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# Empowering Young Women to Complete Higher Education in India

## New Evidence from Young Lives

### Overview

**Empowering young women to successfully complete higher education is crucial not only for individual career opportunities and personal fulfilment, but also for society as a whole, by fostering gender equality and promoting overall economic progress.** The importance of supporting all women and girls – especially those from disadvantaged groups – to access quality education from early childhood *through to higher education* and lifelong learning was highlighted in the recent G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration.<sup>1</sup> This also reaffirmed the fundamental importance of gender equality in implementing the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals.

**Although India has seen a huge increase in higher education enrolment in recent years, significant gender inequalities in graduation rates remain,** particularly for young women from poor households and socially disadvantaged groups. While there are numerous studies examining gender differences in *access* to higher education, there is limited evidence on *completion* of higher education, particularly in relation to gender inequality.

**New analysis of Young Lives longitudinal data in the southern states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana shows that young women are much less likely to complete higher education than young men.** Significantly fewer young women (35 per cent) had completed higher education by the age of 26 years, compared to young men (51 per cent), which is likely to have long-term consequences for their empowerment and future job opportunities.

**Our findings identify several factors associated with the likelihood of completing higher education, with disadvantages related to poverty and caste seeming to have a disproportionate impact on young women.** Early foundational skills and other individual factors also predict later success: girls with poor reading skills at age 8 and low maths and vocabulary test scores at age 12 are significantly less likely to gain a degree through higher education, as are those who engage in paid and domestic work at age 12.

These findings highlight the importance of supporting girls and women *throughout* their studies as well as supporting those who are most at risk of dropping out before completing higher education.

<sup>1</sup> For more details, see G20 (2023).

**Providing a supportive and enabling environment for all girls and young women – especially those from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds** – to stay in education, with sufficient resources and time to study, is essential to completing higher education. Without it, investment in higher education will be much less successful in empowering women and girls. This should include:

- **Building an inclusive ecosystem for higher education by expanding scholarships and accommodation/hostel facilities**, targeting young women from poor households and socially disadvantaged groups.
- **Challenging social norms that discriminate against girls and women and continue to present significant barriers** to young women completing higher education – engaging across whole communities on issues such as discriminatory gender roles related to unpaid domestic work and caring responsibilities.
- **Shifting gender bias in relation to the educational and occupational aspirations of girls and their parents** – promoting large-scale media campaigns to encourage more female students to complete higher education and promote gender equality in the workplace.
- **Investment in children’s foundational learning** – addressing early inequalities in foundational skills development with long-term benefits for completing higher education and lifelong learning.
- **Reducing early marriage** – particularly tackling underlying causes related to poverty and intersecting inequalities, which also has huge intergenerational benefits across a range of life outcomes.

### The Young Lives study

In India, Young Lives has been following the lives of 3,000 young people in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana since 2001. The study is divided into two age groups: 2,000 young people born in 2001 (the Younger Cohort) and 1,000 born in 1994 (the Older Cohort).

The evidence in this policy brief is drawn from a range of Young Lives publications over the last two decades, including our new research report, ‘**Exploring Factors Affecting Gender Inequality in the Completion of Higher Education in India: A Survival Model Analysis**’ (Singh, Mukherjee and Kumar 2023).

## Background

### *Progress towards gender equality in access to higher education, but inequalities remain*

The higher education sector in India has undergone substantial growth over the last few decades, with the private sector playing an increasingly large role in service provision. The total proportion of young people entering higher education (measured by the gross enrolment ratio)<sup>2</sup> has increased significantly, from barely 1.4 per cent in 1960–61 (Thorat 2006), to almost one-third of eligible students (27 per cent) in 2020–21 (Ministry of Education 2023).

Young women have clearly benefitted from the expansion of higher education, with significant progress towards achieving gender parity in enrolment: in 2020–21, 48.7 per cent of all enrolments were women, compared to only 14 per cent in 1950–51 (Ministry of Education 2023). Nevertheless, beneath these impressive statistics, significant gender inequalities remain.

