

# BREAKING BARRIERS: SCHEMES ENHANCING GIRLS' EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

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## Abstract

*The global pursuit of gender equality in education has identified several barriers that hinder girls' access to and completion of education. This study examines various schemes and initiatives aimed at overcoming these barriers and enhancing educational opportunities for girls in Karnataka. By analysing some of the schemes to provide free uniforms, books, mid-day meals, scholarships, bicycles, sanitary pads etc, this paper highlights the transformative impact of these schemes in promoting girls' enrolment, and continuation in school. It also explores geographical disparities that affect educational access. Through empirical evidence, this paper emphasises the importance of coordinated efforts among governments, NGOs, and communities in breaking down systemic barriers and creating inclusive educational environments for all girls.*

**Key Words:** Girl's education, Gender inequality, Patriarchy, Development Programmes

## Introduction

Nelson Mandela once said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." Education makes a positive difference in people's lives. It equips them with knowledge and skills, opening doors to future opportunities. This empowers them to take charge of their lives, become leaders in their communities, and pursue their dream careers. The benefits of education reach far beyond the classroom, impacting society as a whole. While universal education is vital, the transformative power of education is most potent when it reaches those who face the greatest barriers – specifically, women (Duncan, 2013). Education holds immense value, enriching the lives of individuals and strengthening societies as a whole (Nussbaum, 1999).

The National Council for Women's Education report (1959) argues that achieving true gender equality requires a two-pronged approach: extensive education for girls and women, alongside a shift in attitudes for both genders. This means not just legal rights (de jure) on paper, but genuine equality in practice (de facto). Progress is held back by an outdated educational system that fails to acknowledge the evolving needs of society and the economy. This limited approach perpetuates gender inequality, as unequal access to education for men and women widens the gap in their social status. The lack of proper education, particularly for women, is a major roadblock to the advancement for all.

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This paper addresses the importance of girls' education and how the government has tried to close the gender gap in school education by implementing schemes to enable parents to send their children, and particularly their daughters, to school. The paper is divided into four sections. The first section is on the importance of educating girls/women, the second section is on the discrimination faced by girls/women in getting an education, and the third section looks into some of the policies and programmes for girls to acquire an education. And lastly, we discuss the realities seen in the field, in the rural and urban areas of Karnataka. The data were collected from two grama panchayats of Mulbagal taluk of Kolar district, and a low-income neighbourhood in Krishnarajapuram taluk of Bengaluru Urban district.

### **Importance of Educating Girls/Women**

Educating girls is crucial for the development of society. Education provides girls and women with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to make informed decisions about their lives. It empowers them to pursue their goals and aspirations, whether in education, careers, or personal development. Despite several efforts by international organisations to educate every child, a gap between boys' and girls' education persists. Investing in girls' education is not only fair, but is also extremely beneficial for society. Many experts even call it the world's smartest investment, delivering a high return on progress (King and Hill, 2015). The acquisition of knowledge and skills through education empowers individuals to become agents of positive social transformation (Andres & Chavez, 2015). Without a good education, women face a number of difficulties. They earn less, are less likely to work, and may marry and have children at a young age when they might not be fully prepared to be mothers. This cycle can lead to larger families, higher child mortality, and health problems for both mothers and children. Additionally, girls who drop out of school have less control over their lives, both at home and in society. These challenges create a significant economic burden. Empowering girls through education is very beneficial. They gain the ability to critically evaluate the services they depend on, and hold their leaders accountable. Investing in girls' education is not just morally right, but also a wise economic decision (Wodon *et al*, 2018). The absence of education fundamentally disempowers women and girls, hindering their ability to secure their fundamental rights.

According to a recent estimate, 132 million girls are currently out of school globally. This number breaks down further, with 32 million missing out on primary education, 30 million on lower-secondary education, and a significant 67.4 million on upper-secondary education. This is a serious problem that needs to be addressed. Education is essential for girls' development and empowerment and is considered a key factor in breaking the cycle of poverty (UNICEF, 2020). Many challenges continue to prevent young women from getting a quality education. These inequalities are unacceptable and demand a united global effort to address them. Governments in developing countries, NGOs, and multinational corporations must join forces to transform the current situation. This is by implementing a comprehensive strategy that expands primary and secondary school access, and create empowering new programmes specifically designed for young women. The international community can start to make a real difference. This approach can reduce the barriers that stand between girls and education (UNICEF, 2020).

## **Benefits of Educating Women**

Educating women brings significant advantages on multiple fronts. Women with education tend to dedicate more time to working outside the home, which leads to higher incomes for them, and contributes to the economic strength of their nation (Sperling, *et al*, 2016). Women who marry later tend to have fewer, and healthier children, with better chances of getting an education (King and Hill, 2015). When women are empowered with knowledge, it unlocks a wave of positive changes. They gain independence, and leading to healthier families with lower infant and maternal mortality rates. Communities benefit from a stronger economy with rising GDP per capita, while increased agricultural productivity combats malnutrition (King and Winthrop, 2020). Investing in education for girls and young women is a powerful weapon against HIV/AIDS. Education empowers them with knowledge about transmission, prevention, and testing. This awareness allows them to protect themselves and their future children by understanding the importance of prenatal testing and safe breastfeeding practices. By prioritising education for this vulnerable population, efforts to fight against HIV/AIDS can be increased (World Bank, 2020). Additionally, education is the key to building resilience against disasters. Studies reveal that countries with higher education rates, particularly for women and girls, experience fewer deaths during and after disasters. This is because education equips people with the knowledge, skills, and mindset to prepare for, respond to, and recover from emergencies (Striessnig *et al*, 2013).

