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Son Preferences in Private Schooling and Expenditure on Education

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ABOUT

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In December 2021, the Ministry of Science and Technology, Department of Science and Technology (Policy Research Programme) made an open call for the submission of Expressions of Interest in STI Policy Research towards the Establishment of the Center for Policy Research (CPR) by the academic and research Institutes In India. After multiple rounds of consultations and review, the DST-CPR at NISER received the final sanction order from the Government of India, Ministry of Science & Technology, Department of Science & Technology, bearing the letter No DST/PRC/CPR/NISERBhubaneswar-2023 (G) (PCPM) dated 29/03/2023.

The primary focus of the DST-CPR at NISER is to study the Energy Transition and the secondary focus is to study the Tribal Education, and Innovations for Tribal Education in Eastern India covering Odisha, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and West Bengal.

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Executive Summary

Gender disparities in private school enrolment remain a global concern, largely driven by parental decision-making shaped by economic pressures, cultural expectations, and social norms. In the Indian context, these disparities are especially pronounced, with families often prioritizing boys' education due to the belief that it yields greater long-term benefits. As a result, boys are overrepresented in private schools. Financial limitations frequently compel households to invest selectively in education, often at the expense of daughters. Deep-rooted patriarchal values reinforce this imbalance, positioning sons as future breadwinners and daughters as bearers of domestic responsibilities. Moreover, issues such as inadequate safety and limited accessibility further deter parents from choosing private schooling for girls. This policy brief explores the underlying drivers of parental school choice and recommends targeted interventions to reduce gender gaps in private education. Suggested measures include expanding scholarships for high-performing girls, initiating community outreach to challenge gender stereotypes, and improving school safety through reliable transport and gender-sensitive infrastructure.

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1. Introduction

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 highlights the importance of ensuring quality education for all, with a special emphasis on historically marginalized, disadvantaged, and underrepresented groups (Government of India, 2020). Over the past decade, India has seen a marked increase in private school enrolments, largely driven by parental aspirations for better educational outcomes (Georgiadis et al., 2022). Despite this expansion, gender disparities in enrolment persist, particularly in private education. While private schools are often perceived to offer higher quality education than public institutions, access remains uneven. In many parts of India, boys are more likely to be enrolled in private schools than girls, a trend rooted in deep-seated social norms, economic constraints, and parental preferences (Nandi et al., 2023).

Multiple factors influence parental decisions about school enrolment, including financial capacity, parental education, cultural beliefs, and perceptions of school quality and safety (Dasgupta & Sharma, 2022; Maitra, Pal & Sharma, 2016; Sahoo, 2017; Singh, 2015). Limited financial resources often force families to prioritize one child's education over another, and boys are frequently seen as yielding higher future returns due to prevailing gender roles and labour market expectations. This leads many families to enroll sons in private schools while daughters are either sent to public schools or, in some cases, withdrawn from education altogether (Biswas & Kundu, 2025).

Parental education, particularly maternal education, also plays a critical role in shaping school choices. Families with better-educated parents tend to adopt a more equitable approach to investing in the education of both sons and daughters. These parents are more likely to recognize the long-term social and economic value of educating girls, helping to reduce gender gaps in private school enrolment.

Cultural and social norms further influence schooling decisions. In patriarchal contexts where sons are viewed as future earners and daughters as caregivers, education for girls is often deprioritized (Congdon & Lindskog, 2023). This mindset discourages investments in private schooling for girls. Moreover, safety concerns—particularly where private schools are far from home or lack adequate security—can further deter parents from enrolling their daughters (UNESCO, 2022).

Understanding the gender gap in private school enrolment is critical for formulating effective policy responses. Addressing these disparities not only advances gender equity in education but also promotes broader social and economic development by enhancing women's workforce participation and long-term growth. This policy brief analyses the extent and drivers of gender gaps in private schooling and outlines targeted recommendations to promote equal access for boys and girls alike.

