Developing Enabling Environments for Women’s Access to Education and Vocational Opportunities

A Case Study of Policy Change Efforts Led by UN Women’s Second Chance Education Programme in India
In recent years, access to education in India has increased along with school enrollment rates among all groups. Girls now account for about 48 percent of the total enrollment at the elementary level (grades 1–8) (ASER Centre, 2017). While the trend is positive, young women and girls still experience significant barriers to educational opportunities and more restrictions on their autonomy relative to men. According to a report by UN Women, large percentages of girls drop out of school as they get older owing to family members’ concerns for their safety and genderized expectations for formal schooling (UN Women, 2021).

Only 55 percent of government schools in India provide gender-specific bathrooms for girls and women. Moreover, schools are often a distance away from homes or are accessible only by public transportation; according to UN Women, these factors contribute to the relative restriction of girls’ mobility compared with that of boys because of concerns from family members for their daughters’ physical safety while at and traveling to and from school (Bhabha and Gopi, 2016).

For adult women, learning and earning opportunities continue to lag behind those of men. For example; the 2011 national census showed that the literacy rate for females, at 56 percent, was 16 percentage points lower than that for males (Bhabha and Gopi, 2016). Data from 2018 (the latest available) indicate that both groups increased by 10 percentage points over the prior seven years, but the size of the gap remained unchanged (World Bank, 2022a; 2022b). Moreover, labor force participation rates for women, which peaked at about 32 percent in 2005, declined steadily to 21 percent in 2021 (World Bank, 2022c). Although male labor force participation rates also fell, they remain about 50 percentage points higher than those of women.

In response to these challenges, between 2018 and 2022 UN Women piloted its Second Chance Education and Vocational (SCE) programme across six countries with the goal of building “a global model” that provided “localized solutions for marginalized women to fill gaps in their education and improve their opportunities for decent employment” (UN Women, 2022). In this case study, we highlight two of its SCE initiatives based in India that aimed to increase women’s participation in the labor force (see “About the BHP Foundation EE Program Evaluation Case Study Series” for more information). The UN Women and SCE India representatives whom we interviewed posited that complex cultural and societal factors contribute to inequitable opportunities for many women and girls, particularly in rural areas. The challenge, as they describe it, stems from disparate societal expectations for women and men, which shape the decision spaces of both genders. According to UN Women, women and men often grow up believing that women should remain in the home to participate in domestic chores or labor, and—in some regions—marry early.

**KEY FINDINGS**

- UN Women’s Second Chance Education (SCE) Programme in India supported policy changes to improve women’s access to education and vocational opportunities through a common set of key strategies. These include engaging influential decisionmakers who supported its mission, embedding technical consultants in partner agencies, and fostering productive dialogues to enhance agencies’ capacity to enact policy change. SCE India also helped establish structures to ensure the permanency of policy changes.
- SCE recognized challenges in doing this work; policy changes take time, and monitoring and measuring impact is difficult.
- This case illustrates a set of strategies for working with and influencing government entities to improve the policy environment or conditions.
- However, SCE’s case may have limited generalizability, as SCE benefited from established partners’ reputations and experiences.
One prior study confirms that although early marriage has declined in India over the past two decades, 41 percent of married women ages 20 to 24 married before their 18th birthday. Moreover, there is a 22–percentage-point gap between the prevalence rates of early marriage among women from the lowest and highest wealth quintiles (Scott et al., 2021).

During our interviews, we learned these patterns may be reinforced by government or institutional policies that lack a “gender perspective”; that is, interviewees perceive a systemic failure to account for the impact of gender-based bias and cultural norms on women’s access to equitable opportunities. This deficit includes a lack of initiative to foster enabling environments for young women and girls to pursue the skills they need to enter the labor force.

In some cases, as noted by our interviewees, some state agencies have enacted promising but poorly implemented policies that do not deliver on their promises to improve educational and economic outcomes for women and girls.

In this context, UN Women and SCE India are directly engaging in policy reform efforts at the state and national levels to improve opportunities for women and girls. According to UN Women, through these efforts, SCE India has expanded access to education, job training, and entrepreneurial opportunities for over 15,000 women and girls (UN Women, 2021).

This case study summarizes two specific initiatives that fall under the umbrella of SCE India’s work: (1) SCE India’s work in advising the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) on its updated gender policy, and (2) SCE India’s work in supporting Maharashtra’s Skill Development, Employment, and Entrepreneurship Department (SDEED)’s efforts to develop and implement policy to increase entrepreneurial opportunities for women. Although SCE India’s portfolio consists of a variety of efforts; these examples are intended to be illustrative of its work to help advocate enabling policy environments.