## **Gender and Unequal Educational Opportunities**

A UNESCO report reveals a disturbing gap in the access to education for girls. In only 39 per cent of countries do girls and boys have the same enrollment rates in secondary school, and less than 40 per cent provide truly equal educational opportunities regardless of gender (UNESCO, 2017). The global disparity in educational access for girls, while substantial, is only one side of a much larger and more complex issue. Many girls in India, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, face hurdles beyond just enrolling in school. Financial constraints are a major barrier, especially in rural areas among marginalised communities like SCs, STs, and OBCs. This challenge becomes more pronounced as girls get older, leading to higher dropout rates and lower secondary school completion. While urban areas also see dropouts, they tend to be concentrated among children from low-income families living in slums. This trend is reflected in the declining number of girls enrolled in higher grades. The Human Rights Watch Report in 2015 raises similar concerns. Their findings showed that as girls matured, they often faced growing pressure from their families to drop out. This pressure stemmed from discriminatory gender norms and stricter limitations on their movements once they reached puberty (Barr, 2017). Many girls in developing countries face difficulties in getting an education. Deep-rooted gender inequality, violence against girls, early marriage, lack of schools, expensive fees, natural disasters, and war are responsible for preventing girls from seeking higher education (King and Winthrop, 2017). The challenges that girls face are complex and interconnected. Studies consistently show that girls battling multiple hurdles fall far behind in getting and finishing their education (World Bank, 2019).

India has a long history of gender discrimination in education, but recent trends towards modernisation and globalisation have reduced it to some extent (Munshi and Rosenweig, 2006). Over a

century ago, even before other missionaries arrived, Catholic priests played a role in educating both Indian girls and boys. However, it was the Catholic nuns who truly broke ground by becoming educators specifically for girls, particularly in South India (Vennila, 2018). Traditionally, in Indian society, daughters, especially after marriage, are not expected to contribute financially. This cultural norm limits investment in girls' education (Kaul, 2018). Bhatkal (2012) identified a trend of increasing gender bias as children progress through the school-going age bracket. Regarding secondary education, Marphatia et al. (2019) argue that while education is acknowledged to be especially important in shaping the course of girls' lives, the unfortunate reality in India is that it frequently takes a backseat to securing a suitable marriage match. The established division of labour within households, where girls are expected to take on domestic duties and childcare responsibilities, frequently compels them to sacrifice their education (Rumberger and Lim, 2008; Chakraborti, 2009).

Deep-rooted gender bias and traditional expectations often prevent girls from getting an education. In developing countries, for instance, some parents prioritise their sons' schooling over their daughters'. A survey in West Bengal found that twice as many parents wanted their sons to finish high school compared to their daughters (King and Winthrop, 2017). The cost of education can further disadvantage girls. Families generally tend to favour sons' education by 1) prioritising enrolling them in secondary school over daughters, and 2) sending sons to private schools while making daughters attend free public schools (Azam and Kingdon, 2013). It has been observed that unequal opportunities, like having fewer resources, less free time to study, and facing negative cultural views, all contribute to why boys and girls may not learn the same things or at the same pace (White *et al*, 2016). It is further seen that the more girls are discriminated against – in access to resources, free time, and facing cultural disapproval – the more likely they are to drop out of school. This problem is even worse for girls from disadvantaged backgrounds, where poverty, parents' educational level, and traditional beliefs all play a role (Kelly *et al*, 2016; Sahoo, 2017). Kelly and others in their study in Rajasthan bring out the fact that girls from historically disadvantaged communities, such as Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), tend to have lower education and job opportunities compared to the average girl of any other group. Adding to this, Muslim girls, in particular, are least likely to finish even primary school. This could be due to traditional beliefs within the Muslim community or because parents worry that education will not benefit their daughters due to discrimination in the workplace. In poorer parts of India, families are more likely to spend money on educating boys than girls (Lancaster *et al*, 2008). Thus, research shows a clear bias towards educating boys over girls. This leads to more boys getting an education, which explains the unequal learning outcomes mentioned earlier.

## **Child Marriage**

Child marriage is defined as "Any formal or informal union involving at least one child under the age of eighteen" (UNICEF, 2020). This is still practiced in many countries even at present. Child marriage is a huge problem. Each year, millions of girls, about 12 million, are forced to marry before they are even adults. A staggering 650 million women alive today were married as children (UNICEF, 2020). Being forced to marry young takes away a girl's chance to get an education. Studies, like international

household survey results published in the 2017 Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: Global Synthesis Report, mention this as a major reason why girls drop out of school (Wodon *et al*, 2017). Adding to this, getting married young often means a girl has to take on household responsibilities and raise children. This makes it very difficult for her to keep going to school (Ibid. 2017). Laws against child marriage have been enacted and have been in existence for a relatively long time, but the problem is that they are not enforced well enough. In some cultures, people see marriage as a way to protect their daughters, so they get married young. This hurts their chances of getting an education. This general finding is confirmed by a study conducted by the Harvard FXB Center in collaboration with the Indian Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in 2013. The study was based on a 376-household survey, focus groups and key informant interviews across five villages in North-Western Gujarat. This report shows how being forced to marry young and being seen only as future wives severely limits girls' chances of getting an education.

Data from another study in Gujarat (Parmar, 2016) shows that poor rural girls face many challenges in getting an education because of poverty, social expectations, and pressure to marry young. Studies show that married girls are more than twice as likely to be out of school compared to unmarried girls. This is because married girls (and even those engaged) are expected to take care of their families. The reason behind this is that the families worry about their daughters' reputations and future after marriage. As married girls often have to take on household responsibilities, the need for education is not a priority. Getting married as a child hurts a girl's chances of an education and makes it harder for her to get a good job and support herself later in life.

## **Gender-based violence**

Violence against girls is a social problem that affects millions of people everywhere, regardless of background. It can take many forms, from physical threats to emotional abuse, and it happens both at school and in communities. This violence is rooted in unfair ideas about what girls and boys can or cannot do. It is defined as "Acts or threats of sexual, physical or psychological violence, occurring in and around schools, perpetrated as a result of gender norms and stereotypes, and enforced by unequal power dynamics" (UN Women, 2016). Worldwide, an estimated 246 million children experience school-related violence every year. Unfair expectations around gender roles, and who has power, lead to many forms of violence against women and girls, including bullying, physical abuse, and sexual assault (UNESCO, 2023).

