



## Gender Inequality in Literacy and School Level Education in Slums of Kolkata Municipal Corporation, India

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### Abstract

*Literacy is one of the prime indicators of human development. Though the total literacy rate of India shows an impressive progress since the time of independence, there exists noticeable inequality in genderwise achievement at the national, regional and local levels. Recent researchers have developed evidences showing how education can help in increasing capabilities, like freedom of participation in political and economic processes, use of modern technologies, and protection against legal, economic as well as sexual exploitation, attainment of higher social status, increase child and maternal well-being (King and Hill, 1993). Educational status of women is very important as it determines the nature of employment and earning and eventually it helps to increase the family income. Thus education of females helps to eradicate poverty to some extent. Apart from that, level of education among women leads to good health, avoid burden of general disease, control birthrate and thus, has a very important consequence in the well-being of the individual and family. The females, being the biologically weaker section of the society, are being deprived from having equal educational, occupational as well as health status than in comparison with her male counterparts. The scenario is more intense in most of the developing countries like India. Due to several socio-economic and cultural reasons like poverty, preference towards male child, early marriage of girls, unequal rates of work participation and unemployment between males and females, social and religious beliefs, absence of awareness and conservative attitude of the families, high incidence of illiteracy and gender discrimination of girl child mainly in educational front can be seen. The scenario is worst in the slum areas, which is an indispensable part of large cities in contemporary third world countries. About one third of population of Kolkata Municipal Corporation dwells in the slum areas. The present study is thus concerned with the status of gender inequality in literacy of slums in Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC), which is one of the major metropolitan cities of India.*

**Keywords:** Literacy, gender inequality, female slum dwellers, educational attainment.

### Introduction

The modern society has become more and more knowledge based and acquire of knowledge and skills of an individual determines one's economic entitlement in the society. Social status of an individual as well as the socio-economic development of a country mainly depends on the level of education of its citizen. Education is also the key component of human development as envisaged by social activists and accepted by national and state governments. Greater access to knowledge in its various dimensions builds human capabilities, enhance freedom and empowerment of people and also spread of awareness in all fronts. Thus, the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) adopted by Government of India has advocated for Universalisation for Elementary Education and promotion for gender equity in education as the important objectives<sup>1</sup>.

Since the time of independence, India has made some progress in providing basic education and tackling high female illiteracy but the country is yet to achieve the goal of universalisation in elementary education. The national literacy rate of the country has risen from merely 12 percent at the end of the British rule in 1947 to 74.04 percent in 2011<sup>2</sup>. Due to several Governmental

programme like Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (*Education for all*, which is mainly focused on girl children), national female literacy has also risen from 7.9 percent in 1951 to 65.46 percent in 2011. The gap in literacy attainment between men and women are also slowly narrowing from 1981 (22.1 percent point) to 1991 (20.6 percent point). However, this national statistics disguise the vast regional, gender and caste inequalities in literacy.

The census data on literacy of the last five decades shows that, the literacy rate of West Bengal has remained closer to the national average and the overall gain in literacy from 1951 to 2011 in the state was more or less same of the of the national level. Kolkata, being capital of West Bengal and most populous urban centre, holds supreme position in district level educational development index within the state. Occupying the position of the main urban centre in eastern India, the city continues to attract rural people from its hinterland and adjacent states. However, a large percentage of these immigrants fail to secure proper living conditions and housing for themselves and eventually forced to settle in the slum areas. Like all other metro cities in India, a large percentage of poor people of Kolkata live in the slum areas which can be defined as substandard,

overcrowded, ramshackle, decaying housing occupied by poor, unemployed, unemployable and migrants throughout the city<sup>3</sup>.