In the following sections, we begin with a description of each of these initiatives. Then we identify a set of common strategies that SCE India employed across both contexts, along with the challenges that SCE encountered. Finally, given that this effort is part a project that UN Women undertook as part of the BHP Foundation’s Education Equity program portfolio, we present some reflections on how the work is relevant to the BHP Foundation’s program theory of change. We also provide key takeaways for other organizations interested in engaging in policy change. (See page 16 for more details about the BHP Foundation program.)
SCE India's Policy Change Efforts

Effort 1: Advising Gender Policy at NIOS to Facilitate Educational Opportunities for Women and Girls

NIOS is an autonomous institution under India’s Ministry of Education that offers a variety of open and distance programs of study for nontraditional learners or learners who require flexibility (NIOS, undated). According to its most recent publicly available report, in 2020, NIOS provided academic or vocational training for approximately 400,000 students (NIOS, 2022). Course offerings include traditional academic courses, open basic education programs, and opportunities for vocational and skills development training. NIOS’s mission is to improve educational outcomes among student groups that have traditionally had limited access to formal schooling, including women and girls, individuals with disabilities, and those who live in rural areas (NIOS, undated).

NIOS advertises on its website that, with few requirements, students can access courses online or at one of more than 6,500 local study centers. As explained by a representative from NIOS, the open online learning infrastructure allows “students to access courses at any time at their own pace.” For women and girls with competing domestic responsibilities, restricted mobility, or limited access to schools, NIOS provides flexible solutions to complete school or enroll in vocational training. With respect to its work to improve education outcomes for women and girls specifically, among other initiatives, one representative from NIOS described how, through its partnership with SCE, there are 2,500 girls enrolled in special programs at NIOS in four states: Bijar, Maharashtra, Odisha, and Rajasthan.

Despite these efforts, women and girls still account for a disproportionately small portion of enrolled students at NIOS; roughly 33 percent of those enrolled in its vocational and academic programs are female (NIOS, 2022). That many women and girls face barriers to completing their education is well recognized by some NIOS leadership. As far back as 2015, NIOS collaborated with the Commonwealth of Learning in Canada to draft a “gender policy” to promote gender parity and equity across its courses and structures. In our interviews, representatives from NIOS and SCE referred to this concept as gender mainstreaming.

The original gender policy sought to (1) bring awareness to (i.e., “sensitize”) NIOS personnel regarding the unique barriers to education faced by women and girls, and (2) address stigmatizing content in NIOS’s curricula that perpetuates traditional gender-based stereotypes (NIOS, 2016). Although NIOS adopted this policy more than five years ago, as representatives from NIOS and SCE explained during our interviews, it was not having its intended effect.

In 2020, NIOS partnered with SCE India to assist with NIOS’s ongoing efforts to reduce gender bias in

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Gender Policy for Open Schools India, 2021

The overall purpose of the 2021 Gender Policy is “to inculcate gender sensitivity in the functioning of the institution whether academic or administrative, with the aim to change mindsets, to develop curricula and pedagogy and to determine that resource allocation takes place in a gender responsive manner” (NIOS, 2022). Specifically, the Gender Policy identifies six strategic goals:

- Increase enrollment ratio of girls to boys to 50:50 and increase enrollment of individuals who identify as transgendered by 10 percent over the next five years.
- Improve support and tracking mechanisms to enhance achievement and retention among all genders.
- Implement gender-equal and gender-responsive learning materials.
- Increase staff and faculty sensitization and awareness of issues relevant to gender equity and responsiveness.
- Improve infrastructure for gender mainstreaming activities.
- Provide gender-responsive, bias-free environments for all NIOS employees (NIOS, 2021).
its courses and to review its 2015 policy. According to a representative from NIOS, because of a successful previous partnership with a technical consultant, NIOS was interested in leveraging SCE India’s technical and policy expertise to foster more-inclusive environments for women and girls. This desire for increased gender parity and equity reflected broader commitments at the national level to advance gender equity in education and vocational training systems (see Government of India, 2020, for that year’s version of India’s National Education Policy [NEP]).

During the time of our interviews, a technical consultant from SCE India was working with NIOS to finalize its update of the 2015 gender policy and to review its courses and curricular materials for gender bias and gender-based stereotypes. Following her initial review of NIOS’s original policy, SCE India’s technical consultant worked with NIOS and a panel of gender and inclusion policy experts to revise the existing gender policy in accordance with more-recent national and international priorities for women’s access to education and vocational learning. These revisions were completed by winter 2021.

