

Re-engaging Women in Education through Open Schooling: Experiences from the UN Women–NIOS Partnership through the Second Chance Education and Vocational Learning Programme

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ABSTRACT

The persistent challenges in India's education system—high dropout rates among girls, lack of accessible secondary schools, inadequate sanitation facilities, and economic constraints—make it clear that conventional schooling alone cannot solve the problem of educational exclusion.

To address this gap, the Second Chance Education and Vocational Learning Programme (SCE) brings together UN Women's community-based approach to supporting marginalized girls and women who have dropped out of education, and the National Institute of Open Schooling's (NIOS) flexible, learner-centred and demand-driven open and distance learning system.

The SCE model offers an alternative pathway that is flexible, community-driven, and responsive to the realities of women's lives. This Article examines the experiences of women who returned to education through the Second Chance Education Programme. Findings from programme implementation and evaluation suggest that increasing girls and women's access to education through a flexible, distance mode and community-based approach empowers them with knowledge, confidence, and skills to overcome social and economic barriers, consistent with the broader goals of sustainable development and gender equality set out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Key Words: *Gender, girls, women's education and skilling, open, distance mode of learning.*

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INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Over the past decade, India has seen a substantial increase in girls' enrollment in education, reflecting the impact of policy initiatives and societal shifts toward greater gender inclusivity in schooling. However, while there has been a decrease in the dropout rates among adolescent girls, they are still alarmingly high, particularly at the secondary and higher secondary levels. This section examines trends in women's education in India over the last decade, juxtaposing the progress in enrollment with the stark reality of dropouts. It also contextualizes the need for interventions like the Second Chance Education (SCE) Programme by examining the key economic, cultural, and systemic barriers hindering women's sustained participation in education.

METHODOLOGY

This article draws upon programme documentation, NIOS administrative data, findings from the Endline Evaluation of the Second Chance Education and Vocational Learning Programme (2024), and selected learner case studies from programme implementation across multiple states. The article is intended as a descriptive analysis of programme experience rather than an impact evaluation.

TRENDS IN WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN INDIA: ENROLLMENT AND DROPOUT PATTERNS (2012-2023)

India has made significant progress in female education enrollment over the past decade, with rising participation in school and higher education. The Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) for girls has shown consistent improvement over the years. According to UDISE+ 2023-24, (UDISE+, n.d) the GER for girls at the primary level is 94.3%, while at the upper primary level, it is 90.6%, indicating near-universal access to elementary education. At the secondary level (Classes 9-10), the GER stands at 78.0%, and for higher secondary education (Classes 11-12), it is 58.2%.

In higher education, female enrollment has increased substantially. The AISHE 2021-22 (AISHE Final Report | AISHE | India, n.d.) reports that female enrolment in higher education increased from 1.74 crore in 2017-18 to 2.07 crore in 2021-22, marking an 18.7% increase. Women now constitute 49% of total higher education enrollment, a significant improvement over previous year.

GENDER PARITY IN ENROLMENT

The Gender Parity Index (GPI), which measures female GER relative to male GER, has shown consistent improvement. The GPI for higher education stands at 1.01, indicating that female enrollment has exceeded male enrollment for the fifth consecutive year.

DROPOUT RATES AMONG GIRLS: A PERSISTENT CHALLENGE

While enrollment numbers are rising, dropout rates remain disproportionately high among adolescent girls, particularly at the secondary and higher secondary levels.

School Dropout Trends (2023-24)

According to UDISE+ 2023-24 (UDISE+, n.d), the dropout rate among girls at the secondary level is 12.6%, significantly higher than in primary education (1.7%). This suggests that while primary education is widely accessible, retaining girls in school beyond Class 8 remains a challenge.

For higher secondary education (Classes 11-12), dropout rates are even steeper. Only 45.6% of enrolled girls complete higher secondary education, indicating that nearly half of all female students do not transition from Class 10 to Class 12. This sharp decline underscores barriers such as early marriage, financial constraints, and lack of nearby schools.