Research reveals that violence in schools is a serious issue worldwide. Female students are disproportionately affected by this abuse due to a complex mix of factors, all rooted in gender inequality (Human Rights Watch, 2020). School violence is not just about what happens within the school walls. It can happen anywhere – on the way to or from school, at recess, or even in lessons. This broader definition also considers violence against students outside school hours, if it is related to their school experience (Merrill *et al*, 2018). The report highlights that those close to a child, like family members, caregivers, or even teachers and classmates, could be the ones hurting them (Ferrara *et al*, 2019). Witnessing violence can have lasting negative effects on children's confidence and ability to succeed. This violence, whether through words, actions, or neglect, is a serious public health issue because it

happens during a crucial time in a child's development and can deeply impact their mental health. It's also a violation of their basic human rights, hindering their natural growth and potential. There are two main ways this violence can happen: directly (like physical or sexual assault, threats, or forcing someone to do something), and indirectly (through bullying, name-calling, or emotional abuse). Both can be related to gender (Ngakane *et al*, 2012). It has been observed that labelling of gender-based rules makes school-going girls more vulnerable to such violence (UNESCO, 2017).

Being victims of violence in school hurts these young women in many ways. It can harm them physically and emotionally, and their ability to succeed in school in the long run. Despite this, violence against girls at school is often treated the same way as any other kind of school violence (Dunne *et al*, 2006; UNESCO, 2017). The study on how social and economic background affects student behaviour surprisingly revealed that cultural norms are a major factor in gender-based violence. Even in schools, where these norms might be challenged, they often go unquestioned. The study looking at how a child's family background affects the child's behaviour at school found that social and economic factors also play a role in how and why aggression happens in school (Stalmach *et al*, 2014). Children from low-income households and single-parent families were victims of violence in larger numbers than other socio-economic groups. The global report – "Progress of the World's Women 2019-20" shows that single-parent families in India account for 12.5 per cent. In India, poverty and social standing are strong predictors of who experiences violence and exclusion in schools. Factors like caste, social class, gender, disability, and even where you live, all play a big role in how students are treated (Kurian, 2015; Garg, 2017).

New technologies for learning and communication have transformed education, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Online platforms have become increasingly important for teaching and sharing knowledge. Many schools even switched to online learning entirely during the pandemic. This provided opportunities for the students to access various online sites, and has had a negative impact. For example, WhatsApp groups formed by teachers to share and exchange notes and learning were misused by some students to harass their classmates, and it was more often the female students who became the victims. Even though research showed that violence against students based on gender has reappeared online, it was predicted to keep happening after the end of the Covid pandemic (Global Fund for Women, 2020). That has come true as online classes have been completely stopped and students are back to normal classroom learning; but students have devices with internet connectivity and are misusing them, and mostly it is the girls who are victimised. This became evident in our study, where teachers said that they were receiving complaints from female students regarding boys sharing their WhatsApp profiles with their friends without obtaining any consent from the girls.

## **Policies and Programmes Focusing on Girls' Education**

After Independence, India took several steps to improve women's education. Recognising women's role in development, the First Five-Year Plan (1951-1956) focused on healthcare, education, and other programmes. This plan aimed to offer equal educational and job opportunities for women and girls.

In the 1950s, the government began focusing specifically on girls' education, encouraging parents to value their daughters' education. Programmes like condensed school courses for adult

women, and training for childcare workers were launched. Despite efforts, disparities persisted in educational access between boys and girls. The Kothari Commission report (1966) focused on girls' education, the education of backward classes, education of tribal people, and that of the physically and mentally handicapped children. In the 1970s, initiatives were based on reports from the Education Commission and the National Policy on Education. The Fifth Five-Year Plan (1974-1978) coincided with the International Women's Decade and produced a significant report on women's status, highlighting new inequalities due to social and economic changes. This Plan aimed to create equal educational opportunities and improve education quality by offering free textbooks, meals, uniforms, and scholarships for girls, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Sixth Five-Year Plan (1980-1985) emphasised universalising elementary education and included measures like attaching childcare centres to preschools, hiring more female teachers in rural areas, and building hostels for girls from remote areas. The National Education Policy 1986 gave prominence to a child-centric approach in elementary education, followed by a secondary education giving importance to girl child education and SC, ST, and BC categories. The Seventh Five-Year Plan (1985-1990) prioritised removing obstacles to women's literacy and retaining them in school. The Eighth Five-Year Plan (1992-1997) ensured women were equal partners in development. The Ninth Five-Year Plan (1997-2002) focused on educating girls and addressing challenges like long-distance travel to schools. The Tenth Five-Year Plan (2002-2007) aimed to universalise elementary education, closing the education gap between boys and girls with programmes such as Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) and the National Programme for Education of Girls at the Elementary Level (NPEGEL).

The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), launched in 2001, aimed to achieve Universal Elementary Education, but did not fully meet its ambitious goals. Despite progress, significant challenges remained. The new education policy (NEP 2020) has the potential to improve education for women and girls in India. However, for this to happen, the policy needs to be implemented effectively. This means following through on the parts of the plan that specifically aim to address gender inequality. Additionally, other programmes are needed to tackle social and economic disadvantages that hold girls back. By taking these steps, NEP 2020 can truly make a difference for women's rights in India since it introduces several programmes such as gender inclusive education, empowerment of female teachers and a holistic curriculum and gender sensitisation.

The New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has ambitious goals to improve education, especially for girls. By 2030, it aims for 100% school enrolment, safe transportation, dorms for students in remote areas, and basic facilities like clean water, separate toilets, and hand washing stations. The policy emphasises tracking student progress, addressing dropouts, and offering online schooling options. The Right to Education Act will extend through Grade 12, ensuring free education. These measures aim to create a safer, inclusive learning environment for all students, particularly girls.

Institutions play a vital role in implementing these policies. The Department of Primary and Secondary Education collaborates with teachers, community groups, and organisations to enhance learning. Recent initiatives include adding the English language and preschool programmes, revamping special education, and making public schools more accessible and attractive, especially for girls. Specific programmes aim to increase girls' enrolment and retention in schools, highlighting the crucial role of

stakeholders in these efforts. For instance, The Government of India has implemented various campaigns and schemes to increase school access for children, especially girls. The Baa Baale Shaalege campaign targets the 300,000 out-of-school children, half of whom are girls, by involving local organisations like women's self-help groups and associations to open two residential schools in remote North-eastern Karnataka for girls who had dropped out.

