International Journal of Educational Development 46 (2016) 175–187

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Educational Development

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedudev

Private schooling and gender justice: An empirical snapshot from Rajasthan, India's largest state

Orla Kelly [a,b,*], Aditi Krishna [b], Jacqueline Bhabha [a]

[a] FXB Center for Health and Human Rights, 651 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02115, United States
[b] Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Harvard School of Public Health, 677 Huntington Avenue, Boston MA 02115, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 11 February 2015
Received in revised form 3 October 2015
Accepted 12 October 2015
Available online 20 December 2015

Keywords:
India
Girls' education
Gender equality
Private schools
Education policy

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we compare the key attributes and experiences of a sample of 413 young women, who attended government versus private schools at the primary and secondary level. Study participation was limited to those whose parents had completed only upper primary education or less. At the time of the study, participants were in their second year of undergraduate study in government colleges across Rajasthan, the largest state in India. We found, among this socially narrow sample, that caste more than income or years of parental education was the biggest predictor of school type attended at the primary and secondary level. We found other significant differences. Private schools had better infrastructural provisions (including girls' toilets), marginally higher rates of reported peer bullying and better 10th standard exam outcomes. Those who attended private schools reported substantially elevated educational costs (direct fees but also disqualification from government schemes). Paradoxically, a larger portion of participants who attended government schools reported their families had fallen into debt to support their education. These finding support the theory that the most disadvantaged continue to rely on a public education system that yields poor exam results. Reports of teacher violence and teacher absenteeism were largely consistent across institution types. While overall rates of teacher violence were low, those whose parents had the lowest rates of educational attainment were the most likely to report having been victimized in both government and private schools. We explore the implications of these findings for the achievement of gender equality at the post-primary level.

In the decades since independence the government of India has made remarkable strides in increasing average per capita years of education. It has built a large-scale national education infrastructure, largely absent when the country emerged from colonial rule, and made significant progress in raising education attainment rates through the national policy to universalize primary education – Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) – first codified in 2009[1]. At the secondary level too, year on year increases in enrollment are being achieved with more planned for the future: the government aims to attain an enrollment rate of 90 percent at secondary and 75 percent at higher secondary level by 2017 (Government of India (GOI), 2014). Government policies and concomitant increased spending have been critical to raising the average educational attainment rates of the country's youth (Bapna and Sharma, 2015). However, the government is not the only purveyor of education. According to the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER-Rural) 2014, even in rural areas 29 percent of enrollments in the six-to-14 age-group are now in private schools. At the secondary level 60 percent of institutions are private (Government of India (GOI), 2014). The proportion of Indian children and adolescents attending private and semi- private institutions grows every year (Government of India (GOI), 2012). The upsurge in the market share of these schools, particularly those serving low income communities, (often referred to as low fee schools), is due to a confluence of factors including a growing middle class, the government's inability to keep up with the educational demands of a mushrooming youth population, and a lack of faith in the quality of the government schools (Desai et al., 2008; Srivastava, 2008; James and Woodhead, 2014). Taking note of these trends and challenges, national education policy is increasingly relying on

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 8572947889.
E-mail addresses: okelly@hsph.harvard.edu (O. Kelly), adk190@mail.harvard.edu (A. Krishna), jbhabha@hsph.harvard.edu (J. Bhabha).

[1] The Government's flagship program for the achievement of Universalization of Elementary Education began in 2001. Through the program country has achieved near universal enrolment at the lower primary level through massive infrastructural development, teacher training and community mobilization. In 2009, the program was codified by 86th amendment to the Constitution of India which made free and compulsory education a fundamental right for all children aged 6–14 years.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2015.10.004
0738-0593/

private infrastructure to help provide educational opportunities for the nation's youth (Government of India (GOI), 2013a).

Progress in overall enrollment has meant a reduction in the portion of girls excluded from the system; in 2011 the national gross enrollment rate for girls at the lower secondary level was 68 percent (Government of India (GOI), 2012) up from 45 percent in 2005 (Government of India (GOI), 2007). However national level enrollment rates often mask the plight of the most marginalized. In many Indian states, girls, disadvantaged in terms of household income, religion, caste, or location are still the least likely to attend school beyond primary level. In Rajasthan for example 69 percent of girls who enroll in class I do not complete lower secondary school. The situation is even more troubling for young women from minorities; dropout rates for girls from scheduled caste and tribal communities rise to 78 and 80 percent, respectively (Government of India (GOI), 2012). Research suggests that girls' under-representation in private schools, even among low fee institutions, is even more acute than it is in government schools (Härmä and Rose, 2012; Mehrotra and Panchamukhi, 2006; Woodhead et al., 2013). Maitra et al. (2011) find the gender gap in private school enrollment twice as large as that in public schools, worse in younger children, and increasing over time in rural areas.

