

**Brief supporting Evidence Report 47**

**POLICY AUDIT: A HETERONORMATIVITY  
AUDIT OF RMSA – A HIGHER EDUCATION  
PROGRAMME IN INDIAN SCHOOLS**

**Sexuality, Poverty and Law**

Nirantar, a Centre for Gender and Education, India

December 2013

How do sexual and gender norms affect school education in India? How do schools construct these norms? Are state policies and programmes addressing the linkages between sexuality, gender and school education? These are some of the questions that Nirantar, a Centre for Gender and Education, has been engaging with as part of its mandate to ensure that education is empowering for those marginalised because of gender, caste, sexuality and other dimensions of power. Since 1993, we have been fulfilling this mandate through training, development of teaching and learning materials, research, advocacy and community-based work. Our work in the area of sexuality gathered momentum in 2007, when we began working with community-based organisations to help deepen their understanding of sexuality and its linkages with work such as gender-based violence. Nirantar has also undertaken rigorous reviews of curricula and programmes covering adolescence and life skills education, as well as training teachers and NGOs that work with young people on issues of sexuality and gender.

This report shares the findings of a sexuality and gender audit of a national<sup>1</sup> government programme to strengthen secondary school education in India (i.e. the last four years of schooling). The programme is titled the *Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan* (RMSA), a scheme for universalisation of access to and improvement of quality at the secondary stage.<sup>2</sup> Since universalisation of elementary education has become a constitutional mandate,<sup>3</sup> the goal of the RMSA scheme is to achieve universal secondary education. Its vision is to make quality education available and affordable to all young persons aged 14-18. RMSA aims to enhance access, quality and equity as they relate to secondary education, with a focus on marginalised young people such as girls, *Dalits*,<sup>4</sup> Muslims and those who have disabilities.

Our objective is to highlight gaps and opportunities presented by the RMSA programme. This report also highlights critical linkages between education and sexuality that have not thus far been made in debates about either education or sexuality in India. These are linkages which feminist researchers and practitioners have not hitherto engaged with. The evidence presented in this audit shows that unless sexuality is addressed, goals such as making equitable, quality education accessible to the marginalised can never be achieved. For example, the data indicate that fears related to girls' sexuality – namely that girls might express their desires or that they might experience sexual violence in the process of going to school – are a significant reason for pulling girls out of school. This is important in a context where girls' access to higher levels of school education is seen primarily as a gender issue. In the absence of evidence and without an acknowledgement of the key role of sexuality as a determinant, we are left with an incomplete understanding of this critical issue.

This audit does not address all dimensions of gender. Rather, it looks at gender issues in two specific ways. One is gender as it relates to sexuality and the second is gender as it relates to transgender. In the larger realm of development, most players have an understanding of gender that is limited to the binary categories of 'man' and 'woman'. Nirantar recognises that there are many lives and identities that fall outside this binary and

---

<sup>1</sup> Education in India is a 'concurrent subject', which translates to both central and state governments, both being empowered by the constitution to develop programmes and schemes in education. State governments typically develop their own schemes and implement more centrally visioned and financed schemes and policies. This secondary education scheme was initiated by the central government.

<sup>2</sup> Classes 9 and 10 constitute the secondary stage, whereas classes 11 and 12 are designated as the higher secondary stage. The normal age group of the children in secondary classes is 14-16 and the age group in higher secondary classes is 17-18. There is however much variation with respect to age, particularly in rural contexts.

<sup>3</sup> India has guaranteed elementary education to all by passing Right to Free and Compulsory Education for All Act 2009. The universalisation of elementary education is overseen by a scheme called Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA); the RMSA seeks to build upon this scheme.

<sup>4</sup> The term *Dalit* refers to those who are considered by Hindu belief to fall outside India's hierarchical caste system. *Dalits* are recognised by the state as a marginalised community but continue to face discrimination at almost every level including education, health and livelihoods. Within the *Dalit* community, there are many divisions into sub-castes.

that are invisible at the level of both policy and intervention. When policies talk about marginalisation based on gender, they primarily mean women and girls. Transgender people, their lives and struggles are constantly left out because anyone that falls outside of the gender binary is neither seen nor recognised. This audit seeks to bring them centre stage. By providing evidence related to transgender students, the report seeks to show the implications of reducing 'gender' to 'girls' and 'women'.

The significance of addressing transgender issues is therefore twofold. One is at the level of the inclusion of a gender identity that has been completely excluded from the discourse of education. It shows how the gender policing that permeates the institution of the school can harm transgender students and even drive them out altogether. The second is that transgender experiences offer compelling evidence and a powerful reminder of the need to understand and address gender as a social construct and not as 'natural' or 'normal'. The evidence related to transgender students' experiences in schools makes visible the means by which the school system perpetuates and enforces gender norms. This report illuminates the school as a site of gendering, as a space where one learns not just science, language and mathematics, but also about social norms and gender identities.

This report contributes to a new and emerging area of knowledge – and demonstrates how development policy and programme audits through the lens of sexuality and gender can be undertaken. This is an important and challenging area because, as we see in the case of RMSA, development policies and programmes tend not even to mention the word 'sexuality', while being replete with constructions of sexuality and with implicit or explicit messages about the need to be disciplined and to control one's desires. Such messages conflict with ground-level realities and have grave implications for the lives of those who are seen to break sexual and gender norms.

The report is structured follows: Section 1 explains the way in which we have used key concepts in the audit. The second section provides the context within which the audit is located, including the ways in which sexuality and gender are currently addressed by school education in India, both by the state and in the discussion of feminist scholars and practitioners. This section also provides information about the RMSA programme: its goals, as well as critical gaps. Section 3 presents the methodology used in this audit, followed by a discussion of the findings, presented so they can be read in relation to the three major goals of the programme – access, quality and equity. Finally, the report's concluding section includes the key findings of the audit and reflections on the methodology used.

The IDS programme on Strengthening Evidence-based Policy works across six key themes. Each theme works with partner institutions to co-construct policy-relevant knowledge and engage in policy-influencing processes. This material has been developed under the Sexuality, Poverty and Law theme.

This development of this material has been led by the Institute of Development Studies and Nirantar, who jointly hold the copyright.

The material has been funded by UK aid from the UK Government, however the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK Government's official policies.

**AG Level 2 Output ID: 223**

## **POLICY AUDIT: A HETERONORMATIVITY AUDIT OF RMSA – A HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMME IN INDIAN SCHOOLS**

Nirantar, a Centre for Gender and Education, India

December 2013

This is an Open Access publication distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are clearly credited.

First published by the Institute of Development Studies in December 2013  
© Institute of Development Studies

IDS is a charitable company limited by guarantee and registered in England (No. 877338).