The Beediyinda Shaalege programme (Karnataka) addresses the education of street children in urban areas, separated from their parents due to socio-economic conditions. This programme relies on voluntary agencies and institutions active in social and educational fields to provide education to these underprivileged children. The Mid-Day Meal Scheme, a central government programme, aims to improve attendance, reduce dropouts, and enhance learning by increasing children's nutritional levels. Implemented in partnership with state governments, it covers all government and aided schools, focusing on bringing disadvantaged children to school and retaining them.

The Free Uniform Distribution scheme provides uniforms to all students in government and government-aided schools from classes 1 to 10. The Vidya Vikasa Scheme supplies free shoes and socks to these students. The Free Bicycle Distribution scheme, initiated in 2006-07, originally targeted girls in class 8 from Below Poverty Line (BPL) families in remote areas. It was later extended to boys, aiming to reduce tardiness and increase school attendance.

The Ksheera Bhagya Yojane, introduced in 2013, provides milk to children in government and aided schools from classes 1 to 10 three days a week to combat anaemia, malnutrition, and improve learning abilities. The Suchi Scheme promotes menstrual hygiene by distributing sanitary pads to girls in government and aided schools, and the distribution is facilitated by school authorities. Local bodies, empowered by the 11th Schedule of the Indian Constitution and the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments, manage educational programmes at the local level. Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) and structures like Village Education Committees (VEC), School Development and Management Committees (SDMC), Parent Teacher Associations (PTA), Mother Teacher Associations (MTA), and Women Motivator Groups (WMG) ensure community participation in education.

Research demonstrates the importance of community participation in the development of education. Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2010) observed that everyone in a community should work together to ensure all children get a good education. This means setting up systems and programmes that involve different people. Community members alongside teachers and educators can all play a role in these efforts. Some ways to help include improving school buildings, making schools run more smoothly, and providing a better quality of education. The success of education in the long run depends on both people's support and their active involvement.

The Centre for Child and the Law, NLSIU (2011) found that the School Development and Monitoring Committee (SDMC) could be the best institutional mechanism as part of decentralised democratic structures to make state-run schools provide equitable quality education. The research showed that government involvement can be very effective in improving elementary education. However, this success relies on two key ingredients: a democratic system where everyone has a say in how education works, and enough funding and training for those involved. The functioning of the Village Education Committee (VEC) improved considerably after an experimental intervention was done,



and the VECs were very active to discuss many issues related to curricular and co-curricular, school, finance, infrastructure and general matters (Nirmala and Selvi, 2012).

**Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs):** They play an essential role in school education, and many of them focus on providing education to disadvantaged and marginalised communities, particularly in rural areas. These organisations work towards increasing access to education, improving infrastructure, and addressing socio-economic disparities in educational opportunities. They have played a crucial role in promoting child-centred education, activity-based learning and the use of technology in classrooms. NGOs had a role in complementing the government's efforts in addressing gaps in the provision of education, advocating for inclusive and quality education, and bringing innovative approaches to the forefront. For example, the Akshara Foundation has set up Karnataka Learning Partnership for channelling change through the collective action of multiple stakeholders addressing the public education space in Karnataka. This Karnataka programme is a ground-breaking approach to improving public education. It combines modern technology like web data analysis, mobile apps, and voice response systems with existing paper records. This creates a clear and reliable system that everyone can trust. It also brings together public, private, and government organisations to tackle the challenges of education as a team. Another NGO is Parikrama Humanity Foundation which gives free high-quality CBSE English education to children coming from 99 slums and four orphanages in Bengaluru by providing three meals and health check-ups. Each child is supported right from the age of 5 to 25 years by supporting formal college education or vocational training as well as extensive mentorship programmes and career counselling. Azim Premji Foundation focuses on Government Organisations (GOs), and is playing an increasingly important role in improving education, especially in areas where government resources are limited. These organisations work alongside governments to strengthen various aspects of schools, including training teachers, developing textbooks and curricula, and encouraging innovative teaching methods. Their focus is on providing high-quality education for all students through the existing network of public schools. NGOs are particularly valuable in underserved communities facing challenges that hinder education and overall quality of life.

## **Ground Realities of the Rural and Urban Areas Studied**

The study was carried out in the villages of Mulbagal taluk of Kolar district, and a low-income neighbourhood – Baiyappanahalli of Krishnarajapuram taluk in Bengaluru Urban district during the period 2021-2022<sup>3</sup>. Data about rural and urban areas will be discussed separately to get a better understanding of the situations as there are differences due to their locations.

**Methodology:** The paper is based on the data and findings from the above study carried out both in rural and urban locations of Karnataka. Data were collected using both quantitative and qualitative methods covering a sample of 75 students from two grama panchayats: viz., Kurudumalai and

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<sup>3</sup> This is part of the study for the PhD degree on the 'Barriers to Girls' Secondary School Education: Role of Family and Community in Karnataka'.

Mallanayakanahalli of Mulbagal taluk in Kolar district to representing the rural area, and 50 students from Baiyappanahalli slum in Bengaluru Urban district to represent the urban area. Principles of ethical research were followed, and the fieldwork was carried out after a formal approval of the Ethics Committee of the Institute, which sanctioned the planned research. ***Mallanayakanahalli grama panchayat*** has a total geographical area of 40.63 hectares with 1354 households and a total population of 7187 persons spread across 14 villages. The main occupation of the people is agriculture, and a subsidiary occupation is dairying. The caste composition of the panchayat included 52 per cent of the households who were other backward groups such as Kurubas, Agasas, Ganigas, and Gollas, 42 per cent of the households were SCs, 3.4 per cent were STs, and 2.6 per cent were minorities. A majority of the population were marginal and landless farmers, and they depended on wage labour to supplement their income from agricultural labour. The grama panchayat has 17 elected representatives of whom 10 are women. The facilities in the panchayat include 12 Anganwadi centres, 10 lower primary schools, two higher primary schools, one high school, one Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) girls' residential school, one private school, namely Delhi Public School, a pre-university college, and a library with digital facilities. There is a primary health centre and a veterinary hospital.

