



EveryGirl, EveryWoman, EveryWhere

POLICY BRIEF

Adolescent Girls in the North East:
Realizing Rights and Navigating Challenges
2019



OVERVIEW

India has the world's highest number of young people.¹

30% OF INDIA'S POPULATION

365 MILLION
ARE YOUNG PEOPLE
BETWEEN
10-24 YEARS

250 MILLION
ARE BETWEEN
10-19 YEARS

THAT CONSTITUTES
120 MILLION
GIRLS BETWEEN
10-19 YEARS

Recent data tells us that there has been a lot of improvement in the status of young people in India: they are better off health wise, have higher level of achievement in education, and we see a lessening of the gulf between girls and boys in school enrolment and completion. Yet, adolescent girls are still denied the fruits of development, with many of them still deprived of their rights and not meeting their full potential.

Not only are girls not given adequate support to fulfil their educational aspirations, estimates show that on an average, a girl in India receives less than four years of education in her lifetime. As a result, India is home to the largest number of illiterate women in the world — more than 200 million (UNESCO 2014).

Completion of secondary school remains elusive for girls and the opportunity for skilling, to help transition from school to the workplace, is extremely limited.

26.8% OF 20-24 YEAR OLD WOMEN ARE MARRIED BEFORE THE AGE OF 18 YEARS

8% OF GIRLS AGED 15-19 ARE ALREADY MOTHERS².

37% WOMEN ARE STILL DEPENDENT ON OTHERS TO MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT THEIR OWN HEALTH CARE, HOUSEHOLD PURCHASES, AND MOBILITY

As a result, young girls and women face stronger social, economic as well as physical hardships, which further compound their ability to live their lives to the fullest potential. To add to it all, girls and women in India still do not make decisions around their own education, health, marriage or childbearing.



What stops girls in the North East from achieving their full potential?

The situation in North East India, (comprising Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim), with specific reference to adolescent girls and young women is no better than the rest of India.

In certain cases, it compares unfavourably to rest of India, for example, while school dropout rates have reduced in many states, some north eastern states are showing increasing numbers of girls dropping out of school.



Girls Dropping out of secondary school in the North East³

ASSAM 29%	NAGALAND 18%	MEGHALAYA 20%
ARUNACHAL 16%	MIZORAM 21%	



Contrary to common beliefs, prevalence of child marriage in North East India is very high. Although we have laws against child marriage, latest National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data shows that early marriage is prevalent in North East India. Child brides often become mothers at an early age. When girls bear children while they are still children themselves, their lives are put at risk. Complications in pregnancy and childbirth are the second causes of death in girls aged 15-19 in low- and middle-income countries. Child marriages in the north east must be curtailed.

33% of women between 20-24 years got married before the legal age of 18 and 19% of girls between 15-19 years were pregnant or already mothers in Tripura

31% of women between 20-24 years got married before the legal age of 18 and 14% of girls between 15-19 years were pregnant or already mothers in Assam

NFHS 4, 2015-16

¹ 2011 census

² National Family Health Survey 4 (NFHS 4, 2015-16)

³ Data.gov.in



The situation becomes even more grim when we look at maternal health care, especially in Assam.

Assam has the highest Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) in India at 237. The national MMR is at 130.

14% women in Assam and 19% in Tripura, of age 15-19 years were already mothers or pregnant at the time of the survey (NFHS 4), against a national average of 8%. In fact, amongst the states with highest teenage pregnancy were Goa at 64%, followed very closely by Mizoram at 61% and Meghalaya at 53%.



Assam's Sex Ratio at birth has declined from 918 (2014) to 896 (2016) which is lower than the national average of 898

(Sample Registration System, 2016)

Some Policy Initiatives:

Understanding that this growing young nation needs policy, process and governance support, over the past few decades, the Government of India has launched some policies and initiatives that aim at an all round development of adolescents and young people. Some of them are listed below:



Women and Child Development

- Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescents (RSEAG) or SABLA.
- Kishori Shakti Yojana
- Beti Bachao Beti Padhao
- Balika Samridhi Yojna



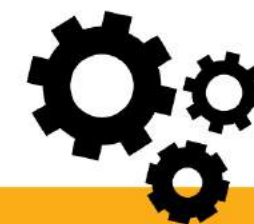
Health

- Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram
- Menstrual Hygiene Scheme
- Weekly Iron Folic Supplementation
- Adolescent Friendly Health Centers under NHM
- Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakarm



Education

- Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan
- Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan
- Adolescence Education Programme
- Mid-Day Meal Programme



Others

- The National Youth Policy
- Digital India and Skill India
- National Skill Development Mission
- Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan programme
- National Service Scheme

Why are girls denied the full realization of their rights?

- **Because they are girls:** Many cultures and families perceive daughters as less valuable than sons. They feel that even if they educate their daughters there will be no return on investment since they will marry into another family and therefore boys are given the chance to attend school instead. In certain cases there exists a perception that educated girls will not be obedient and will be less likely to abide by the will of the father, brother or husband.
- **You don't see the girl - you see a wife, mother and daughter-in-law:** In our society, girls are seen as mothers in waiting and families often see more value in training her to be a wife, mother and daughter-in-law, rather than invest in her education. Girls are asked to carry out household

chores and families prefer to pull girls out of school so that they can help at home or for fulfilling social expectations (marriage). Social norms limit girls' and women's roles to child bearing and rearing, which is why their education is not considered important. It is known that most low-resourced families prefer to invest in the male child, considering their ability to support parents in their old age.