Women play an important role in the overall development of any country as it occupies half of the population of the nation. The females, being the biologically weaker section of the society, are being deprived from having equal educational, occupational as well as health status in comparison with her male counterparts. The scenario is more intense in most of the developing countries like India. Due to several socio-economic and cultural reasons, absence of awareness among the mass and conservative attitude of the families, high incidence of illiteracy and gender discrimination of girl child mainly in educational front can be seen<sup>4,5</sup>. The scenario is worst in the slum areas, which is an indispensable part of large cities in contemporary third world countries. About one third of population of Kolkata Municipal Corporation dwells in the slum areas.

**Objective of the Study:** i. To estimate the spatial variation in gender inequality in literacy among females in the slums of KMC. ii. To investigate the causes of such spatial pattern in gender disparity in literacy. iii. To measure the disparity in educational attainment of the female slum dwellers. iv. To examine the infrastructural facilities and different governmental schemes adopted for improvement of female literacy and educational status in the slum areas of KMC

## Methodology

For the purpose of the study, data were collected mainly from different secondary sources like District Statistical Handbooks, Primary Census Abstracts, Economic Surveys and related websites. The author also visited offices of the Survey of India, NATMO, Economic and Statistical Bureau, Government of West Bengal, District Hospitals and Block Development Offices, Kolkata Municipal Corporation to collect the relevant information for the study. The relevant data and the information

have then been organised, classified, tabulated and analysed by statistical methods.

**Slum Scenario of Kolkata:** According to Indian Slum Act (1956), slums are “Those areas where buildings are in any respect unfit for human habitation.” The Calcutta Municipal Council Act (1980) define slum as “an area of land not less than 700 square metres occupied by, or for the purposes of, any collection huts or other structures used or intended to be used for human habitation”<sup>6</sup>. For the purpose of Census of India 2001, the slum areas broadly constitute of “A compact area of at least 300 population or about 60-70 households of poorly built congested tenements, in unhygienic environment usually with inadequate infrastructure and lacking in proper sanitary and drinking water facilities”<sup>7</sup>.

The slums of Kolkata can be divided into three groups- the first one, almost 150 years old in the heart of the city are associated with the early urbanization of the city. Second group was formed during 1940s and 1950s due to rural to urban migration. Those people located themselves around industrial sites and near infra-structural arteries. The third group came into being during the time of partition of India and later during the formation of Bangladesh. They illegally occupied vast urban lands and areas along roads and canals<sup>8</sup>.

In Kolkata, slums are divided into two categories: registered and unregistered slums<sup>8</sup>. The total slum population in the city has increased from 6.26 lakhs (according to KMC Bustee department, 1991) in 87 wards to 14.9 lakh in 141 wards during 2001 (Population Census 2001), which is 32.55 percent of the total population. According to KMC report 2001, there were about 2011 registered and 3500 unregistered slum existing in all the 141 wards within 15 boroughs under KMC (except ward number 42, 45 and 87)<sup>7</sup>.

Table-1  
Study Area at a Glance

Area	Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC)	Male Population	2500040 (2001) 2362662 (2011)
Extent	Latitude 22°34'11"N Longitude 88°22'11"E	Female Population	2072836 (2001) 2124017 (2011)
Area	185. sq. km	Density of Population	24497 persons/ sq. km (2001) 24306 persons/ sq. km (2011)
Borough	15	Sex Ratio (per 1000 males)	811 (2001) 899 (2011)
Total Wards	141	Literacy (in %)	80.9 (2001) 87.14% (2011)
Total Population	4572876 (2001) 4486679 (2011)	Male Literacy (%)	83.8 (2001) 89.08 (2011)
Growth Rate (%)	-1.67	Female Literacy (%)	77.3 (2001) 84.98 (2011)

Source: Census of West Bengal, 2001 and 2011 (P)

Recent researchers have developed evidences showing how education can help in increasing capabilities, like freedom of participation in political and economic processes, use of modern technologies, and protection against legal, economic as well as sexual exploitation, attainment of higher social status, increase child and maternal well-being. Educational status of women is very important as it determines the nature of employment and earning and eventually it helps to increase the family income. Thus education of females helps to eradicate poverty to some extent. Apart from that, level of education among women leads to good health, avoid burden of general disease, control birthrate and thus, has a very important consequence in the well-being of

the individual and family. But, a high level of discrimination in educational front against females can be observed in the slum areas under KMC<sup>4</sup>.

