



Transforming India through *educating girls*

Indian girls are no longer a liability for families. Several schemes launched by the government have not only transformed their lives but have also brought about a change in the mindset of the society

text | Vikas Khanna

As India celebrates the National Girl Child Day on January 24, which is aimed at reducing female foeticide, improving the skewed sex ratio and educating girls, it is a matter of grave concern that discrimination, violence and lack of equal opportunities continue to haunt them. Concerned over the diminishing number of girls, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* (Save the Daughter, Teach the Daughter) campaign last year. The idea was to improve child sex ratio – the number of girls born for every 1,000 boys – and gender equality through access to education. Despite successive governments' efforts, the child sex ratio dropped from 964 in 1971 to a low of 918 in 2011. A United Nations survey presented a grim scenario when it observed the decline was reported in more than two-thirds of districts in the country between 2001 and 2011. What is reprehensible is that the problem is worse in urban areas. For example, Delhi recorded one of the lowest child sex ratios of any state, with 871 girls born for every 1,000 boys in 2011.



Condemning the selective abortion despite its ban, PM Modi said: "Girls are commonly killed in their mothers' wombs and we don't feel the pain. We don't have a right to kill our daughters." At a time when social indicators like maternal mortality have improved due to the efforts of the government, the increasing number of female foeticide cases poses severe challenges. A 2011 study published in a British medical journal found that as many as 12 million Indian girls may have been selectively aborted between 1980 and 2010.

In fact, the objective behind celebrating the National Girl Child Day was to create social awareness about the importance of girl child in society and to create better opportunities for her welfare. It is in this context that several girl child specific schemes were launched by the Government of India to end the discrimination they face.

Beti Bachao Beti Padhao has been designed to focus on 100 gender critical districts where the child sex ratio is particularly low by enforcing existing laws that criminalise pre-birth gender selection and by improving girls' school attendance, among other measures. The main





thrust of the campaign is that there should be 1,000 girl child births for every 1,000 male child births.

Sukanya Samridhi Scheme, launched last year, is aimed at encouraging people to save for education and marriage of girl child. Under the scheme, the accounts can be opened in the name of two girl children up to 10 years of age in post offices or scheduled commercial banks. With a minimum investment of ₹1,000 a year, the scheme offers 9.1 per cent annual interest.

Though the money can be withdrawn only after the girl attains the age of 21, premature withdrawal of 50 per cent of the amount at the end of the previous financial year is allowed for the purpose of the girl's higher education

or marriage after she turns 18. The idea is to encourage financial inclusion and increase domestic savings.

The *Balika Samridhi Yojana*, which was started in 1997, was aimed at changing the negative attitude of families and communities towards the girl child by increasing enrolment and retention of girls in schools; raise the marriage age of girls and creating income opportunities and activities. The scheme involved a gift of ₹500 to the mother on the delivery of a baby girl and an annual scholarship for education till Class X. The amount of scholarship increased with the girl moving up in classes. It was noticed that early and forced marriage stood in the way of girls' progress. Girls, who are child brides, miss

Sukanya Samridhi Scheme encourages people to save for a girl's education



out on education and are more vulnerable to physical and sexual violence, and bear children before they are physically or emotionally prepared. The cycle of violence that begins in girlhood carries over into womanhood and across generations. The idea behind the scheme was to address their needs and unlock their potential.

Similarly, the Women and Child Development Ministry came out with a scheme called *Dhanalaksmi* to make cash transfer to the girl child family to ensure immunisation, school enrollment and maintenance up to the Class VIII. Under the Right to Education Act, free and necessary education to the girl child has been made available. Then there are self-help groups in

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order to make better the livelihood of girls in rural areas.

The success of these schemes can be gauged from the fact that more and more girls are today creating a niche for themselves and

bringing laurels to the country.

However, there is an urgent

need to adopt and implement laws and policies to end early and forced marriage. The government's

efforts can succeed if communities are

also mobilised against the practice.

Until we create awareness about the benefits of women education, these programmes will not bring about the desired result.



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