2. Gender Disparity in School Enrolment in India

Gender disparity in school enrolment remains a concern in India, particularly in several states where girls are less likely to attend school due to socio-cultural norms, safety concerns, and economic limitations. **Table 1** presents gender-disaggregated enrolment data across four educational levels, Primary, Upper Primary, Secondary, and Higher Secondary, for various States and Union Territories (UTs) in India. At the national level, boys have a marginal advantage in enrolment rates, but the overall gender gap is relatively small across all educational levels, indicating considerable progress toward gender parity. However, a closer state-level analysis reveals significant regional variations. While primary-level enrolment is nearly balanced in most areas, some

Table 1: Enrolment Rate by Gender and Level of Education Across States in 2023-24

State/ UT	Primary (1 to 5)		Upper Primary (6-8)		Secondary (9-10)		Higher Secondary (11-12)		Primary to Higher Secondary	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Andaman and Nicobar Islands	51.29	48.71	51.65	48.35	50.54	49.46	48.65	51.35	50.82	49.18
Andhra Pradesh	51.95	48.05	52.07	47.93	52.02	47.98	49.42	50.58	51.68	48.32
Arunachal Pradesh	50.90	49.10	48.64	51.36	48.76	51.24	47.68	52.32	49.67	50.33
Assam	50.81	49.19	48.04	51.96	45.54	54.46	47.98	52.02	49.06	50.94
Bihar	51.92	48.08	50.70	49.30	48.61	51.39	49.20	50.80	50.99	49.01
Chandigarh	52.55	47.45	53.48	46.52	52.94	47.06	53.53	46.47	53.05	46.95
Chhattisgarh	51.08	48.92	50.61	49.39	48.66	51.34	44.54	55.46	49.89	50.11
Dadra and Nagar Haveli and	52.55	47.45	53.29	46.71	52.09	47.91	48.17	51.83	52.28	47.72
Delhi	52.78	47.22	53.33	46.67	52.83	47.17	51.04	48.96	52.69	47.31
Goa	52.01	47.99	51.72	48.28	51.46	48.54	49.08	50.92	51.43	48.57
Gujarat	53.17	46.83	53.40	46.60	54.91	45.09	50.72	49.28	53.28	46.72
Haryana	54.34	45.66	54.83	45.17	55.18	44.82	52.75	47.25	54.42	45.58
Himachal Pradesh	52.20	47.80	52.41	47.59	52.15	47.85	51.22	48.78	52.10	47.90
Jammu and Kashmir	51.95	48.05	52.32	47.68	52.82	47.18	52.14	47.86	52.20	47.80
Jharkhand	51.97	48.03	50.97	49.03	49.21	50.79	49.09	50.91	51.03	48.97
Karnataka	51.76	48.24	51.85	48.15	51.25	48.75	46.78	53.22	51.17	48.83
Kerala	51.05	48.95	50.98	49.02	51.03	48.97	49.91	50.09	50.85	49.15
Ladakh	51.19	48.81	48.87	51.13	46.76	53.24	46.54	53.46	49.41	50.59
Lakshadweep	51.73	48.27	47.59	52.41	50.09	49.91	51.63	48.37	50.46	49.54
Madhya Pradesh	52.11	47.89	51.99	48.01	52.25	47.75	50.76	49.24	51.97	48.03
Maharashtra	51.95	48.05	52.95	47.05	53.33	46.67	52.48	47.52	52.52	47.48
Manipur	51.57	48.43	50.63	49.37	50.13	49.87	50.36	49.64	51.00	49.00
Meghalaya	50.88	49.12	46.78	53.22	43.80	56.20	41.70	58.30	48.42	51.58
Mizoram	51.32	48.68	50.49	49.51	48.45	51.55	47.25	52.75	50.29	49.71
Nagaland	51.42	48.58	49.94	50.06	48.30	51.70	46.61	53.39	50.01	49.99
Odisha	51.58	48.42	51.63	48.37	50.96	49.04	49.51	50.49	51.25	48.75
Puducherry	51.52	48.48	51.73	48.27	51.37	48.63	48.23	51.77	51.02	48.98
Punjab	53.48	46.52	53.89	46.11	53.45	46.55	53.36	46.64	53.56	46.44
Rajasthan	52.66	47.34	52.79	47.21	53.25	46.75	53.21	46.79	52.85	47.15
Sikkim	52.48	47.52	50.90	49.10	49.52	50.48	45.83	54.17	50.52	49.48
Tamil Nadu	51.69	48.31	51.77	48.23	51.37	48.63	48.00	52.00	51.10	48.90
Telangana	52.05	47.95	51.66	48.34	51.07	48.93	49.54	50.46	51.47	48.53
Tripura	50.87	49.13	50.17	49.83	49.35	50.65	49.00	51.00	50.22	49.78
Uttar Pradesh	52.73	47.27	51.94	48.06	53.64	46.36	53.78	46.22	52.77	47.23
Uttarakhand	53.07	46.93	53.00	47.00	52.31	47.69	50.86	49.14	52.62	47.38
West Bengal	51.13	48.87	50.56	49.44	49.59	50.41	43.92	56.08	49.82	50.18
India	52.13	47.87	51.85	48.15	51.79	48.21	50.38	49.62	51.80	48.20