Dropout in Higher Education

Despite improvements in access, female retention in higher education remains a challenge. While enrollment has increased, dropout rates for women remain high, particularly among Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) students. The AISHE 2021-22 report (AISHE Final Report | AISHE | India, n.d.) found that:

- SC female enrollment rose to 31.7 lakh in 2021-22, yet dropout rates remain high due to financial constraints. According to the latest data given by Hon'ble Minister Education to the parliament in 2024, the annual average drop out rate for SC students is 3.56 for upper primary and 12.55 for senior secondary level.
- ST female enrollment saw an 80% increase since 2014-15, but a significant portion of women fail to complete their degrees. For the ST students the dropout rate is higher (6.03 for upper primary and 16.62 for secondary levels)

Why Are Girls Dropping Out? Key Factors Behind the Decline in Retention

Despite increasing access to education, multiple socio-economic and institutional barriers continue to push girls out of the formal education system.

1. Economic Barriers and Household Responsibilities

One of the primary reasons for dropout among girls is economic hardship. In many cases, parents prioritize boys' education over girls', considering their sons as future breadwinners. Additionally, girls in rural areas are often expected to contribute to household work. According to UDISE+ 2023-24 (UDISE+, n.d), in states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, dropout rates for girls exceed 12% in secondary education, as many families withdraw girls from school to support domestic work.

2. Early Marriage and Societal Expectations

Cultural norms still play a significant role in determining educational outcomes for women. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2020-21) (https://mohfw.gov.in/sites/default/files/NFHS-5_Phase-II_0.pdf), 23.3% of women aged 20-24

were married before turning 18, with states like West Bengal, Rajasthan, and Jharkhand reporting even higher rates of child marriage. Once married, girls are less likely to continue their education, as societal expectations often prioritize household responsibilities over learning.

3. Lack of Secondary Schools in Proximity

While primary schools are widely available, secondary schools remain inaccessible in many rural and tribal areas. According to UDISE+ 2023-24 (*UDISE+*, n.d.), a substantial number of villages lack a higher secondary school within a 5 km radius. The absence of safe transportation options, coupled with concerns about girls' safety, leads many families to withdraw their daughters from education after Class 8 or 10.

4. Inadequate Sanitation Facilities for Girls

The absence of proper toilet and sanitation facilities in schools disproportionately affects female students. The Swachh Vidyalaya initiative under the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme has improved sanitation access, yet many schools still lack functional, gender-segregated toilets. This leads to absenteeism, particularly among menstruating girls, which ultimately increases dropout rates.

5. Poor Quality of Education and Teacher Absenteeism

Even when girls remain in school, the quality of education they receive is often inadequate. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER 2022) (*ASER 2022 - ASER: Annual Status of Education Report*, n.d.) found that while enrolment has improved, basic reading and math skills remain low among secondary school girls, leading to low academic performance and disengagement from education. Additionally, high teacher absenteeism in rural government schools discourages regular attendance, further contributing to dropout rates.

SECOND CHANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMME

The Second Chance Education (SCE) Programme, implemented by UN Women in partnership with the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS), provides an alternative pathway for girls and women to re-engage with education. By offering flexible, accredited learning opportunities alongside vocational training and financial support, the programme supports women who have been excluded from formal education to return to learning, develop employable skills, and improve their economic independence.

The SCE model is particularly significant in the context of India's education infrastructure, where traditional schooling systems often overlook accommodating women who have dropped out due to economic constraints, early marriage, household responsibilities, and lack of accessible schools. Unlike conventional educational institutions, which require daily attendance and fixed schedules, the SCE Programme enables women to study at their own pace, reducing barriers related to time and mobility. Moreover, its integration with NIOS ensures that women receive nationally recognized certifications, making them eligible for higher education and formal employment.