The updated Gender Policy renews NIOS’s commitment from the 2015 policy to design curricula and materials that “lead toward gender sensitivity and empowerment” (NIOS, 2016). The policy anticipates the need to develop the capacities and awareness of gender discrimination among NIOS’s staff. It requires regular orientations, trainings, and workshops. Representatives from SCE India and NIOS spoke about the importance of orienting course writers and staff to think differently about how they portray women and girls in their content so that no one feels excluded. As articulated by one interviewee, “How do we make materials more positive in terms of bringing new ideas? A woman can be a firefighter. [How do we move beyond] just making it neutral and go beyond the stereotypes that exist in society to help students think in a new way?” Both parties expect the policy to drive improvements toward more gender-inclusive learning spaces that promote equity and increased use among women and girls.

Notably, SCE’s review of the original 2015 gender policy led SCE India and NIOS to conclude that the policy was unsuccessful because it did not explicitly outline provisions for implementation, monitoring, or evaluation. So, as part of the 2021 revision process, representatives from SCE India, NIOS, and its team of experts embedded specific goals and enrollment target ratios into the policy for women and transgendered individuals over the next five years.

Additionally, the revised policy establishes permanent structures to support implementation and ongoing evaluation. This effort includes a Gender Steering and Implementation Cell (GSIC) consisting of NIOS personnel and external policy experts supported by a technical consultant from SCE India. The GSIC will oversee and evaluate the operations of its three subcommittees (academic, counseling and guidance, and gender budgeting and auditing), each tasked with a different facet of implementation. As part of its role, the GSIC will develop a quarterly reporting structure on a yet-to-be-determined set of indicators and associated feedback structures for relevant departments and personnel.
Effort #2: Supporting Policies to Increase Entrepreneurial Opportunities for Women in Maharashtra

SCE India’s second policy-related effort took place in the State of Maharashtra, which is considered “one of the most prosperous and industrially advanced” states in India (Pandey, 2020). Roughly 31 percent of women in Maharashtra participate in the workforce, compared with the national average of 23 percent (Pandey, 2020). However, as throughout most of India, women’s participation rates in the labor force in Maharashtra have decreased over the past two decades, with large differences in labor trends across rural and urban areas. For example, among women who work outside the home, 61 percent of urban women report regular paid employment, compared with just 6 percent of rural women. Rural women who participate in the labor market are, by contrast, far more likely to be self-employed (52 percent versus 27 percent, respectively); however, the vast majority of these women are unpaid workers in family-owned enterprises. In urban areas, most self-employed women (75 percent) are own-account workers, meaning they work alone or with a partner but have no permanent employees working for them (Pandey, 2020).

According to the economic census conducted by the Government of India in 2013, women make up 8.25 percent of the total proportion of entrepreneurs in Maharashtra (Government of India, 2016). This figure includes women who own enterprises, with or without employees. Although Maharashtra ranks among the top five states in India in percentage share of women entrepreneurs, SCE India and representatives from the government of Maharashtra believe more could be done to encourage women to pursue their own business ventures.

According to one of our interviewees, the official agencies charged with education and labor-force development tend to lack women-centered initiatives or initiatives that directly promote the advancement of women. Such policies are important because, in her view and experience, women too often lack the networks and capital needed to start their own businesses.

These were some of the observations that led Maharashtra’s SDEED to partner with SCE India for technical and policy support in 2020. The goal of the partnership was to increase women’s participation in entrepreneurial spaces by identifying and removing structural barriers that prevent women from starting their own businesses. As with SCE India’s partnership with NIOS, SCE’s technical consultant developed an action plan with SDEED for gender mainstreaming across statewide education and employment activities. In this case, the technical consultant also facilitated trainings for women to foster education and economic empowerment (UN Women, 2020).

In January 2021, with the support of SCE India, SDEED established the Women Entrepreneurship Cell (WEC) within the Maharashtra State Innovation Society (MSInS). Conceived of as a champion for increased women-led entrepreneurial activity, the WEC is tasked with the design and implementation of initiatives to promote women-led entrepreneurship throughout Maharashtra. The WEC consists of 14 representatives from multiple arms of SDEED and a permanent representative from SCE India, and it is chaired by the SDEED secretary. The WEC requires that 50 percent of its membership be women. Because the WEC is permanent and supported by SCE India, the SCE India technical consultant expressed hope that the partnership will be able to sustain impact on entrepreneurial opportunities throughout the state as a permanent platform for forming and mobilizing gender-specific agendas.