Several studies show persistent gender gaps in higher education enrolment among those from the poorest households and in rural areas, particularly those belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Backward

Classes (e.g. Ghosh and Kundu 2021). For example, the gross enrolment rate for Scheduled Tribe women is only 19.1 per cent, compared to the overall rate of 27.9 per cent (Ministry of Education 2023).

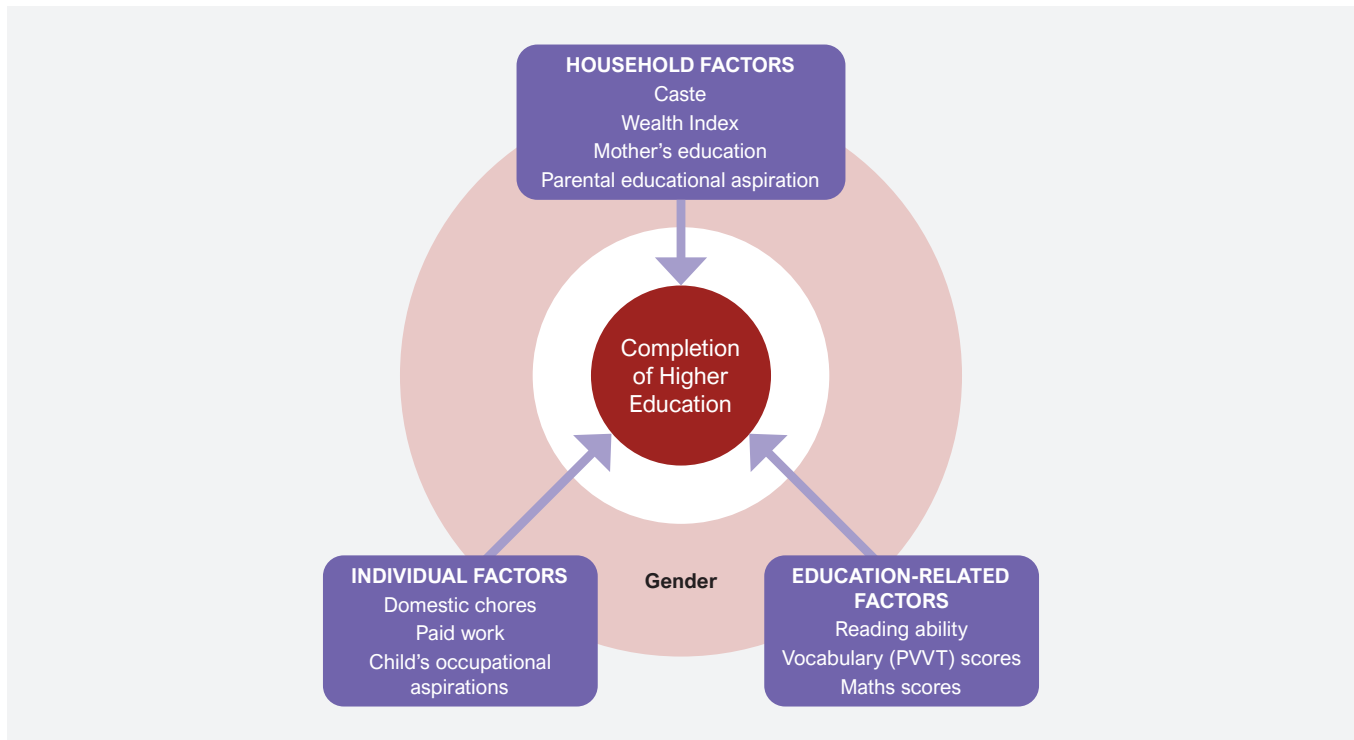
## Young Lives findings

### *Despite progress in enrolment, young women are much less likely to complete higher education than young men*

Among the Older Cohort sample, significantly fewer young women (35 per cent) had completed higher education by the age of 26 years, compared to young men (51 per cent), which is likely to have long-term consequences for their empowerment and future job opportunities (Singh, Mukherjee, and Kumar 2023).