Source: UDISE+ Annual Report 2023-24

Table 2: Enrolment Rate by Gender and Management Across States in 2012-13 and 2023-24

States/ UTs	2012-13				2023-24			
	Govt.		Private		Govt.		Private	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Andaman and Nicobar Islands	51.62	48.38	52.13	47.87	50.30	49.70	52.18	47.82
Andhra Pradesh	45.02	54.98	55.75	44.25	47.79	52.21	55.64	44.36
Arunachal Pradesh	49.94	50.06	56.51	43.49	46.83	53.17	55.70	44.30
Assam	48.69	51.31	56.69	43.31	47.61	52.39	53.98	46.02
Bihar	50.30	49.70	54.84	45.16	49.31	50.69	61.03	38.97
Chandigarh	53.62	46.38	57.58	42.42	52.08	47.92	54.55	45.45
Chhattisgarh	49.64	50.36	55.66	44.34	48.50	51.50	53.89	46.11
Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu	4.25	48.43	60.18	39.82	50.36	49.64	57.08	42.92
Delhi	50.03	49.97	60.63	39.37	49.18	50.82	58.35	41.65
Goa	51.81	48.19	55.32	44.68	51.18	48.82	53.34	46.66
Gujarat	57.42	42.58	58.85	41.15	50.57	49.43	57.71	42.29
Haryana	49.75	50.25	61.08	38.92	48.92	51.08	58.33	41.67
Himachal Pradesh	50.24	49.76	58.74	41.26	50.03	49.97	55.44	44.56
Jammu and Kashmir	50.81	49.19	57.08	42.92	49.93	50.07	55.12	44.88
Jharkhand	49.64	50.36	55.57	44.43	48.80	51.20	56.64	43.36
Karnataka	49.93	50.07	55.58	44.42	48.86	51.14	54.01	45.99
Kerala	50.17	49.83	52.93	47.07	50.50	49.50	51.84	48.16
Ladakh	NA	NA	NA	NA	46.13	53.87	52.58	47.42
Lakshadweep	49.36	50.64	NA	NA	50.46	49.54	NA	NA
Madhya Pradesh	48.99	51.01	57.29	42.71	48.93	51.07	56.94	43.06
Maharashtra	53.08	46.92	58.16	41.84	51.19	48.81	55.81	44.19
Manipur	48.18	51.82	51.74	48.26	49.70	50.30	51.75	48.25
Meghalaya	48.89	51.11	49.16	50.84	48.56	51.44	48.21	51.79
Mizoram	51.99	48.01	51.42	48.58	50.16	49.84	50.37	49.63
Nagaland	48.91	51.09	52.15	47.85	46.58	53.42	51.75	48.25
Odisha	50.68	49.32	56.04	43.96	50.15	49.85	55.66	44.34
Puducherry	45.22	54.78	56.60	43.40	45.59	54.41	55.35	44.65
Punjab	53.77	46.23	58.34	41.66	51.51	48.49	55.77	44.23
Rajasthan	48.68	51.32	61.30	38.70	47.46	52.54	59.04	40.96
Sikkim	48.30	51.70	54.57	45.43	49.85	50.15	51.79	48.21
Tamil Nadu	48.49	51.51	54.85	45.15	48.67	51.33	54.46	45.54
Telangana	NA	NA	NA	NA	47.52	52.48	54.33	45.67
Tripura	50.98	49.02	56.59	43.41	49.05	50.95	54.62	45.38
Uttar Pradesh	47.75	52.25	58.37	41.63	49.95	50.05	56.00	44.00
Uttarakhand	48.78	51.22	54.56	45.44	48.34	51.66	56.41	43.59
West Bengal	49.53	50.47	54.72	45.28	49.58	50.42	54.97	45.03
India	49.83	50.17	56.66	43.34	49.42	50.58	56.13	43.87