The goal of the WEC, as explained by representatives from both SCE India and SDEED, is to create a gender-sensitive policy environment from the top down. The WEC aims to increase women’s representation in the start-up community, build national and international linkages for female entrepreneurs through formalized mentoring and training, and build support for women-led enterprises (MSInS, undated). Ultimately, the WEC aims to change how women are socialized to think about entrepreneurship as an activity exclusively for men by enabling them to imagine themselves as entrepreneurs.

According to the SCE India consultant, often, it is the choice to become an entrepreneur that is the most difficult step for women to take: “You are taking one
of the biggest risks in your life . . . and I think that decision is extremely hard, especially for women who have been socialized for years to seek safety nets, especially from other people.” The WEC aims to provide much-needed spaces for women entrepreneurs to connect, share, and learn from one another’s experiences.

Shortly after its commission, the WEC established its first university-based entrepreneurial incubator for women and multiple college-based entrepreneurial clubs to support women’s access to information about starting their own businesses. It has also launched a competition-based program designed for women in rural areas to pitch their ideas to a panel in exchange for resources to start their own businesses. As of March 2022, the WEC had begun to organize webinars helping women entrepreneurs accelerate their startups and to offer coaching and training in entrepreneurial skills through online and virtual workshops. At the time of our interviews, it was in the process of exploring options to extend financial and technical support to early-stage startups, including reimbursement mechanisms for patent filing costs, testing and certification of prototypes, and system certification.

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Next, we describe each of SCE’s and its partner agencies’ key strategies in detail, as we understood them.

First, SCE India engaged influential decision-makers that supported its mission, with champions already in place. SCE India capitalized on NIOS’s interest in gender equity and inclusivity. NIOS had already expressed an interest in having a technical consultant review its courses for gender bias; furthermore, the organization had an existing gender policy. As explained by a representative from SCE India, because NIOS already showed a commitment to the issue, SCE India did not need “to push so much”; strengthening the gender policy advanced mutual objectives for both organizations.

Similarly, the government in Maharashtra had expressed interest in streamlining economic opportunities for women throughout the state. According to a representative from SCE India, the Chief Secretary Minister “had a clear vision of what she wanted to achieve through this partnership. . . . Maharashtra showed strong ownership and the demand for it, which is how [the partnership with SCE India] happened.”

Second, SCE India’s technical consultants were embedded within its partner agencies to serve as liaisons between SCE India and each respective partner. These individuals streamlined collaboration and provided necessary expertise. Through a formal Memorandum of Understanding process, SCE India recruited and placed highly capable individuals

SCE India’s Key Strategies for Shifting Policy

In its partnerships with NIOS and SDEED, SCE India leveraged similar strategies for shifting policy. As depicted in Figure 1, the main drivers for change in the two cases that we reviewed included partnering agencies’ desire to improve outcomes for women and girls coupled with SCE’s policy expertise.

Based on our analysis, following initial contact with NIOS and SDEED, SCE India applied four key strategies—engaging, embedding, enhancing capacity, and supporting permanency—to help the agencies increase economic and educational opportunities for women and girls. In both cases, the interviewees we spoke with explained how they intended for these efforts to lead to (1) increased oversight and accountability, (2) more gender-inclusive environments, and (3) more or improved programming for women and girls.
FIGURE 1
Depiction of Problem Space and Strategies That SCE Leverages to Shift Policy

- **Fewer opportunities for women to participate in the labor market in India than for men**
  - SCE engaged governmental agencies with influence, interest in gender equity, and internal champions.

- **Agency-level demand for change**
  - SCE technical expertise

- **Engaged**
  - SCE and partner agencies embedded SCE technical consultants within the regular operations of partnering agencies to streamline efforts.

- **Embedded**
  - SCE technical consultants leveraged earned trust and expertise into policy revision and development while enhancing the agency’s capacity to enact the policy change.

- **Enhanced capacity**
  - SCE technical consultants facilitated development of permanent working groups and accountability structures within partner organizations to ensure continuation.

- **Supported permanency**
  - More programs for women and girls
  - Oversight and accountability
  - More gender inclusive environments

- **Desired impact**
  - Motivated

**Motivator Activity Inhibitor Desired Impact**

- **Agency-level demand for change**
  - Motivated

- **Engaged**
  - SCE technical expertise

- **Embedded**
  - SCE technical consultants embedded within the regular operations of partnering agencies to streamline efforts.