Our new analysis identifies several socio-economic and early life factors that predict which children are most likely to gain higher education qualifications, and which are most at risk of dropping out of education before gaining a degree. We have categorised these into household, individual and education-related factors, and investigated which of these also compound and perpetuate gender inequality (Figure 1).

2 UNESCO defines gross enrolment rate as total enrolment expressed as a percentage of the eligible official school-age population in a given school year (UNESCO n.d.).

**Figure 1.** Socio-economic and early life factors associated with higher education completion<sup>3</sup>

### **Household factors: poverty, caste and other inequalities predict higher education completion**

Our new analysis shows that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are much less likely to complete higher education, particularly those from poor households, from Scheduled Castes and Backward Classes, and those whose mothers had little or no education (Singh, Mukherjee, and Kumar 2023).

When poverty, caste and other inequalities intersect with gender discrimination, young women are often left at a significant disadvantage. Our findings show that young women from poor households and in rural areas are least likely to complete higher education. The risk of not completing higher education is particularly high (1.6 times and 1.7 times higher) for young women belonging to Scheduled Caste and Backward Classes, respectively, compared to those from Other Castes (Singh, Mukherjee and Kumar 2023).

Parental expectations for their sons and daughters' education also play a significant role. Our new analysis shows that a parent's educational aspirations for their children – hoping for them to complete higher education as opposed to lower levels of schooling – are strongly predictive of whether they go on to complete higher education. This builds on previous Young Lives evidence showing that both a parent's and their child's own educational aspirations (at age 12) significantly predict *enrolment* in higher education by the age of 22 (Sánchez and Singh 2018).

While our findings suggest that parental educational aspirations matter for both girls and boys completing higher education, previous Young Lives research in India (and Ethiopia) has shown that *gender bias* in parental educational aspirations can significantly hold girls back, with parents expressing significantly higher aspirations for boys at ages 8 and 12. These effects appear to have intergenerational and long-term consequences for girls' educational pathways. Girls whose parents had relatively low educational aspirations for them at age 8 compared to boys, had lower aspirations themselves by the age of 12. This contributed to gender gaps in cognitive skills and lower self-efficacy and agency by the age of 15 (Dercon and Singh 2013), and educational attainment by the age of 19 (Serneels and Dercon 2021).

### **Individual factors: children who engage in paid and domestic work at age 12 are less likely to complete higher education**

Our new analysis shows that children who engage in paid work at age 12 are 2.4 times less likely to complete higher education, compared to those who did not work at the same age. Similarly, children who engage in domestic work at age 12 are 1.7 times less likely to complete higher education, compared to those who do not.

Interestingly, participating in paid and domestic work at an early age was a significant predictor of not completing higher education for both girls and boys. However, given that girls consistently bear the greatest burden of household duties and childcare responsibilities, this association is likely to disproportionately affect girls and

<sup>3</sup> Higher education completion is defined in our new research as successfully obtaining at least an undergraduate degree (or higher) by the age of 26, excluding vocational and technical qualifications (Singh, Mukherjee, and Kumar 2023).

young women. Previous Young Lives evidence shows that engaging in more than two hours of domestic work per day at age 12 is one of the most important factors explaining the gender gap in completion of secondary education (Singh and Mukherjee 2018). This becomes particularly relevant in times of crisis. During the pandemic, young women undertook the bulk of increased domestic work and looking after children who were unable to go to school. In India, 61 per cent of 19-year-old girls spent more time on household duties during COVID-19 restrictions, compared to only 35 per cent of 19-year-old boys (Favara et al. 2022)

Children's own occupational aspirations are also a significant predictor of higher education completion. Our new analysis shows that 12-year-old girls who aspired to secure a professional job were twice as likely to have completed higher education by the age of 26, compared to those who had expected to end up with a non-professional job.