Source: UDISE+ Annual Report 2012-13 and 2023-24

3.1 Economic Constraints and Investment Priorities

In households with constrained financial resources, educational investments are often guided by perceptions of future economic returns (Rani & Gopinathan, 2021; Sundari, 2015). Research indicates that families are more likely to allocate greater financial resources toward the education of male children, under the belief that boys will contribute more significantly to household income in the future (Kaul, 2018; Saha, 2013; Rashmi et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2023). This bias contributes to higher enrolment rates of boys in private schools compared to girls.

Data from the 2017–18 National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) highlight this disparity in educational expenditure. On average, annual spending on boys' education was consistently higher than that for girls across all schooling levels. At the primary level, the expenditure gap was approximately ₹770, which widened substantially to ₹2,860 at the higher secondary level (**Fig. 1**). This trend reflects the increasing financial commitment that families are willing to make for sons as they advance through the education system, further reinforcing gender disparities in access to quality education.

3.2 Cultural and Social Norms

Traditional gender roles and societal expectations play a critical role in shaping parental decisions regarding children's education (Krishna et al., 2024). In many cultural contexts, particularly across South Asia, boys are commonly regarded as future breadwinners, while girls are expected to take on domestic responsibilities. These gendered perceptions often lead families to prioritize educational investments in sons, frequently choosing to enrol them in private schools, which are perceived to offer higher-quality education.

The Global Education Monitoring Report 2022 (UNESCO, 2022) underscores this trend, noting a pronounced pro-male bias in private school enrolment in India, with a consistent gap of approximately six percentage points in favour of boys at both primary

and secondary levels. Notably, this disparity persists regardless of variations in community background, caste, household income, or parental education, highlighting the enduring influence of cultural norms and gendered expectations on educational choices.

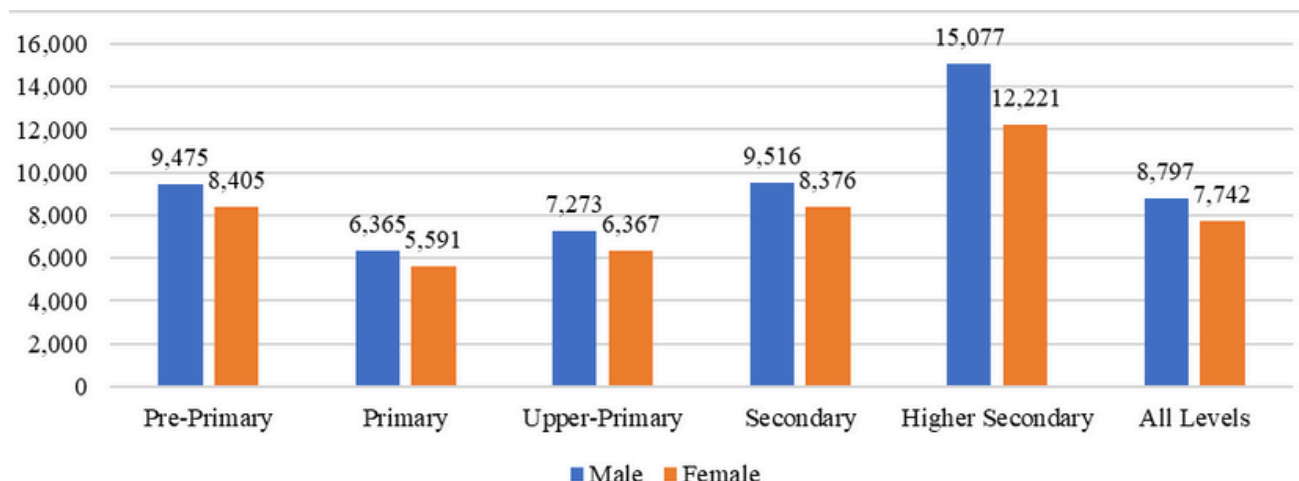
3.3 Perceptions of Parents on School Quality and Safety