- **Enhanced capacity**
  - SCE technical consultants facilitated development of permanent working groups and accountability structures within partner organizations to ensure continuation.

- **Supported permanency**
  - More programs for women and girls
  - Oversight and accountability
  - More gender inclusive environments

**Desired impact**

- Motivated

**Motivator Activity Inhibitor Desired Impact**
(i.e., its technical consultants) inside each of its partnering organizations. As a result of this strategy, SCE technical consultants supported their partners with the logistical work of policymaking and program implementation within partnering organizations’ existing frameworks and structures.

For this reason, SCE India requires its technical consultants to possess at least a master’s degree in social science, gender studies, law, or another related discipline and have at least five years of professional experience, preferably in a government or civil society placement. As explained by one NIOS representative, this level of expertise, coupled with the technical consultant’s familiarity with both SCE and NIOS, facilitated efficient communication between the two organizations, which streamlined collaboration.

Once the consultants were onboarded, SCE’s standards for technical consultants ensured each had the requisite skill set to perform highly specialized tasks that reduce the human resource burdens on their host organizations associated with policymaking and program implementation. This work included such tasks as developing and drafting proposals and approach papers, submitting paperwork through formal channels, building support and consensus among staff members, monitoring approvals, and collaborating with external experts.

For example, in Maharashtra, one of the technical consultant’s key responsibilities was collecting evidence for policymakers to use when taking their ideas to legislatures and higher government officials. In addition, drawing on both her content and technical expertise, the SCE India technical consultant collaborated with SDEED personnel to ensure gender sensitivity and inclusive language in all new programs, policy documents, and social media platforms.

Sometimes, as explained by representatives from NIOS and SCE India, the technical consultant’s work involved overseeing small groups or panels of experts. For example, when NIOS drafts large policies or documents, it typically recruits a panel of field experts to inform the content with their knowledge and experiences. As part of NIOS’s efforts to update its gender policy, the SCE India technical consultant worked with NIOS personnel to identify and onboard a team of eight experts with senior-level policy experience at organizations and academic institutions working in gender equity or inclusion spaces (i.e., NIOS’s Advisory Board for Gender Policy). Then, the SCE India consultant organized and facilitated the necessary meetings with NIOS’s new advisory board to drive the work forward.

Third, SCE India consultants and partner organizations participated in relationship-building to foster productive dialogue. This shared sense of trust and respect enhanced agencies’ capacity to enact policy change. The extent to which SCE India technical consultants and partner organizations were able to create and implement meaningful policy changes hinged on mutual trust, the ability to communicate openly, and a shared sense of purpose—all of which are critical elements for efficient and effective collaboration.

Members of NIOS’s Advisory Board for Gender Policy described informal meetings with SCE India’s technical consultant to ensure that staff experiences and philosophies aligned with the priorities of both institutions prior to receiving formal approval from NIOS to join its advisory board. For four weeks, the advisory board met to develop a plan for proceeding in view of NIOS’s and SCE India’s shared agenda for gender equity and inclusion at NIOS before branching into smaller subcommittees organized by subtopics alongside representatives from NIOS.

Members of the advisory board noted the critical importance of the academic freedom that they enjoyed under SCE India and NIOS to explore gender inequity and inclusion from multiple vantage points over multiple occasions, formally and during conversations over lunch and teatime. As one representative from NIOS’s advisory board explained, “We were given the freedom to explore and come together. I come from the field, and I already knew certain people. [This] spreading of the net was different. Although the agenda was set by UN Women and NIOS, they were open to our experiences. . . . They gave us a lot of academic freedom and creativity.”

The theme of relationship-building for broaching policy change is reflected in SCE India’s work with SDEED as well. SDEED experienced significant levels of turnover among members of its executive leadership, all of whom were women and supportive of improving economic opportunities for women. This
turnover did not appear to deter policy change initiatives. According to the SCE India technical consultant, she was able to coordinate her efforts through one higher-level official, a “champion,” who had been present since the beginning of the partnership and with whom the consultant had established a close working relationship.

Fourth, SCE India supported permanency by establishing structures to institutionalize the policy changes it had facilitated in an effort to ensure that the efforts would not be undone. As mentioned above, SCE India is guiding NIOS to create a permanent gender policy steering committee, consisting of NIOS personnel and external policy experts supported by a representative from SCE India. This committee will oversee implementation of the new gender policy and associated systems for monitoring and evaluation. It is also intended to help support NIOS’s ongoing efforts to improve access to and quality of education for women and girls. Similarly, SDEED and SCE India hypothesized that there is a need for a mechanism to continually support culture change within the Maharashtra State Government as it improves conditions for women. This is why the government regarded the presence of a permanent SCE India member on the WEC and the requirement that 50 percent of leadership be women as critical components of SCE India’s strategy to improve opportunities for women throughout the state of Maharashtra.

