any, in private school choice in India, with a view to drawing out the implications in terms of parental preferences and possible policy interventions.

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Despite impressive growth in income and literacy over the last two decades, India continues to lag behind the other BRIC countries in indices of enrollment and attendance, especially beyond the primary level of schooling (Kingdon (2007). According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2009, India ranked 114th out of 134 countries measured. Recent data and studies (see, for example, Drèze & Sen, 2013) highlight the worsening human development situation and increasing gender inequity since the 1990s,<sup>1</sup> a period that has also interestingly witnessed the considerable growth of private schools around the country.<sup>2</sup> Despite the absence of school fees, the dismal state of government-run schools has induced many households, even some poorer ones, to take advantage of the newly emerging private unaided schools in India to meet their educational needs. This has also been facilitated by the modest private school fees in India (Tooley & Dixon, 2003).

We use individual-level unit record data from 7 to 18 year olds from two rounds of nationally representative India Human Development Survey (IHDS) conducted in 2005 and 2012. We argue that in societies characterized by a strong preference for sons, the gender of the child is endogenous. This is because in such societies, parents may continue to have children until they have the preferred gender composition (see Kishor, 1993). The latter has been worsened by the availability (since the early 1980s) of mechanisms (e.g., scanning technology) that enable sex-selective abortions (see Jha *et al.*, 2011). In such an environment, the same unobserved parental characteristics that may affect the gender of a child could also systematically affect the educational opportunities of boys and girls differently, thus causing significant endogeneity bias in school choice estimates.

While some use the gender of the first child on the grounds that it is random, thereby restricting the analysis to the first-born (see, for example, Rosenzweig & Wolpin, 2000),<sup>3</sup> we use a household fixed-effects approach that exploits the variation in the school choice for children born to same parents. This approach not only addresses the endogeneity of the gender of the child but also the issue of potential bias arising from the omitted household-level child-invariant (for example, parental motivation or lack of it) and child-varying (for example, individual ability and/or behavioral traits) factors that may also influence their school choice. This allows us to estimate the causal effect of gender on private school enrollment.

Daughters may receive less human capital investment than sons (regardless of market returns) if parents inherently place a low value on females.<sup>4</sup> In the context of India, there is evidence of significant discrimination against girls for a range of different outcome variables: fertility (Kishor, 1993), malnutrition (Pal, 1999), school enrollment and educational attainment (Pal, 2004), and breastfeeding (Jayachandran & Kuziemko, 2011). This observed gender inequity could be the result of intra-household allocation rules (Browning & Chiappori, 1998), cultural norms (sons as old-age security or exogamy (Dyson & Moore, 1983), and/or state interventions influencing the supply of relevant public goods, including schools (Murthi, Guio, & Drèze, 1995). Similar gender-based differences are observed in other developing countries as well (Glick, 2008). Economists have generally attributed it to gender differences in the labor market in terms of models of intra-household allocation in which lower female agency arises from either lower productivity or lower returns from female labor (Kingdon, 1996; Sundaram & Vanneman, 2008). Further human capital investment in girls has been shown to increase when work opportunities requiring more education arise (Heath & Mobarak, 2011) and also when women

have better information about and access to existing jobs (Jensen, 2012).

In comparison, the literature on gender-based discrimination in private schooling is rather under-developed in both its scope and methodology, especially in the Indian context.<sup>5</sup> Using a sample of low-income households in the state of Uttar Pradesh in India, Srivastava (2006) finds no evidence of gender inequity in private school enrollment. When using 13-village survey data from the same state of Uttar Pradesh in India, Härmä (2009) observes that a son is preferred for private education, especially for secondary schools, which is then attributed to household budget constraints. Using two rounds of Young Lives longitudinal data from the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, Woodhead, Frost, and James (2013) report a widening gender gap in low-fee private school enrollment over the 2001–09 period. Unlike the present paper, all of these cited papers have used data from small and localized surveys and do not control for the endogeneity of gender and other household-level omitted-variable bias.<sup>6</sup>

Our study builds on various strands of the existing literature in an attempt to identify the causal effect of gender on private schooling, with implications regarding its nature, size, causes, and evolution in an all-India context. We estimate private school enrollment as a function of a child's gender (if female, as captured by the GIRL dummy), birth order, and dummies representing age categories, with controls for child-invariant and child-varying unobserved household-level factors within a household fixed-effects model. In our framework, the estimated coefficient of the GIRL dummy yields the marginal effect of being a girl (relative to a boy) child which we take to be a measure of female disadvantage in private school choice. We assess its variation not only across different types of households (by caste, religion, expenditure, parental education) and communities (rural/urban, northern, north-western, western regions of the country), but also over time 2005–12. Our results indicate that there is a significant bias against girls in private school enrollment and that this persisted for both the 2005 and 2012 rounds of IHDS using matched household panel. The average female disadvantage was about 4 percentage points in 2005, and this rose to about 6 percentage points in 2012. Indeed, estimates from matched 2005 and 2012 panel households do not indicate any drop in female disadvantage over the period. We also find substantial heterogeneity across various sub-samples characterized by individual, household, and community characteristics: female disadvantage in school choice is higher among younger (relative to older) girls but lower for Christian (relative to high caste Hindu) girls and also those from poor (relative to rich) households in which the mothers have at least secondary schooling. There is also interesting regional variation in female disadvantage. One way of interpreting this is that household preferences are generally non-altruistic in an environment in which intra-household allocation rules, job market considerations, and other deeply-rooted socio-cultural norms influence parental schooling decisions as boys and girls grow into adolescents.

We thus contribute to the existing literature in a number of ways. Noting that the net effect of gender could be ambiguous, we exploit the variation in school choice among children born to same parents to identify the causal effect of gender using a household fixed-effects model. Second, many recent surveys ask direct questions about parental (especially women's) preferences, e.g., whether they value girl's schooling equally to boys. Answers to these questions are largely subjective and prone to measurement errors. Instead, we compare the nature and size of female disadvantage across various sub-samples defined by individual/household/community characteristics.

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