Parental perceptions of school quality, particularly with regard to teaching standards and student safety, play a pivotal role in school selection decisions (Kumar & Choudhary, 2021; Ved & MPM, 2021). Private schools are often perceived to offer superior teaching quality and English-medium instruction, both of which are commonly associated with better future career opportunities. Consequently, parents are more inclined to favour private schools when they believe these institutions provide a competitive academic edge. Safety and school environment are also critical considerations in the enrolment process (Bhagavatheeswaran et al., 2016). When private schools are perceived as safer or of higher academic quality, families with limited resources may prioritise sending their sons to these institutions, reflecting both gendered expectations and strategic investment decisions. Conversely, concerns related to harassment, long travel distances, or inadequate infrastructure can discourage parents from enrolling their daughters in private schools (UNESCO, 2022). These safety-related apprehensions contribute to the persistence of gender disparities in private school enrolment.

3.4 Parental Education and Awareness

Parental educational attainment, particularly that of mothers, plays a significant role in shaping school enrolment decisions (Greenberg, 2011). Households in which mothers have achieved higher levels of education are generally less influenced by gender biases when selecting schools for their children. Educated parents are more likely to value the long-term benefits of education for both sons and daughters, resulting in more balanced and equitable educational investments (Biswas & Kundu, 2022).

Figure 1: Average annual expenditure (Rs.) of households on per-student by level of education, 2017-18



Source: National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), 75th round, “Household Social Consumption: Education”, 2017-18

In contrast, communities with lower literacy levels often adhere more strongly to traditional gender norms, which can perpetuate inequalities in school enrolment. Studies suggest that improvements in household economic status and maternal education are closely associated with a narrowing of the gender gap in private school enrolment (Khalid, 2023; Kumar & Choudhary, 2021). These findings highlight the importance of promoting female education not only for its intrinsic value but also for its broader impact on reducing intergenerational gender disparities in access to quality education.

3.5 Government Policies and Financial Incentives

The availability of government subsidies, scholarships, and conditional cash transfer programmes, such as Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana, and the National Scholarship Scheme for Higher Education of Scheduled Tribe Girls, can significantly influence parental decisions regarding girls’ education. In regions where such financial incentives are actively implemented, disparities in private school enrolment between boys and girls tend to narrow, underscoring the critical role of policy interventions in shaping gender-equitable educational outcomes.

These initiatives help mitigate the economic barriers that often lead families to prioritise the education of female children. By easing the financial burden associated with private schooling, such programmes encourage more balanced investment in the education of daughters. Empirical evidence suggests that targeted financial support for girls’ education not only enhances enrolment rates but also contributes to reducing long-standing gender biases in household decision-making related to schooling.

4. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Enhancing the enrolment of girls in private schools necessitates a multifaceted approach that addresses financial barriers, cultural norms, safety concerns, and educational quality. Achieving gender parity in education requires coordinated efforts from policymakers, educators, civil society, and local communities. A collaborative, multi-stakeholder strategy is vital to dismantling systemic barriers, empowering girls, and promoting inclusive and sustainable development. Building upon existing initiatives, the following detailed policy recommendations are proposed:

- **Targeted Scholarships for Meritorious Girls:** Offer merit-based scholarships specifically for girls who perform well academically but lack financial resources to access private education. This recognizes their potential and incentivizes families to support their continued schooling.
- **Conduct Awareness Campaigns:** Societal attitudes and cultural norms significantly influence educational decisions. Community engagement can challenge gender biases and underscore the importance of girls' education. Community-based programs should be implemented that highlight the benefits of educating girls, featuring success stories and role models to inspire change.
- **Strengthen Regulatory Frameworks and Accountability:** Enforce regulations that require private schools to maintain gender parity in admissions, ensuring that a fair proportion of seats are allocated to female students.

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