Flexible Learning Through Open and Distance Education

A fundamental aspect of the SCE Programme is its collaboration with NIOS, India's largest open schooling system, which offers women a second chance at completing secondary and higher secondary education. The flexibility of NIOS allows learners to study independently, access digital resources, and appear for exams at their convenience. This model is particularly beneficial for women in rural areas, where the absence of nearby secondary schools often forces girls to discontinue education after Class 8 or 10.

For many women, re-enrolling in formal education after years of being out of school can be daunting. Recognizing this, SCE provides community-based learning hubs where women can receive academic support, peer mentorship, and digital literacy training. These hubs not only serve as safe spaces for learning but also foster a sense of solidarity among women, encouraging them to persist in their education despite societal pressures. In states such as Bihar and Rajasthan, where resistance to women's education remains high, these localized support structures have played a crucial role in ensuring program retention.

Programme enrolment and completion data reflect this reach: according to programme records, 4,870 students registered under the SCE programme, of whom 3,375 (69 per cent) passed their examinations. Learners ranged in age from 16 to 60 years. With government-recognized certification, these women now have opportunities to apply for jobs in the formal sector or qualify for vocational training programs, options that were previously unavailable to them due to the lack of formal education credentials.

Beyond Education: Skill Development and Economic Empowerment

While reintegration into formal education is a key goal, the SCE Programme also recognizes that education alone is not enough to ensure long-term empowerment. Many women who return to learning through SCE are driven not only by the desire for knowledge but also by the urgent need to improve their financial independence. To address this, the programme integrates vocational training with academic learning, allowing women to develop marketable skills while completing their education.

The economic impact of this model is particularly significant in rural and semi-urban areas, where job opportunities for women without formal education are extremely limited. The programme supported women in accessing both self-employment and formal employment opportunities, with some participants reporting improved salaries.

According to the programme endline evaluation, participating women reported income improvements ranging from 50–100 per cent after completing education and skills interventions.

This suggests that education, when combined with skill development, has a direct impact on women's earning potential, lifting families out of financial vulnerability. (Endline Evaluation; Second Chance Education and Vocational learning programme, Athena Infonomics India Pvt. Ltd. UN Women, February 2024)

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNT

Despite the positive outcomes documented above, the programme implementation presented significant challenges. While activities were planned and kept evolving to respond to the needs of learners, some problems required more flexibility in terms of teaching support, Tutor Marked Assignment (TMA) submission, examinations, timelines, and support from other governments schemes as we move forward.

In the initial phases of mobilization, the community educators often encountered hostility. The programme team worked with women leaders and Anganwadi workers from within communities to identify entry points and develop contextually appropriate communication strategies. Women learners faced issues with their mobility. In such situations, the community educators had to go to their houses to teach them at their convenience, bringing education to their doorsteps. In the cases where travel was mandatory, the cadre convinced families to allow women to do so.

In tribal areas like Baran, middlemen operate and take large sums of money from students to get them admission and certificates. Once students get a certificate, the middleman connects them for admission to B.Ed or para-medical colleges. To counter this, the programme team in Rajasthan facilitated the enrolment process at the Women's Empowerment Hub. However, this has given rise to an environment of hostility, due to which community educators are present at exam centers to help the candidates in case of difficulties.

Given the patriarchal setup in which the programme was implemented, most often, intersectional issues like caste, religion, and class issues, which are deep-rooted in the social milieu, became a hindrance to girls' enrolment and continuing their education. The community educators had to undertake extensive community awareness on these sensitive issues and explained the universal benefits of education for all, irrespective of class or caste boundaries.

Women reported difficulties accessing mobile technology. In Chittorgarh, for example, the 100 women in the programme mostly own basic mobile phones, which cannot receive learning content via WhatsApp, nor do these phones support online activities. In many families, when the men return home in the evening, they refuse to allow their wives to use their phones.

While the COVID-19-related pandemic created massive disruptions, the cadre found ways in which to remain in touch with the learners, ensure they remained motivated, and did not fall behind in their lessons. Physical classes had to be halted due to the lockdown. In such cases, educators held sessions for small groups who assembled at different people's houses. Those who were owning smartphones became part of WhatsApp groups, received videos and study material, and shared it with everyone. The district lead of Baran said, "We gave tasks as homework, and Learners had to submit it the next day.