**Gender Disparity in Literacy Scenario of Slums of Kolkata:** Kolkata ranks first in the district level literacy status within West Bengal. However it disguises the fact that gender inequality in literacy and educational attainment in all fronts exists in the city. In reality, it can be observed in a more intense form in the slum areas of Kolkata where the poorer sections of the society live.

**Table-2**  
**An Overview of Boroughs under KMC**

Borough Number	Area (sq. km)	Wards	Number of Slum Pockets	% of Slum Population	Borough Number	Area (sq. km)	Wards	Number of Slum Pockets	% of Slum Population
I	572.64	1-9	104	24.22	IX	1408.74	74-80, 82, 83, 88	118	36.17
II	365.51	10-12, 15-20	82	26.14	X	815.83	81, 89, 91-100	84	17.79
III	2480.6	13, 14, 29-35	93	44.33	XI	2284.11	101,102,110-114	53	30.05
IV	508.00	21-28, 38, 39	82	29.48	XII	4356.01	103-109	84	49.60
V	364.79	36, 37, 40-45, 48-50	66	17.10	XIII	1160.52	115-123	80	19.96
VI	851.65	46, 47, 51-55, 60-62	100	34.50	XIV	2525.61	124-132	83	23.30
VII	4303.28	56-59, 63-67	172	56.69	XV	3510.80	133-141	91	54.71
VIII	445.22	68-73, 84-87, 90	168	23.92					

Source: KMC Bustee Department, 2009

**Table-3**  
**Selected Aspects of Disparity in Literacy Status in Different Boroughs of KMC**

Borough Number	Gaps between Overall Female literacy and Slum Female Literacy	Gender Gap in Overall Literacy (X <sub>1</sub> )	Gender Gap in Slum Literacy (X <sub>2</sub> )	Point Difference between X <sub>2</sub> and X <sub>1</sub>	Standard Score of X <sub>2</sub>
I	30.46	7.43	7.14	-0.29	0.05
II	-8.12	6.68	3.76	-2.92	-1.29
III	11.35	8.97	3.41	-5.56	-1.43
IV	14.69	1.31	4.05	2.74	-1.17
V	16.25	-1.85	5.67	7.52	-0.53
VI	12.67	4.49	9.10	4.61	0.82
VII	6.66	9.21	7.10	-2.11	0.03
VIII	23.86	6.84	8.09	1.25	0.42
IX	8.59	10.84	9.26	-1.58	0.89
X	27.3	8.12	6.34	-1.78	-0.27
XI	13.11	7.5	12.08	4.58	2.01
XII	10.4	10.69	5.60	-5.09	-0.56
XIII	31.13	8.81	11.52	2.71	1.78
XIV	10.13	7.29	5.30	-1.99	-0.68
XV	-10.52	10.84	6.81	-4.03	-0.08
			Mean= 7.02		
			SD= 2.53		

Source: Compiled by the Author

**Note:** standard score = (raw score-mean)/standard deviation

Table-3 shows the different aspects of gender disparity in literacy among general and slum population of KMC. The analysis of the above data reveals the following:

From the calculated data above, it can be seen that with the exception of borough II and XV, the general female literacy exceeds the slum female literacy by a substantial amount. The maximum amount of gap in female literacy can be seen in borough XIII followed by borough I, and the minimum difference is in borough VII. The two instances (borough II and XV) where the slum female literacy exceeds general female literacy may be due to the higher percentage of slum population to total population of these boroughs, awareness among female slum dwellers regarding education and proper implementation of governmental educational programmes.

While estimating gender gap in literacy rate in 15 boroughs of KMC, it was found that in all the instances (except borough V) male literacy rate overrides the female value by a large margin, with the maximum gap are in borough IX and XV, while the minimum gap can be found in borough IV.