Challenges to SCE India’s Policy Change Efforts

Although SCE India’s efforts to improve gender equity in education and the workforce through policy are promising, the process has not been without challenges. We briefly summarize some of these challenges below.

- **Lengthy Processes:** According to representatives from NIOS and SCE India, the process of updating and drafting policy is time-consuming. As one representative explained, “Everything needs to be approved. The director will need to approve every meeting and agenda, minutes; it goes through a process.” All new proposals and policies must survive multiple rounds of approvals up and down various internal chains of command at each respective organization. Still, representatives also explained how this time-intensive process of policymaking is helpful because it forces stakeholders to engage in ongoing and substantive dialogue and to work out differences in perspectives or policy goals. The constant communication and need for formal approvals ensure, according to one representative, that “No one is left wondering what happened” and that the final policy has institutional buy-in.

- **Difficulties related to monitoring and measuring impact:** Although monitoring the implementation of policy and assessing its impact is critical, efforts to do so are not always undertaken or planned alongside the policy change. At the time of our interviews, according to an SCE India representative, SDEED had not yet announced any formalized plans to develop monitoring and evaluation frameworks to measure the impacts of WEC-led initiatives. Relatedly, as explained by representatives from NIOS and SCE, deciding upon accurate measures of impact—which they are in the process of doing—and actually measuring impact can take considerable time. According to representatives from both SCE India and NIOS, clear short- and long-term goals are needed to inform a comprehensive plan for policy implementation and a strategy for monitoring and assessing impact.

Relevance to the BHP Foundation Education Equity Program’s Theory of Change and Concluding Remarks

This case study is one in a series intended to illustrate aspects of the BHP Foundation’s Education Equity program theory of change (see appendix). As this narrative shows, in two instances, SCE India played a role in working with and influencing government entities to improve the environment or conditions
to be more supportive of women’s and girls’ education and employment opportunities. It did so by providing expert consultation that led to the development of relevant policies. If we consider these policies as **interim outcomes** of SCE India’s efforts, they reflect **more-informed decisionmaking**. That is, the facts and perspectives the consultant provided helped inform the content of the policies and contributed to the strategic decision to establish permanent structures to oversee implementation of the policy (NIOS) and institutionalize the policy changes (SDEED). All the while, the SCE India consultants did just that: provide insights and guidance to a local team, rather than force change. This way of working likely helped **empower local actors and foster thought leaders** within each organization, which is important for sustaining and growing the movement that supports gender equity and second-chance opportunities for learning and earning for women.

In both featured examples, SCE India worked with entities that were already predisposed to engage on the issues. This is strategic on SCE India’s part; however, it also injects some uncertainty as to the extent of the outcomes that resulted from SCE India’s efforts versus from preexisting momentum on the issue. The hard work of influencing government authorities on policy issues often starts at a more foundational level of making introductions, requesting conversations, and educating about the issue. Investments in policy efforts that start at ground zero may yield less-certain outcomes; shifts in policies and decisionmaking may not result or, if they do, may manifest on a significantly longer timeline.

Related, from this one case, we hypothesize that while the dividends of policy changes can potentially be large, impacts may be slow to manifest and difficult to measure. Readers should bear in mind that downstream and diffused impacts of policy changes are likely and will be difficult to capture. Or, there may be little will or capacity on the part of the organizations to monitor policy implementation and evaluate impacts at all. At the same time, sustained policy dialogues that may not result in formalized policy shifts may, in themselves, have incalculable value.

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**Considerations for Organizations Undertaking Policy Change Efforts**

For organizations considering engaging in similar policy efforts, this case may offer some points for reflection.

**Consideration 1:** SCE India’s strategies could be used as a starting point for developing a plan of engagement. Across the two vignettes presented in this case study, SCE India implemented a set of complementary strategies to shift policy. The four strategies—engaging, embedding, enhancing capacity, and supporting permanency—span the organization’s work, from selecting willing and predisposed partners to building in structures for institutionalizing changes. These few context-specific change examples do not provide a comprehensive or generalizable roadmap to doing such work, particularly when their impact remains to be seen. However, the strategies could provide fodder for conversations about how to approach policy change efforts and how to align resources and ensure capacity for carrying out the strategies.