***Kurudumalai grama panchayat*** is spread across 427.13 hectares having 1601 households with a total population of 10364 persons spread across nine villages. The caste composition of the panchayat includes 47.1 per cent of the population belonging to other backward groups such as Kurubas, Vokkaligas, Ganigas and Agasas, 31 per cent were SCs, 0.6 per cent were STs, and 21.3 per cent were minorities. The grama panchayat has 19 elected representatives of whom 10 are women. There are 12 Anganwadi centers, 11 primary schools, two upper primary schools, one high school, and a Kittur Rani Chennamma residential school. There is a primary health centre in the panchayat. There is a library with digital facilities. The main occupation is agriculture and about 65 percent of the families are engaged in it, and the remaining 30 per cent residents are engaged in horticulture. The other occupations in the panchayat are carpentry, basket weaving, beedi rolling, tailoring, etc.

The villages in these two grama panchayats are scattered and a few villages do not have access to any bus facility, and must depend on other forms of transport such as autos, two-wheelers and bicycles. Educational institutions above elementary schools, and the libraries (one in each grama panchayat) are situated in the grama panchayat headquarters, making it more difficult for children from villages other than the panchayat village to access it easily.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire for the students, and focused group discussions and in-depth interviews were held with parents, teachers, officials of local bodies, and representatives of local organisations such as Self-Help Groups, and the School Development and Monitoring Committee (SDMC). A total of 125 adolescent students from rural and urban areas in the age-group of 12-19 years formed the sample. The data collection started as soon as the COVID-19 lock-down was lifted, and even then, the people were not willing to interact with outsiders due to the fear of contracting COVID-19. Hence, the support of local non-governmental organisations working in the study areas was sought to contact the participants. Representatives of Grameena Mahila Okkoota (GMO) in Mulbagal, and Association Promoting Social Action (APSA) in Bengaluru, enabled the data collection

process by getting the participants to a place where safe distance and other safety protocols were followed.

## The Rural Sample

The study focused on the marginalised sections of the population residing in the two grama panchayats viz., Mallanayakanahalli and Kurudumalai of Mulbagal taluk in Kolar district. Children from the villages of these panchayats had access to both government and government aided schools as there was only one private school—Delhi Public School, which was not affordable for the poor. The studied villages had a higher proportion of Scheduled Caste groups, and thus, 37 per cent of the sample included members of these groups, 31 per cent belonged to OBCs, 20 per cent were Muslims and 12 per cent were from the Scheduled Tribe groups (See table 1).

**Table 1: Religion and Caste Composition**

Religion & Caste	Rural		Total
	Female	Male	
OBC	15 (27%)	8 (40%)	23 (31%)
SC	23 (42%)	5 (25%)	28 (37%)
ST	6 (11%)	3 (15%)	9 (12%)
Muslim	11 (20%)	4 (20%)	15 (20%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>55 (100%)</b>	<b>20 (100%)</b>	<b>75 (100%)</b>

**Source:** Field data 2021-2022

A majority of the students were studying in government schools in the rural areas, where most of the parents' main source of income was wage labour. Table 2 gives the details of the students studying in different schools and table 3 describes the class in which they were studying. Most of the students were in government schools, seven per cent of the students were studying in government aided schools, and four per cent were in a private school. Students studying in government schools felt that those who were studying in the private school has an attitude that they are better than the government school students in English speaking and discipline. They also mentioned that only children from financially better off households can afford to join the private school whose fees are very high. As Pavithra, who is from a landless labour family belonging to SC community and is studying in class IX in a government school says, children from financially better off households are going to the private school as a matter of prestige, and parents feel that they will be able to speak better English compared to those in government schools. She also pointed out that some of those who were studying in the private school have rejoined the government school due to relatively high fees in the private school, whereas in the government school everything is free, and teachers do teach well in her opinion.

**Table 2: Type of School Attended**

Type of school	Rural		Total
	Female	Male	
Government	46 (84%)	19 (95%)	65 (87%)
Government Aided	4 (7%)	1 (5%)	5 (7%)
Private	3 (5%)	0	3 (4%)
Govt-Hostels	2 (4%)	0	2 (2%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>55 (100%)</b>	<b>20 (100%)</b>	<b>75 (100%)</b>

Source: Field data 2021-2022

**Table 3: Educational Level of Students**

Education	Rural		Total
	Female	Male	
6-7	10 (18%)	0	10 (15%)
8-10	29 (53%)	11 (55%)	40 (53%)
I – II PUC	13 (24%)	4 (20%)	17 (22%)
I Degree	3 (5%)	2 (10%)	5 (6%)
ITI	0	3 (15%)	3 (4%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>55 (100%)</b>	<b>20 (100%)</b>	<b>75 (100%)</b>

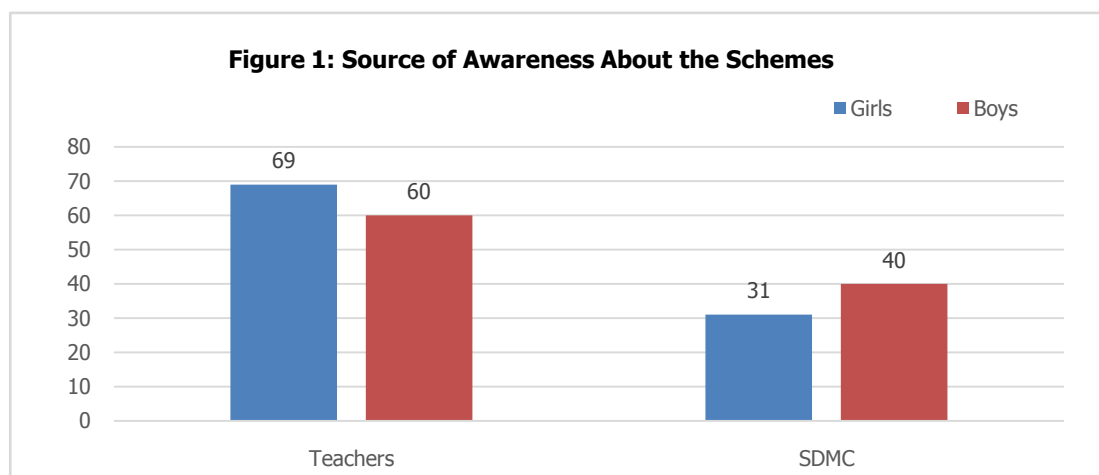
Source: Field data 2021-2022

The data showed that 93 per cent of the students were aware of the schemes that enable the students from weaker sections to continue their studies. A major source of information about the schemes were teachers (67%) and the remaining were students who said that they came to know about the schemes through the School Development and Monitoring Committee (SDMC). SDMCs are found to be proactive in disseminating information related to the school, as the committee consists of the parent body and grama panchayat members, who are part of the community. Information dissemination is thereby much quicker and wider.