In the similar manner, the gender wise literacy gap in different slums of the boroughs was calculated. Unlike the overall scenario, where at least one borough showed a reverse trend, the disparity is quite intense in the slums. The maximum gap can be found in borough XI followed by borough XIII while the lowest value can be seen in borough III.

To access the spatial variation between the overall gender disparity in literacy and that of the slums in KMC, dissimilarity indices were calculated. The summary of the findings is put in Table 3a. It can be seen that the maximum dissimilarity exists in

borough V while the minimum is in borough I. The nature of corresponding association is also summarized in the table.

To understand the concentration of literacy gap in the slum areas of the 15 boroughs of KMC, standard score of the gap in literacy between slum population and total borough population was calculated in table 3. It can be seen that the concentration of literacy gap is much higher in borough XI (southernmost borough of KMC), while borough III shows lesser concentration followed by borough II and IV (all are located in the northern part of the city). This might be due to better implementation of different educational programmes by government and different NGOs, high work participation among female slum dwellers, awareness regarding education, better work participation of female slum dwellers and higher average family income. For better understanding of the scenario, the absolute value of standard score can be categorized under 3 heads shown in table 3b.

**Gender Disparity in School Level Educational Attainment in Slums:** Parity in educational attainment is an important indicator of measurement of social well-being of female in a society. However, similar to the literacy status, significant disparities in level of education among male-female slum population of KMC is visible. Some factors that might lead to this condition are biasness towards male child, poverty, child marriage of women, high cost of education which leads to discrimination against the female child, involvement of young female member in household chores and also in other jobs for increasing family income<sup>1</sup>. Due to constraints of data regarding educational attainment of slum pop at different levels, the study is mainly confined to gender disparities in condition of school level education. This can again be divided into 3 stages- primary stage of education (that include gross enrollment rate also), secondary and higher secondary stage of education and this is briefly summarized in table 4.

**Table-3a**  
**Spatial Pattern of Association of Gender Gap between  $X_1$  and  $X_2$ , KMC 2009**

Dissimilarity Index Value	Nature of Association Between $X_1$ n $X_2$	Number of Units	Borough Number
<3.00	Strong	9	I, II, IV, VII, VIII, IX, X, XIII, XIV
3.00-6.00	Medium	5	III, VI, XI, XII, XV
>6.00	Weak	1	V

Source: Compiled by the Author

**Table-3b**  
**Spatial Pattern in Concentration of Gender Gaps in Literacy, Slums of KMC, 2009**

Standard Score Value	Nature of Concentration in Gender Gaps in Literacy	Number of Units	Borough Number
-2 to 0	Low	8	II, III, IV, V, X, XII, XIV, XV
0 to 2	Moderate	6	I, VI, VII, VIII, IX, XIII
>2	High	1	XI

Source: Compiled by the Author

**Table-4**  
**Disparity in Educational Attainment**

Borough Number	Inequality in Educational Attainment		
	Primary	Secondary	Higher Secondary
I	-8.19	1.96	6.24
II	-5.46	3.03	2.43
III	-6.54	1.44	4.11
IV	-7.2	4.75	2.45
V	-0.49	-1.86	2.35
VI	-4.00	2.06	1.94
VII	-5.2	3.36	1.84
VIII	-4.73	2.32	2.41
IX	-8.73	4.83	3.9
X	-8.08	1.71	6.37
XI	-12.99	3.56	9.43
XII	-12.32	5.26	7.06
XIII	-13.15	9.68	3.48
XIV	-12.75	4.43	8.32
XV	-5.72	3.45	2.27

Source: Compiled by the Author

It is very interesting to note that, though the literacy rate of female slum population of the study area is noticeably lower than that of its male counterpart, a totally opposite scenario can be observed at the stage of primary level of education. Table 4 clearly shows that, in all the 15 boroughs, the enrollment of female slum population in primary education is much higher than that of the male slum dwellers. The maximum and minimum inequality in primary education of the slum dwellers can be seen in borough XI and V respectively. Thus position of female literacy is best at the primary level. At subsequent stages, the status deteriorates. Borough XI, however, offers the most favourable situation as regards the gender disparity in school level education of female slum dwellers.