**Consideration 2:** SCE’s initiatives benefited from established partners’ reputations and experiences. Under the guidance of UN Women, SCE India is supporting shifts in policy at two large government institutions aimed at fostering conditions that enable more women and girls to access learning and earning opportunities. Since SCE India is a UN Women program, it builds on a well-respected intergovernmental institution to develop relationships with local and national governments, engage them, and exert policy influence. To garner buy-in, build local capacity, and support scaling and sustainability, UN Women...
frequently uses the approach of engaging with governments from the beginning of an initiative. Other organizations seeking to undertake policy change efforts may require more time and resources to develop initial trust with partner organizations and ensure alignment of objectives.

**Consideration 3: Monitoring and evaluating impacts of policy change require will, capacity, and patience.** Organizations interested in undertaking policy change efforts should put a plan in place to study the effectiveness of the policy by monitoring and evaluating the impacts, keeping in mind that impacts may take a long time to manifest or not happen at all. To date, there have been limited plans around tracking and studying the impacts of the policy changes SCE India is supporting. Limited interest, knowledge, or capacity may be key factors. Organizations seeking to engage in policy work may benefit from identifying the values of assessing impacts and how information from such an evaluation could support their goals. To address knowledge and capacity issues, organizations can seek practical guidance from open resources or experienced evaluators on metrics to consider, how to gather necessary data, and how to build capacity for such work.

**Methods**

The following data sources informed the case study: an interview with an SCE India representative knowledgeable about the NIOS gender policy effort (August 2021), a focus group with members of the NIOS Advisory Board for Gender and Inclusion Policy (August 2021), and an interview conducted with an SCE India representative knowledgeable about the SDEED policy efforts (October 2021). In addition, we drew on interviews conducted in spring and fall 2020 and 2021 with the project manager from UN Women and other leads of the BHP Foundation–funded SCE project. Finally, we drew on documents (e.g., funding proposals, annual reports) that UN Women submitted to the BHP Foundation as part of the SCE project, as well as publicly available documents on the organizations and the policies being highlighted. We used these documents as a check on the accuracy of our notes and to provide additional context that we felt would be helpful for the reader. Although we would have liked to interview additional individuals outside of NIOS and SCE, this was beyond the scope. We acknowledge this as a limitation.

We recorded all interviews and prepared detailed, transcription-like notes. We coded the notes in Dedoose, a cross-platform internet application used for mixed-method data analysis, identifying key contextual factors, descriptions of the policy changes and their intended effects, critical actors, and strategies leading to the policy changes, including barriers and facilitators of success. Subsequently, we abstracted and analyzed our data by subtopic to identify overlapping themes across SCE India’s work with NIOS and the SDEED. Prior to publication, we circulated a draft of this report for fact checking among representatives from UN Women and SCE India.

**Notes**

1. As cited in the UN Women’s SCE programme proposal to the BHP Foundation (UN Women, 2018).

2. A brief distributed by UN Women in 2021 places this figure slightly lower (see UN Women, 2021).
APPENDIX

The BHP Foundation Education Equity Program Theory of Change (Fall 2018–Spring 2023)

The program’s initial theory of change, developed in fall 2018 and current as of spring 2023, is shown in Figure 2.

As described in published reports of the RAND Corporation team’s independent evaluation of the program (Master et al., 2021; 2023), the figure “summarizes the core investments made in the first phase of the program, as well as the anticipated timeframe for impacts. It describes how the funded partners are collectively engaged in varied activities to enhance educational equity through the use of evidence.” These activities range from generating evidence about new innovations to curating and disseminating effective strategies, building capacity to leverage evidence in decisionmaking, and advocating to ensure societies and systems provide an enabling environment for more-informed investments in education and learning. Within the first five years of the funded activities, the program expects to see outcomes that are interim in nature. These include greater availability of evidence and data, empowered thought leaders engaged in more-informed decisionmaking, and the establishment of networks of purposeful collaboration. Long-term impacts will take more time to manifest.

Figure 2 and our case studies to date reflect the initial program theory of change. As of early 2023, the program has been developing a more fine-grained articulation of its theory of change and pathways toward intended impacts.
About the BHP Foundation Education Equity Program Evaluation
Case Study Series

This case study is based on research funded by the BHP Foundation as part of an overall study of its Education Equity (EE) program investment. The findings and conclusions presented are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the BHP Foundation. The BHP Foundation is investing in global education programs and initiatives focused on leveraging evidence and testing transformative innovations to improve access and equity in systems of education globally. The program prioritizes initiatives “with the potential to spur transformative ‘step changes’ in educational practices at-scale, and to achieve these goals primarily by using evidence to enhance the quality of decision-making, investments, and educational practice” (Master et al., 2023). These initiatives are led by five partner organizations:

1. the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution (CUE)
2. the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)
3. the Global Business Coalition for Education (GBC-Ed)
4. Teach for All (TFALL)
5. UN Women (UNW).