### ***Education-related factors: poor reading and maths skills in the early years are associated with not completing higher education***

Our new analysis shows that children who had poor reading skills at age 8 are nearly twice as likely (1.7 times) to not complete higher education, compared to those with age-appropriate reading skills (Singh, Mukherjee and Kumar 2023).

Similarly, children with below-average performance in receptive vocabulary and mathematics tests at age 12 are also significantly less likely to complete higher education (the risk of not completing is 1.6 times and 1.3 times higher, respectively), compared to those who performed above average.

These results signal the negative effect of early cognitive skills development on long-term educational trajectories. For example, at age 8, children who were able to write without any difficulty or error were over three times more likely to succeed in progressing through secondary education than children with poor writing skills (Singh and Mukherjee 2015).

### ***Higher education significantly improves chances of decent work***

Previous Young Lives evidence shows that higher education significantly improves young people's chances of decent work, particularly for young women (Favara, Chang and Sánchez 2018). Among our sample, 46 per cent of young women with higher education qualifications were in decent jobs by the age of 22, compared to only 8 per cent of those with below secondary school qualifications. Those who had completed a vocational course were even more likely to have found regular salaried employment, compared to those without higher education qualifications (Singh and Mukherjee 2022).



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## Policy implications

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020<sup>4</sup> recommends a complete overhaul of the higher education system, highlighting increased access, equity and inclusion as one of its key goals, and including the target of achieving gender parity in enrolment to higher education by 2035. While this remains an important goal, there is still much to do to fully deliver the commitments on gender equality set out in the G20 New Delhi Leader's Declaration and Sustainable Development Goal 4.

Enabling gender equality in higher education requires sustained efforts to empower girls and young women from all backgrounds to both *enrol and complete* their studies. This requires providing a supportive and enabling environment for all girls and young women – especially those from poor households and disadvantaged castes – to stay in education and with sufficient resources and time to study.

**Key policy actions to help deliver a supportive and enabling environment for young women to complete higher education should include:**

- **Building an inclusive ecosystem for higher education by expanding scholarships and accommodation/hostel facilities, particularly targeting young women from poor and socially disadvantaged households.** This should include providing safe transport to schools and colleges (which are often at a distance from rural communities) and ensuring safe and girl-friendly environments within educational institutions, such as suitable facilities for water and sanitation needs. Supporting female students to stay in education becomes increasingly critical as girls enter adolescence.
- **Challenging social norms that discriminate against girls and women and continue to present significant barriers to young women completing higher education.** This involves engagement across whole communities – working with boys and men, community leaders, local and national NGOs, and the media – to challenge discriminatory gender roles which often begin in early childhood, including the unequal distribution of paid and unpaid domestic work.
- **Shifting gender bias in relation to the educational and occupational aspirations of girls and their parents.** Schools and the media can both play an important role in challenging preconceived beliefs about what careers are suitable for boys or girls, and related educational aspirations for girls. Large-scale campaigns to encourage more female students to complete higher education should also focus on promoting women's participation across a broad range of sectors, particularly in jobs and professions where women are underrepresented.
- **Early investment in children's foundational learning.** All approaches to supporting young women to complete higher education must be underpinned by continuing investment in addressing early inequalities in foundational skills development in both primary and secondary education, as well as access to affordable quality preschool education.
- **Reducing early marriage, which also has huge intergenerational benefits across a range of life outcomes.** Policymakers need to tackle the underlying causes of early marriage related to poverty and intersecting inequalities, ensuring that vulnerable girls and women are protected by effective safety nets and empowered to fully participate in marital and fertility decision making (Singh and Ford 2022).

## Continuing to follow Young Lives

Young Lives has returned to the field in 2023 to conduct our next comprehensive in-person quantitative survey (Round 7) across our study countries. Our survey will include new data on young people's educational attainments and labour

market outcomes. This will enable us to generate important new insights into the long-term benefits of education and the factors both preventing and enabling young women completing higher education.

<sup>4</sup> For more details, see Ministry of Human Resource Development (2020).

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