After this stage, there is a complete reversal in the trend at secondary level except in borough V. The disparity again turns against female population due to economic, social or cultural reasons. The magnitude of gender disparity assumes a more prominent and alarming figure at the higher secondary level of education. In borough XI, maximum value of gender gap in higher secondary education is observed, while the minimum value can be seen in borough VII. In all these, mention must be made of borough XI, which, though recorded most favourable situation for the female at the primary stage, the scenario rapidly changes at subsequent stages and at the higher secondary stage the borough provides the worst situation of gender gap of literacy against the females.

In a society like India, preference towards male child and consideration of a girl as a burden are few of the reasons for gender inequality in education and the slums of KMC are no exception. Thus, the girl children are denied of equal opportunity to education<sup>1</sup>. Added to this, other factors responsible for the existing disparity are high dropout rates among females, early marriage among girls, engagement in domestic as well as economic activities to support families (mainly as domestic maid) at a very young age, conservative attitudes of families, religious taboos, different social constraints and lack of awareness among the mass. Thus, though the early stage provides a hopeful situation, there is a rapid and complete turnaround and dismay of the female population continues.

**Educational Infrastructure Available to Female Slum Dwellers:** To analyse differential performances in literacy development and elementary education, 2 variables were identified by the researchers. These are institutional variables (like basic school amenities, school infrastructure, quality of education) and socio-economic household related variables<sup>9</sup>. Beside this, female work participation rate can strongly influence the literacy and educational pattern of a concerned population.

**Table-5**  
**Number of Different types of Educational Institution in KMC, 2010-11**

Types of Institution (Formal and Informal)	Number	Number of Students		Number of Teachers	Teacher-Student Ratio
		Male	Female		
Primary School	1562	109599	109831	8887	40.5
Primary School Under Control of Municipal Corporation/ Local Bodies	264	14288	14585	870	30.13
Middle School	51	11808	8405	247	12.21
High School	324	204010	230801	6300	14.49
Higher Secondary School	299	101063	99413	9428	21.68
Adult High School	6	330	214	60	110.29
Non-formal Educational Centre	1	10	215	5	22.22
Social Welfare Homes under M.E.E.Deptt.	8	334	306	-	-
Reformatory or Certified Institutions or Welfare Homes under Social Welfare Department for the Juveniles or Destitute Children or the Children of Red-light Areas	140	21644	21504	2939	68.11
Jana Sikshan Sansthan	1	81	896	21	21.49

Source: District Statistical Handbook of Kolkata, 2011

People's access to education mainly depends on the local educational infrastructure. In a metro city like Kolkata, a large number of schools and higher educational institutions are available and many people from suburban or even from rural areas commute daily or migrate to the city for the purpose of availing quality education. But the slum population of the city are not always lucky enough to access such quality education, mainly because of the high cost factor associated with it. Slum children do not have any other opportunity but to avail education in the government schools or the schools run by municipality or any local body. The total numbers of different educational (formal and informal) institutions within KMC are listed in table 5 and it can be seen that:

Though there are ample primary schools within KMC to provide basic education to the children, not all of them are accessible by the slum dwellers. There are 264 primary schools (2010-11 year) under control of KMC or some local bodies which are preferred by the slum population for their child's education. This is due to very low expense or almost free education along with mid-day meal and other facilities provided by these schools that attract slum children. The number of primary school under control of some local bodies or KMC has increased from 242 in 2006-07 to 264 in 2010-11 with a high teacher-student ratio.