PROGRAMME EXPERIENCES: WOMEN WHO RECLAIMED THEIR EDUCATION

The following cases are illustrative examples drawn from programme documentation and should not be interpreted as representative of all programme participants.

The success of the SCE model is best illustrated through the lives of the women it has impacted. Nisha Chauhan from Rajasthan, for instance, resumed her education after nearly four decades with the encouragement of her husband. Through the SCE Programme, she completed her 12th-grade certification and secured employment, proving that age is not a barrier to learning. Today, she actively advocates for her daughter's uninterrupted education, breaking the cycle of early dropout that had persisted in her family for generations.

Similarly, Kajal Devi from Bihar, who was married at the age of 16, had resigned herself to a life of economic dependence. When she learned about the SCE Programme through a local women's collective, she decided to enrol in NIOS. Completing her secondary education enabled her to set up a tailoring business, making her the primary earner in her household. Stories like Kajal's demonstrate that education is not just a tool for personal growth but also a means of achieving economic security and self-sufficiency.

Another compelling case comes from tribal communities in Odisha, where the programme has been instrumental in empowering women who had never attended school before. Many of these women, after enrolling in literacy courses under SCE, have gone on to pursue vocational certifications and find employment in local industries. The transition from being completely excluded from education to becoming skilled professionals underscores the transformational power of alternative education models.

LIMITATIONS

This article is based primarily on programme implementation records, administrative data and evaluation findings. While these sources provide important insights into programme delivery and participant experiences, they do not allow for causal attribution of outcomes. Additional longitudinal research would be useful to assess long-term educational and economic impacts

CONCLUSION

Implications for expanding women's access to education

The persistent challenges in India's education system—high dropout rates among girls, lack of accessible secondary schools, inadequate sanitation facilities, and economic constraints— suggest that conventional schooling may not be sufficient to address all forms of educational exclusion among girls and women.

The SCE model offers an alternative pathway that is flexible, community-driven, and responsive to the realities of women's lives.

This article examined the experiences of girls and women who dropped out of mainstream education and re-engaged through the Second Chance Education Programme, implemented in partnership by UN Women and NIOS. Findings from programme implementation and evaluation suggest that expanding access to education can strengthen women's knowledge, confidence, aspirations and opportunities to overcome social and economic barriers.

Community counselling, peer mentorship, and awareness of tangible educational outcomes can support older women in addressing hesitancy about returning to education. The programme also deals

with learners who are married women, sharing more domestic responsibilities and having many competing demands, and hence is to be seen with a much broader lens. These women in domestic settings lack time, so the education is to be made more relevant and the processes more accommodating.

The experience of the UN Women–NIOS partnership highlights how community-based learner support, flexible open schooling and skills development can contribute to expanding educational opportunities for women who have been excluded from formal education systems.

Since gender equality is a national priority, the programme creates more flexibility, e.g. allowing women and girls to study and sit examinations in two subjects at a time rather than five, reducing pressure on learners while taking advantage of the on-demand examination system. The programme also demonstrates the value of convergence with government schemes in reaching women who have left formal education at different stages of their educational journey.

The experiences of learners documented in this article reflect resilience and persistence in the face of gender-discriminatory norms and structural barriers. They highlight both the challenges women face and the conditions under which those barriers can be overcome.

UN Women and NIOS remain committed to identifying evidence-based approaches to scaling practices that enable girls and women to access education and improve their socio-economic outcomes.

(Bringing back women from the folds of formal education through Open Schooling systems; UN Women, NIOS collaboration, 2022).

The Second chance Education programme not only benefited individual women but had a ripple effect wherein women studying in a particular area, mobilized and motivated other girls/women of here area to join in the programme. Women started investing in their own education and paying their own fees thus gaining confidence and experiencing independent decision-making unthought of earlier. Some women who completed 10th through SCE, then enrolled on their own in 12th, gathered the money to pay for NIOS, and continued taking community classes under SCE.