- **Is it safe for her?** Most parents are worried about letting their daughters walk alone to school, use public transport to cover long distances to school or take routes that could be dangerous. This is exacerbated by everyday reports of violence against girls and harassment by boys on the way to school.

- **Girls suffer from the lack of infrastructure much worse than boys do.** There is lack of appropriate support for girls at school, both in terms of infrastructure and access to desired resources. In Arunachal Pradesh, only 46% girls' toilets are functional, which is lower than the national average of 75%. In Meghalaya, only 59% of schools have access to safe drinking water, which is again lower than 95% of national average.
- **Get her married early:** Too often marriage is seen as a higher priority than education. In many communities, girls are not valued as much as boys – they are seen as a burden on their family. Marrying your daughter at a young age can be viewed as a

way to ease economic hardship by transferring this 'burden' to her husband's family. Child marriage is also driven by patriarchal values and the desire to control female sexuality, for instance, how a girl should behave, how she should dress, who she should be allowed to see, to marry, etc.

- **No space in school for young mothers?** Early marriage often leads to teenage pregnancies and in many parts, girls who are pregnant, regardless of their circumstances, get excluded from school.
- **Too poor to educate daughters:** Poor families take their daughters out of school or give them away in marriage because they are poor and cannot afford education for a daughter.

What We Need To Do

Improving access to basic education, building on critical life-skills and decision making abilities, increasing the basket of choices (education, career, healthy life) as well as building an environment that is conducive to adolescent girls' growth, is therefore imperative. The seven sisters of the North East require comprehensive, targeted policies as well as programme level interventions that bring young girls and women into the centre. Experiences and data suggest that women in the North Eastern states have a better social status than the rest of India. The sex ratio in most North Eastern states is either similar to or higher than the national

average (943). This is true for both urban or rural areas, indicating that there is no specific preference for a male child in the region.

Although, rates of incidence of crime, like cruelty by the husband and/or relatives, is high in Assam (59, as against the national average⁴ of 18), this is not the case in rest of the North Eastern states. From this we can infer that girls and women have a more equal space in society. It is therefore important to introduce approaches that build on existing strengths of these states.

*Ten Point Call to Action:

- 1. Design and deliver a cohesive 360-degree strategy.** All stakeholders together must focus on ensuring access to safe, affordable and good quality secondary education, empowerment of women and girls, engagement with men and boys, incentivizing change, advocacy at all levels, influencing public opinion to promote behaviour change, and consistent laws with stricter enforcement. Experience also shows the importance of all stakeholders working together - in consensus. Differing political or mission priorities may lead to diffusion of efforts.
- 2. Design and deliver programmes** to enhance school completion and improve learning outcomes and improve access to education. Put in place qualified teachers, training, curriculum and content so that all girls and boys complete their school education. Scale up initiatives that focus on out-of-school youth and those with limited access to education, including children living with disabilities and indigenous peoples.
- 3. Improve infrastructure** - build and repair buildings, improve school amenities, improve mobility to school, and provide health and nutrition services in school settings.
- 4. Engage parents** and demonstrate the value of educating daughters.
- 5. Put required systems in place** to support livelihood as well as skilling opportunities. Invite government, industry and academia to offer girls and women skills through internships, mentoring programs and training opportunities.
- 6. Support acquisition of employability skills** and preparation for skilled economic activity with comprehensive skills training and facilitate access to information, jobs and markets.
- 7. Ensure safe entry into sexual life, delayed marriage and childbearing** through provision of gender-transformative life, comprehensive sexuality education and access to adolescent-friendly health services.
- 8. Based on the needs of the youth** of the North Eastern states, introduce schemes such as RKSK, SAG/SABLA as well as School Health Programmes in identified districts.
- 9. Ensure the inclusion of the most vulnerable.** Often the most affected are the most vulnerable. Unless specific measures are taken to identify and ensure the inclusion of the most vulnerable (by caste, parental education levels, household poverty, sex and marital status, for example), interventions will risk overlooking the neediest adolescents and diminish our ability to show positive findings at the population level. Programme enrolment must therefore ensure that the most vulnerable are not excluded.
- 10. Prevent child marriages,** and implement current laws better. Given the high rates of early marriages in the North Eastern states, especially Assam, make targeted efforts to:
 - a. Strengthen support for alternatives to child marriage, especially efforts to keep girls in school
 - b. Improve local knowledge of the social and health consequences of child marriage and to encourage attitudes that favour marriage at a later age
 - c. Work with community leaders, tribal heads, institutions of faith and such, towards shifting social norms to increase girls' age at marriage
 - d. Develop institutional and community-based support systems to help families as well as adolescents to make behavioural shifts
 - e. Work with lawmakers, religious & tribal leaders to ensure that early marriages are banned



Conclusion

Whether India achieves her Sustainable Development Goals and population stabilization objectives, and realises the potential of her demographic dividend, will depend on the nation's investment in her young people.

The Lancet Commission on Adolescent Health and Development notes that investments made in adolescent well-being today yields triple dividends – in terms of health and well-being during adolescence, during adulthood, as well as that for the next generation, as healthy and educated parents bear and rear healthy, educated and skilled children (Patton et al., 2016).

Investments in promoting successful transitions to adulthood have the potential to generate large economic and social returns, particularly in low-income countries.

The time is opportune to build the strength and enhance the capabilities of young girls and women in North East India.

⁴ National Crime Records Bureau 2016

* Adapted from report- Supporting transitions from adolescents to adulthood, by Shireen Jejeebhoy, August 2017



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