The RAND team is evaluating the BHP Foundation EE program investment during a five-year period, from 2019 to 2024. The purpose of the evaluation is to assess program impacts, share formative insights to inform its continuous improvement, and provide recommendations related to its strategy and the BHP Foundation’s theory of change (see Appendix for details). RAND researchers’ first evaluation report was published in 2021. An interim findings report is being released in spring 2023, and a final report is planned for late 2024.

The case studies are one component of the RAND team’s evaluation. Each case study describes the arc and implementation of single-partner initiatives that are illustrative of the BHP Foundation’s theory of change (fall 2018–spring 2023). Through our cases, we seek to demonstrate the BHP Foundation’s theorized pathway between one or more categories of program activities (e.g., curating evidence, disseminating evidence-based strategies, developing capacity) and one or more interim outcomes (e.g., increased availability of evidence, more-informed decisionmaking, networks, and empowered local actors) as articulated in the program theory of change to date. Given the brief time frame of each case study (i.e., data collection spanning one year), each report is limited to documenting early signs of progress toward interim outcomes.

To select the focus for each case study, we considered the activity or activities and pathway(s) that each BHP Foundation–funded partner could best or uniquely illustrate. We approached the partner with the case study idea(s) to elicit input. Studying implementation involves collecting data at the level at which activities are implemented; as such, we asked the funded partner to identify and connect us with a local in-country partner performing the on-the-ground work that we would highlight. This process likely yields case narratives that are positive or successful examples of partners’ work. For more details on methods, see the brief methods summaries included in each case study.

We believe this series will be of interest not only to the BHP Foundation and its program partners, but also to policymakers engaged in global education, organizations interested in implementing educational change efforts, and other foundations interested in investing in global educational change.
References


MSInS—See Maharashtra State Innovation Society.


NIOS—See National Institute of Open Schooling.


UN Women, *The UN Women’s Second Chance Education Foundation Proposal to the BHP Foundation*, 2018.


World Bank, "Literacy Rate, Adult Female (% of females ages 15 and above, India)," database, updated October 24, 2022a. As of March 1, 2023: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.FE.ZS?locations=IN

World Bank, "Literacy Rate, Adult Male (% of males ages 15 and above, India)," database, updated October 24, 2022b. As of March 1, 2023: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.MA.ZS?locations=IN

World Bank, "Labor Force Participation Rate, Adult Female (% of females ages 15 and above, India)," database, updated December 6, 2022c. As of March 1, 2023: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=IN

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About This Report

This case study traces the development of two efforts by UN Women’s Second Chance Education Programme (SCE) in India to support policy changes that improve women’s access to education and vocational opportunities. Through its SCE programs, UN Women works to influence governments to support and sustain “second chance” education solutions through writing, adopting, and implementing regulations, procedures, laws, or other administrative action.

To influence policy change, SCE India leveraged a common set of strategies across the two cases we feature here. Specifically, SCE worked with stakeholders who were already engaged with the topic, embedded technical consultants within the partner agencies, supported policy enactment by facilitating productive conversations and the logistical aspects of policy formation, and promoted structures to institutionalize proposed reforms.

This case study demonstrates that, through the provision of specialized technical guidance to high-level decisionmakers, organizations such as UN Women’s SCE India can facilitate productive conversations that lead to policy change initiatives. At the same time, the prospects for these efforts remain uncertain. As explained by multiple stakeholders, SCE India faces deeply ingrained resistance to change. Moreover, SCE India and its partners are still working to develop appropriate measures and indexes to measure change and have realized that impacts may take considerable time.

RAND Education and Labor

This study was undertaken by RAND Education and Labor, a division of the RAND Corporation that conducts research on early childhood through postsecondary education programs, workforce development, and programs and policies affecting workers, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy and decisionmaking. The case study was sponsored by the BHP Foundation as part of an overall study of its Education Equity program investment. The findings and conclusions presented are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the BHP Foundation.

More information about RAND can be found at www.rand.org. Questions about this report should be directed to Elaine Wang (ewang@rand.org), and questions about RAND Education and Labor should be directed to educationandlabor@rand.org.