Given that nearly half of all girls enrolled in secondary school do not transition to higher secondary education, programs such as SCE

Yashoda, a victim of polio disease, and her early marriage also couldn't stop her willingness to pursue her education. She took admission to NIOS (National School of Open Schooling) for the 12th standard twice, but unfortunately, she failed. The intervention of the Second Change Education Program re-ignited her and many other women in the village to pursue education.

At inception, she was hesitant to join, but later she enrolled by paying a fee of Rupees 1700 and is now regularly attending the classes conducted at the learning center. Her endeavors motivated her husband, who also enrolled at NIOS for the 10th grade. Her husband has an aspiration to find a government job in the future. (Bringing back women from the folds of formal education through Open Schooling systems; UN Women, NIOS collaboration, 2022)

may provide useful approaches for expanding access to education among women who have discontinued formal schooling.

Future efforts of both the Government and Non-Governmental Organizations working in this area should focus on:

- Strengthening community-based learning hubs to provide greater academic support.
- Increasing financial assistance to remove cost barriers that prevent women from enrolling.
- Expanding digital education initiatives to make learning more accessible, especially in remote areas.
- Enhancing vocational training linkages to ensure that education translates into economic empowerment.

By addressing these key areas, India can take a decisive step towards ensuring that every woman, regardless of her socio-economic background, has the opportunity to complete her education and build a secure future.

The success of the SCE Programme and its integration with NIOS demonstrates that a second chance at education is not only possible but transformative, changing the lives of women, their families, and their communities for generations to come.

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of UN Women, the United Nations, or any of its affiliated organisations.

FOOTNOTE

UN Women is the United Nations Entity for gender equality and women empowerment. UN Women works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes, and services needed to ensure that the standards are effectively implemented and truly benefit women and girls worldwide.

The National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) is a pioneering national organization that is committed to reaching the light of knowledge by providing high-quality distance education in over 100 academic and vocational subjects to over 6 lakh students a year to every person especially the most marginalized, the girls, transgender, women who

NIOS Gender Policy: A snapshot

- **Strategic Goals:**
 - Enrolment: Increase of girls to boys in NIOS to 50:50.
 - Enrolment: Increase third genders by 10% in the next 5 years.
 - Enhancement in Retention and achievement
 - Gender-responsive academic curriculum and material
 - Sensitization and awareness
 - Budget Allocation
 - Gender-responsive employment and employee facilities.
 - Preparation of Gender Action Plan (GAP)
- The GAP is a strategic tool to help achieve the goal of equality for all genders to access, learn, and complete their education through open schooling systems.

dropped out of school, special category people like street children, persons with disabilities, jail inmates, etc. Its unique On-demand examination system and flexible subject choices, credit facilities with other boards and Training Institutes, and Personal Contact Programmes are making millions of uneducated people, especially girls and women break the boundaries of illiteracy and socioeconomic deprivation.

Although NIOS system of distance education is very suited to the needs of girls and women, the enrolment percentage of girls in NIOS cumulative from 2018 -19 to 2023- 24 is 55.44 percent lower than boys (65%) . (<https://sdmisadmin.nios.ac.in/auth/rc-wise-report>), although, the pass percentage of girls from 2017 to 2024 for both senior secondary and secondary is 48.89% compared to 48.65% for boys. (<https://sdmisadmin.nios.ac.in/auth/rc-wise-report>). There is also a gender discrepancy in the types of vocational courses taken by girls and boys. For example, more technical courses like radio, TV technician, and carpentry are taken by boys than girls. To address this gender gap in enrolment and gender stereotyping in the types of courses taken by girls and boys, NIOS is taking many measures like providing financial incentives through reduced fees for girls, transgender people and persons with disabilities and implementing the Gender Policy under the Second Chance Education programme in partnership with UN Women.

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