**Table 4: Schemes Availed by the Students**

Schemes availed	Rural		Total
	Girls	Boys	
Free books, uniforms	52 (95%)	20 (100%)	72 (96%)
Bicycle	46 (84%)	10 (50%)	56 (75%)
Scholarships	17 (31%)	17 (85%)	34 (45%)
Hostels	2 (4%)	0	2 (3%)
Vitamin tablets	46 (84%)	0	46 (61%)
Girls' toilets	55 (100%)	0	55 (73%)
Sanitary towels	46 (84%)	0	46 (61%)
Mid-day meal	52 (95%)	20 (100%)	72 (96%)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>75</b>

Source: Field data 2021



Many programmes and schemes are implemented with an aim to address the constraints and barriers to being in school, whether due to poverty, poor health and malnutrition, and also by reducing the cost of schooling. Material incentives are provided, such as free textbooks, bags, uniforms, shoes-socks, bicycles, sanitary pads etc., to reduce the cost of schooling on parents. Parents are encouraged to send their children, particularly daughters, to school. The mid-day meal programme aims to improve nutrition and school participation. The merit-based scholarships, school-based health programme, separate toilets for girls, hostel facilities to promote interest in education, are also meant to enable girls to attend school. The type of facilities accessed by the study sample are given in table 4. In total, 72 students have benefited from various schemes, and the other three in this sample were studying in a private school, and were not entitled for any benefits, i.e. their parents must meet all their school expenses. Two girls were able to get admission into KGBV schools (Hostel) which is residential, and to get admission one must write an entrance test and compete for the limited number of seats. In the residential school, they are provided with all the facilities such as toiletries, bedding etc., apart from books, meals and health checkups.

The distribution of free bicycles to students studying in the 8<sup>th</sup> standard in the government and aided schools was introduced in the year 2006-07 as an incentive to the students – especially girl students, to reduce the drop-out rate, and improve their attendance in school to enhance learning outcomes. Later, in the year 2008-09, it was distributed to all categories of students, except for those in corporation limits, bus pass holders and those in hostels. But the recipients of the cycle have a story to tell. Students from the study area felt that the new cycle given was of low quality, as in some cycles the handles and pedals were not set properly, and there were bends in the wheels, and they had to take the cycles to the shop for repairs, spending at least Rs. 200 to Rs. 300. Some of them said that their cycle was lying in a corner of the house and no one used it, after using the cycle for a few months. But there has been a positive effect too, as girls learnt to ride the bicycles and are confident to use them on the roads. Some parents agreed that it has helped children to reach school on time, though they have to keep aside Rs. 100 to Rs. 200 for repair works, such as changing tyre tubes, for repairing wheel chains that get cut etc.

Scholarships have been provided to those who are meritorious, and nine per cent of the sample students had availed it. Mid-day meals are provided to all students studying in government and

government aided schools, and all the children except the ones in the private school benefitted from the mid-day meal programme. There were no complaints raised by our study sample about not being provided meals or their quality. There was monitoring of the mid-day meal by members of the SDMC, and sometimes by members of the self-help group who are part of the NGO Grameena Mahila Okkoota.

Schemes exclusively meant for girls to continue their education were separate toilets with water, vitamin tablets (iron and folic acid), and sanitary pads. All the girls in our study said that their schools had separate toilets for girls and with water supply, but they were kept locked, and they had to get the keys from a teacher when they wanted to use the toilets. Teachers stated that the toilets were kept locked so that their cleanliness could be monitored whenever they were used.

The Shuchi scheme implemented by the Department of Health supplies sanitary pads to the students at government schools, to enable girl students to attend classes regularly and not to be absent during menstrual days of the month. Sanitary pads were provided every month by the teacher who is in-charge of distribution. During the lockdown period, when classes were online, the distribution of sanitary pads had stopped completely, and when schools reopened, the students said that they were not given pads as there was no supply from the government. When we discussed this issue with the teachers, they indicated that they had raised the issue with the department, but the reply that they received from the department was that there was a shortage of funds. Some schools had installed incinerators for the disposal of sanitary pads, and in some schools waste bins were provided and later the pads were burnt. A case of theft of the incinerator was discussed by the head teacher of Kurudumalai high school, that some miscreants had stolen it during the school vacation. Now, the girl students had to use the community toilet which has an incinerator, though it was 300 metres away from the school. The girls indicated that it is a serious problem that they faced, and as one of them said, it is embarrassing to go to the community toilet because everyone will know the reason for her going there, so she does not want to come to school during her periods. This issue highlights the sensitivity of the problem faced by girls, and the Panchayat Development Officer (PDO) who had accompanied us to the school promised to look into the matter at the earliest.

At the grassroots level, to check whether these benefits have reached the targeted beneficiaries, the teachers, members of SDMCs, elected panchayat members, panchayat officials and the NGOs have a role in creating awareness and monitoring them. In the study area, discussions with the members of SDMCs, panchayat members and officials revealed that they were not very active in looking into the requirements of the schools, unless and until they were brought to the notice of these stakeholders by the school authorities. Panchayat authorities said their responsibility is in looking after infrastructure development, and water and sanitation of the schools. From the panchayats, they have set up libraries, and there is one library in each panchayat, located adjacent to the panchayat offices. Each library has books related to educational subjects, fiction, autobiographies, career guidance, functional English etc. It has digitalised materials established by the department of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (RDPR) known as Grama Digi Vikasana. There is a smart TV and a dozen tablets, which contain the lessons for high school students. A visit to both libraries brought out the fact that these devices were not even opened from the boxes, and the person in-charge said that students came to the libraries, but only to read books or newspapers. However, in reality, none of the students

interviewed had visited the library in their panchayat, and the majority were not even aware of the existence of the library. The libraries are located on the main roads close to the panchayat offices, while the homes of the students are spread across a radius of five to seven kms, which made it difficult for them to access either library. This is clear evidence that the programme has had only limited success, and while libraries were set up under the Grama Digi Vikasana, they did not enhance their use by the people for whom they were established.