Given these trends, the government's concomitant goals of embracing a more active private sector and the achievement of universal secondary enrollment raises some key questions. Are the parallel objectives of privatization and equality within the education system attainable? Will the growing state dependence on the private sector for provision of primary and secondary schooling condemn the most disadvantaged citizens to an under-funded public system crippled by poor learning outcomes? How do the experiences of girls from underserved communities attending private schools differ from their counterparts in government schools? Finally, what implications does the growing private sector have for poor households' ability to avail themselves of government incentives for girls' education such as books, uniforms, and stipends?

To address these questions, we examine the attributes and deconstruct the experiences of a successful minority of young women, from economically and educationally deprived households across Rajasthan, who managed to progress to tertiary level education. All our study participants have parents who have completed no more than primary school education; the young women themselves were enrolled in their second year of an undergraduate degree in a government college at the time of the study. Some participants attended private institutions at the primary and secondary level, others attended government schools. In what follows we examine the individual and familial differences between those who attended public as opposed to private primary and secondary level schools. Relying on retrospective reporting, we also explore the differences in experiences and outcomes between these two groups. Finally, we discuss the implications of the growing privatization of education for achieving gender equality in Indian education. The findings of this study generate key insights into the enduring challenge of improving gender equality given the proliferation of private schooling in India and beyond.

1. The rise of private schooling

There are four types of schools in India: (i) government schools which are those institutions established, run, and funded by the State or Central Governments (ii) local body schools which are established by elected local government bodies; (iii) Private aided schools, which are operated by private entities such as civil society organizations but receive State Government grants-in-aid; and (iv) unaided private schools which received no financial or operational support from the government. Private unaided schools serving disadvantaged communities make up the largest share of private institutions. They vary significantly in quality and price and many low fee unaided private schools are 'not recognized' by the government. According to Kingdon (2007) receiving recognition from the government is an arbitrary process:

> Government 'recognition' is an official stamp of approval and for this a private school is required to fulfil a number of conditions, though hardly any private schools that get 'recognition' actually fulfil all the conditions of recognition. (p.183)

It is widely accepted that the portion of the population served by low fee unaided private schools is underestimated because teachers in government schools over report attendance, and many official national education censuses do not take unrecognized schools into account.

The growing role of the private sector in the provision of education in the developing context is a polarizing topic (Day Ashley et al., 2014; Tooley and Longfield, 2015). The rise of private schools has been heralded by some as a positive step toward the achievement of an accessible, quality education system (Tooley, 2001; Tooley and Dixon, 2007). Proponents of private sector involvement in education highlight evidence of higher quality education in private schools (Tooley et al., 2011). In India there is evidence that private sector institutions tend to have increased teacher accountability (Aslam and Kingdon, 2011) leading to lower levels of absenteeism (Kingdon and Banerji, 2009; Muralidharan and Kremer, 2006), lower pupil-teacher ratios (Goyal and Pandey, 2009; Maitra et al., 2011) resulting in better teaching practices. A variety of studies in India have found that private schools perform better than their public school counterparts in learning achievement (Desai et al., 2008; Goyal, 2009; Muralidharan and Kremer, 2006; Tooley et al., 2010). French and Kingdon (2010) exploited the natural experiment of children from the same families attending different institution types. They found a significant advantage for those attending private schools—an effect most markedly observable among low income families. Studies with the parents of children in low cost unaided private schools have found that their motivations include: dissatisfaction with the teacher performance, poor attitude and lack of accountability in government institutions; and higher perceived returns due to better quality teachers, improved prospects of upward mobility due to peer effects, and a focus on English language in private institutions (Harma, 2009; James and Woodhead, 2014; Srivastava, 2008).

Conversely, some argue that the role of low cost unaided private institutions in reaching the underserviced constituencies is overstated (Woodhead et al., 2013), and that the increasing role of the private sector in the provision of this fundamental right will in fact further disadvantage the most vulnerable (Colclough, 1996). Recent evidence from India suggests that the upsurge in low cost private schooling is indeed exacerbating gender- and class-based inequalities within and outside the families, forcing many into debt in the pursuit of upward mobility for their children, while the poorest of the poor remain completely excluded from the systems (Härmä, 2009, 2011; Azam and Kingdon, 2013; Goyal and Pandey, 2009; Singh and Bangay, 2014; Woodhead et al., 2013). There is alarm that the growing low cost private sector will erode the employment protections and training requirements for teachers (Aslam and Kingdon, 2011). There is also some dissent about the universality of the low-cost private school learning outcome advantage (Chudgar and Quin, 2012). Singh (2015) found that positive effects of these private schools do not extend to mathematics or psychosocial skills. Further he found no evidence of a significant private school effect in urban areas. Others question the extent to which it is even possible to control for individual