Among the non-formal institutions, adult literacy school demands a special mention. According to 2001 census, almost 34 percent of the adults (above 15 years of age) are illiterate in India. The United Nations' "Education for All - Global Monitoring Report (2010)" declared India as the country with the highest number of illiterate adults<sup>10</sup>. In Kolkata, a large number of adults are illiterate and for their benefit, only 6 adult high schools are running within KMC area with a negligible amount of students.

The number of non-formal educational centre has decreased from 50 (2006-07) to 1 (2010-11) due to merging with other centres.

**Governmental Schemes and Programmes:** Several literacy and educational programmes of the Central and State Government are in operation in the district to improve the educational status of the economically weaker sections. Some of the programmes that need mention are:

**National Literacy Mission:** Launched in 1988 with the aim to literate the non-literates of the age group of 15-35 years and out of the school children of 9-14 years.

**District Primary Education Programme (DPEP):** It is a centrally sponsored, externally funded programme aiming at universalisation of primary education. In West Bengal, it is running in 10 districts with the basic objectives of providing access to primary education (Class I to IV) to all children of 5 to 9 years age group, retain children in schools by providing

necessary support and improvement in level of quality of education.

**Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (Education for All):** The National Policy of Education 1986, as revised in 1992, had indicated three thrust areas in elementary education like universal access for enrolment, universal retention of children up to 14 years of age and a substantial improvement in the quality of education to enable all children to achieve essential levels of learning.

**Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS):** Children below 6 years of age are provided with supplementary nutrition, immunization, health check up, referral services, pre-school education.

**Sishu Siksha Karmasuchi (Child Education Programme):** Launched in 1997-98 under the Education Department, Government of West Bengal to set up about 1000 child education centre with the help of Panchayati Raj bodies.

**Mid-Day Meal Scheme:** Launched on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1995 to boost universalisation of primary education by increasing enrollment and improvement of attendance, the programme originally covered children in primary stage in Government, local body and Government-aided schools. The scheme consisted of free supply of food grains (100 grams per child per school day) and subsidy for transportation. In 2004, this scheme revised to provide cooked mid-day meal with 300 calories and 8-12 grams of protein to all children studying in Class I to V in Government and aided schools. The scheme was further revised in 2008 to cover all the children studying in Government, Local Body and Government-aided primary and upper-primary (Class VI to VIII) schools. The calorific value of a mid-day meal at upper primary stage has been fixed at a minimum of 700 calories and 20 grams of protein by providing 150 grams of food grains (rice/wheat) per child/school day.

**Bharti Sunischitkaran Karmasuchi, 2007:** It is a special enrolment drive programme taken by the West Bengal Government to cover huge number of Out of School Children. During enrolment drive, special attention was given to enrolment of girl child, minorities, SC and ST.

**Sakshar Bharat Mission:** In 2009, Central Government launched this scheme with the objective to reduce illiteracy, mainly among women and 9 districts of West Bengal came under this scheme.

**Kanyashree Prakalpa:** Formulated by Department of Women Development and Social Welfare, West Bengal, it is a conditional cash transfer scheme with the aim of improving the status and well-being of girl child in West Bengal by providing incentives for schooling of all teenage girls and delaying their marriage until the age of 18.

## Conclusion

Though the educational infrastructure and ample Governmental schemes to provide the city people (mainly the poorer sections) basic education, but the literacy status of the female slum dwellers of KMC is far from satisfactory. Due to several socio-economic and cultural reasons, a huge number of female slum population are provided with very basic educational facilities or none at all. The gender disparity in literacy among the slum population of KMC is thus quite high. To deal with this situation, proper implementation of the existing Governmental educational schemes within or near the slum areas is needed. The role of NGOs is very important in this regard and the additional educational programmes by the NGOs can be a great help to reduce the illiteracy as well as gender disparity in education among the female slum dwellers. Introduction of night schools and more adult literacy schools can be very helpful too in this regard. Most of all, changes in the mentality of slum population regarding girl child's education and understanding its importance can reduce the disparity and indiscriminate against girl child to some extent.

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