**Case Study:**

*Aruna is IX class student, studying in KGBV residential school in Mallanayakanahalli. Her parents were landless labourers belonging to the SC community and the family consists of four children, and all are studying in government school. She is good at studies, hence the local NGO Grameena Mahila Okkuta helped her to prepare for the entrance test to get into KGBV for class VI. She says being in the hostel has helped her to focus on her studies, because at home there would have been a lot of disturbance with her drunken father. Being a girl, she would have had to do household work too. She aspires to become a computer engineer. KGBV has classes till XII, and she says without taking any support from the parents, she will be easily able to complete her class XII.*

*She gets free books, uniforms, shoes, sanitary pads, health checkups, free meals, toiletries etc. and need not depend on the family for her requirements. Parents do visit her once a month, and though the hostel is situated in her grama panchayat's vicinity, she is allowed to go home only during the vacations.*

## **Bengaluru Urban District**

Baiyappanahalli slum of Varthur town was notified as a slum in 1999. The slum has 100 houses with a population of 900 persons, of whom 540 are male and 360 are female. The caste composition of the population is 350 persons who belong to SCs, 350 to STs and 200 from other groups, according to the 2011 census. People who live in this slum are construction workers, auto and cab drivers, work in small businesses such as selling vegetables and flowers, or as domestic workers. The slum is situated adjacent to a BDA layout Sadananda Nagar, where the residents are of middle and upper-middle class. Within a radius of 5 kms there are many schools including government, government aided and private schools. Adjacent to the slum is the NGO Unnati, which is engaged in a vocational training and social transformation programme for the underprivileged youths who are less educated and unemployed. Residents in this slum know about this organisation, and some of the youth who had received training in this organisation, are economically better placed and are earning a good salary compared to their parents. The slum being centrally located, has access to basic amenities and to both private and public health services.

## **The Urban area Studied**

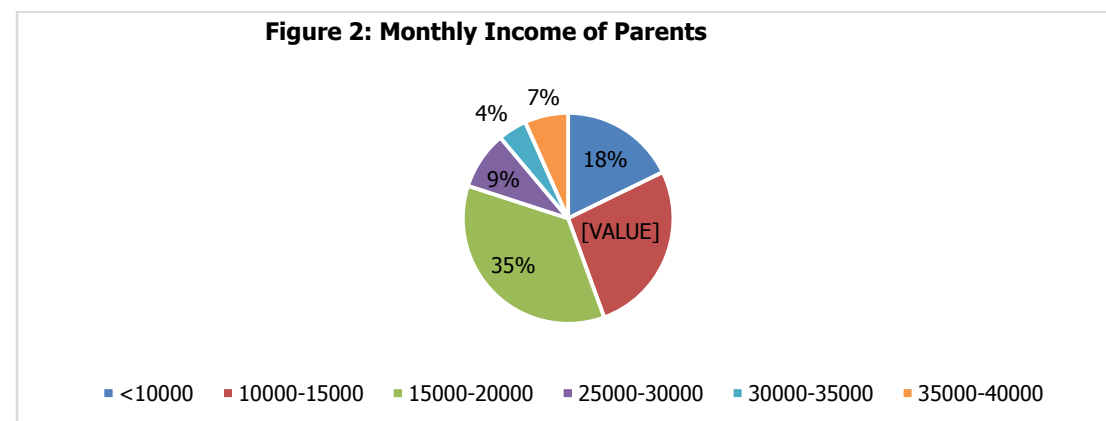
The marginalised sections of society are the ones who opt for government schools in an urban area, and thus, a low-income neighbourhood was selected to understand their access to education, especially for girls. Most of the people living in this area are Hindus, and the rest are Christians and Muslims. The residents had migrated from the North Karnataka region and Tamil Nadu more than three to four decades back, in search of employment. Table 5 shows the caste composition of the sample studied. About 74 per cent of them belong to SCs and 22 per cent are OBCs (Kurubas and Goundars).

**Table 5: Religion & Caste Composition of Sample**

Religion & Caste	Urban		Total
	Female	Male	
OBC	8 (20%)	3 (27%)	11 (22%)
SC	29 (74%)	8 (73%)	37 (74%)
ST	1 (3%)	0	1 (2%)
Muslim	1 (3%)	0	1 (2%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>39 (100%)</b>	<b>11 (100%)</b>	<b>50 (100%)</b>

Source: Field data 2022

Fifty students were the participants for the study, and they were in the age group of 12 to 19 years. Table 6 below shows the educational levels of the students, where 58 per cent were secondary school students, and most of them were studying in government and government aided schools. Hence, they were eligible for the benefits of the schemes promoted by the government. Those 18 per cent of the students who were studying in private schools could not get these benefits, and their parents wanted them to study in a private school as they felt the quality of education is far better than in government schools, and the medium of education was English. Data showed that seven per cent of the households have a monthly income ranging between Rs. 35,000 to 40,000, four per cent whose monthly income is between Rs. 30,000 and 35,000 and nine per cent had an income ranging from Rs. 25,000 to 30,000. This shows that there are households who have a better income, enabling them to send their children to private schools to fulfill their aspiration of having an educated generation to lead a better life than themselves. The graph below shows the income levels of the households.

**Figure 2: Monthly Income of Parents**

Source: Field data 2022

**Table 6: Educational Level of Students**

Education	Urban		Total
	Female	Male	
6-7	10 (25%)	2 (19%)	12 (24%)
8-10	23 (60%)	6 (54%)	29 (58%)
I – II PUC	6 (15%)	3 (27%)	9 (18%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>39 (100%)</b>	<b>11 (100%)</b>	<b>50 (100%)</b>

Source: Field data 2022



Parents of the private school children felt that besides getting an education in English, they will be more disciplined and well-mannered, and it would be easier for them to get a good job. All the mothers in the sample were domestic workers and their interaction with the household members where they were working had an influence on them. They were observing the children of those households, and wanted to educate their children in private schools in order to have a better life than themselves. Domestic workers were working in three to four houses to earn a good income to send their children to private schools, and during the beginning of the academic year, they also get monetary support from the households where they are working, to pay for the education of their children.

**Table 7: Type of School Attended**

Type of school	Urban		Total
	Female	Male	
Government	23 (60%)	5 (46%)	28 (56%)
Aided	13 (33%)	2 (18%)	15 (30%)
Private	3 (7%)	4 (36%)	7 (14%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>39 (100%)</b>	<b>11 (100%)</b>	<b>50 (100%)</b>

Source: Field data 2022

The sample data shows that those who were studying in government and government aided schools were able to get benefits of the schemes. Table 8 and 9 below indicates their awareness of the schemes and the source from where they came to know about them. All the girls knew about the schemes, and their teachers were the main source of information, though a few students got to know about them through TV and newspapers.

**Table 8: Aware about the Schemes**

Awareness about the schemes	Urban		Total
	Girls	Boys	
Yes	39 (100%)	8 (73%)	47 (94%)
No	0	3 (27%)	3 (6%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>39 (100%)</b>	<b>11 (100%)</b>	<b>50 (100%)</b>

Source: Field data 2022

**Table 9: Source of Awareness about the Schemes**

Source of awareness	Urban		Total
	Girls	Boys	
Teachers	38 (97%)	8 (73%)	46 (92%)
TV & Newspapers	1 (3%)	3 (27%)	4 (8%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>39 (100%)</b>	<b>11 (100%)</b>	<b>50(100%)</b>

Source: Field data 2022

The schemes are said to be available freely for all the students of government and government aided schools. However, students in government aided schools have to produce income and caste

certificates to claim the benefits, such as free books and uniforms, which were available only to those who belong to below poverty line families (BPL). The benefits for the students of government and aided schools were that they had separate toilets with water facility for girls, and mid-day meals. Mid-day meals are entrusted to Akshaya Patra – a NGO, and teachers take the responsibility of serving the meals. Benefits that were available to all the children in government schools were free books, one set of uniforms, scholarships for merit students, sanitary pads for girls, and one albendazole tablet per student for de-worming, as well as annual health checkups.

**Table 10: Schemes availed by the Students**

Schemes availed	Urban		Total
	Girls	Boys	
Free books, uniforms	23 (59%)	5 (45%)	28 (56%)
Scholarships	4 (10%)	2 (14%)	6 (12%)
Girls' toilets	39 (100%)	0	39 (78%)
Sanitary Pads	23 (59%)	0	23 (46%)
Mid-day meal	36 (92%)	7 (64%)	43 (86%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>50</b>

Source: Field data 2022

The data show that there were no SDMCs in government schools, though there were parent-teacher meetings, and parents, especially mothers, attend them. Mothers of the children studying in the private school do attend these meetings, while others said they do not get the time to attend the meetings regularly, but they do so at least once or twice in a year. Thus, parents do not have much knowledge about the schemes that are available for their children. They are aware of free books, uniforms and the midday meals, and that sanitary pads are given to girls.

**Case Study:** Bhuvana is a X standard student studying in Government High School, Byaippanahalli. Her father is an auto driver and mother a domestic worker. She has two sisters who are also studying in the same school in class VII and VIII. Education being free in the government school, her parents decided to educate all the three girls there as they cannot afford to send them to an aided or private school. She says if one child is sent to a private or aided school where fees have to be paid, then the other two children will also fight to go to the same school. Hence, her parents decided to send all the three girls to the same school. All the three girls have got free text and note books, unstitched uniform -one set, shoe and socks, mid-day meals, milk every morning and an egg or banana once a week. Since most of the children did not want egg and banana, the authorities have started to give each one a piece of chikki (sweet made of peanuts and jaggery) two days in a week. Since students have to wear three different coloured uniforms on different days in a week, parents have to buy a set of white uniform and blue uniform. A sanitary kit containing 8-10 pads is provided every month to girls studying in class VIII to X. Yearly once a tablet for de-worming is given to each student and once a year health camp is conducted to check dental, eye, and general health, and sessions are taken on menstrual hygiene. There are no parent-teacher associations or any committees in the school. Only parents are called for a meeting once in 2-3 months, if her mother finds time, she attends it. Bhuvana and one of her younger sisters have got scholarships.

We go back to the question whether the educational schemes in the state have brought positive changes among the weaker sections of society in accessing education. The main focus is on girl students, as studies have pointed out that girls drop out more often than boys, as they move on to higher classes. Hence, there were policies framed at different points of time to see that girls continue their education. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan focused on universal enrolment in elementary schools, and

thereafter, the thrust was to reduce the dropout rate in secondary schools. It was also seen that elementary schools were within a radius of one km, and secondary schools were within five km so that children reached school on time. Schemes such as free books and uniforms, separate toilets for girls with water facilities, distribution of sanitary pads etc., have been very useful for girls as it has enabled them to continue their secondary schooling. Still, we find that accessing girls' toilets in rural schools has been a problem as the students had to depend on teachers to unlock the toilets, and there was no proper disposal mechanism for used sanitary pads. The bicycle scheme introduced to enable girl students to reach schools on time were costly for the parents who had to spend money to make them functional. In the urban area, which had a larger population, reaching school was not as difficult as in the rural areas, as there are various modes of transport facilities available. The urban area has all types of schools catering to the needs of different people, most of the weaker sections opted for government schools, and among the people of the slum, those who felt that they have to give a better-quality education sent their children to government aided and private schools.

## **Conclusions**

In conclusion, while various schemes have made significant strides in promoting access to education, particularly for girls, there remain critical challenges that need urgent attention. Delays in the distribution of essential resources like books, uniforms, and sanitary pads, coupled with the lack of functioning of SDMCs, underscore systemic issues that hinder effective implementation. Additionally, the disparity in the quality of education and access to entitlements between rural and urban areas highlight the need for more equitable distribution and monitoring mechanisms.

The involvement of elected representatives from local governing bodies, along with enhanced participation of parents in SDMCs, could greatly strengthen school functioning and ensure accountability. Furthermore, simplifying processes such as RTE quota application to mitigate discrimination faced by children from lower-income families is imperative.

Despite these challenges, it is evident that these schemes have had a positive impact, particularly in encouraging girls to continue their education. Moving forward, concerted efforts must be made to address the identified shortcomings and ensure that every child, regardless of her background, has equal access to quality education, and the support that she needs to succeed in gaining a higher level of education.

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