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EDUCATION: SOUTH ASIA

South Asia, a source of great literary and literacy traditions and a generator of great philosophies, also contains a large percentage of illiterate people, the majority of them women. South Asia includes India, Pakistan, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Burma and Afghanistan.

The progress of these countries is dependent on female literacy because health, hygiene, and nutrition problems can be partly overcome through educating women. "Illiteracy is closely related to underdevelopment and poverty, and the elimination of illiteracy represents an essential condition for the development and well-being of peoples and nations" (UNESCO PROAP, 1989: II). In South Asia, women constitute nearly two-thirds of illiterate adults. There is an inherent contradiction in the region between modern amenities, modern educational systems, and advanced communication systems, on the one hand, and the high level of illiteracy and significant backwardness, on the other.

Background

Women in south Asian countries face the dual constraints of traditional views about women's education and the policy of reduced spending on women's education. The choice of educating heavily favors boys due to the traditional division of labor and gender. This is particularly evident in rural areas, where the bulk of domestic work falls on women. Women are allotted the tasks of working in the fields and the home and maintaining routine life. This situation is aggravated by the lack of facilities. For example, project by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization aimed at rural women have encountered highly paternalistic regional bureaucracies.

Women, Work, and Equity

Some women's education was never planned, although they "gained from education 'incidentally' or as an auxiliary development of men of their own social class" (Nayar, 1988, cited in UNESCO PROAP, 1989: 31). South Asia is a region of contrasts, with women holding positions as highly qualified professionals, such as doctors, lawyers, engineers, advocates, bankers, and teachers. There are women vice-chancellors, assembly speakers, advocates and eminent principals. The proportion of women among the technical administrators and managers, however, is extremely low, because many women do not undertake math-based education that would enhance their technical skills. The other picture is of women who cannot read or write, with 90 percent of females in rural areas illiterate. The majority of "educated" women are found in poorly paid jobs, but these women have been instrumental in bringing educational issues to national and international notice. Some of these women are activists who have raised the issues but are yet to make a significant impact. Socialist economies such as those in India and Sri Lanka also have emphasized the need to free women from centuries of repression by providing them with special educational programs designed to bring about social reconstruction. These are highly politicized programs, however, and their impact is negligible except in isolated areas. The educational system vis-à-vis women has largely failed, because it has not prevented the mass school dropouts or "shut-outs" arising from rural or urban poverty. The struggle some women face for survival is so great

that their daughters are included in the basic task of surviving; in such cases, it is not uncommon for girls to work at home, which enables their mothers to work and their brothers to attend school. Such practices explain the low female literacy rates. It may be argued that poverty and patriarchal rules combine to categorize women as housewives and mothers and fail to consider the need to reorient the gender relations within the family.

Development and literacy policies have ignored the important aspect of educating women. These dual restraints have confined women to the tasks of family, hygiene, health, and child rearing. The positive impact of education on women is reflected in better living conditions, better hygiene, and improved financial positions. Formal and informal education has focused on self-employment, cottage industries, or family planning ignoring the issue of gender equity and thus perpetuating poor living conditions. The societies of south Asia are generally sex-discriminatory, and policy recommendations propagated by the United Nations Development Decade for Women are interpreted in ways that do not help women.

Female Illiteracy

Literacy is linked to the ideologies and cultures of the region and finds expression in severe discrimination against females in countries such as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, where girls are undernourished and neglected. Those that survive the malnourishment enter early marriages, with incomplete schooling contributing to a continuous cycle of oppression. In the countries where health programs have been implemented, literacy rates have increased, and women's education has helped to improve other amenities, such as child care requirements. Urbanization also has had a positive effect on women's education and related issues, with a significant narrowing of enrollment difference between girls and boys and achievement of greater gender equity. The rural population, however, has had to contend with lower resource allotment, fewer public services, and poor health conditions. The process of industrialization, which also contributes to increased literacy, is slow in the south Asian countries and has resulted in disjointed growth. Other factors working against women include the 15 to 20 hours per week of hard manual labor that many undertake in the home, discriminatory attitudes towards girls' education, a preference for boys' education, and a traditional view that sees education as superfluous for girls because educational advantages accrue to another house when the girl is married.

Female illiteracy is high in India, with an estimated 144 million women illiterate, followed by Pakistan and Bangladesh with 18 million, Nepal with 4 million, and Afghanistan with 3.3 million (UNESCO PROAP, 1989: 35). There are numerous villages in India, Pakistan, Bhutan and Bangladesh where not a single woman is literate. Even with a significant increase in enrollment, the failure to complete primary schooling leaves the literacy level low. In an egalitarian society like Sri Lanka, the literacy level is high, supported by socially just policies of free education, health, and concessional transport, resulting in literacy rate of almost 83 percent (UNESCO PROAP, 1989: 53).

Recent Efforts

In south Asia, adult literacy received attention only after the 1970s, and in India, for example, the National Literacy Mission was launched in October 1988 with a "focus on empowerment of women

through functional literacy and skills development” (UNESCO PROAP, 1989). Nonformal distance education is not well attended, due to impediments such as distance, lack of child care, poor health, and malnutrition. Initiative that would make educational programs viable for girls include a high degree of commitment from government agencies that can mobilize funds, the provision of training for female teachers, scholarships to girls, free education, curriculum structured to the needs of women, and a focus on nonformal education.

There is a major push in these countries toward educational programs that support productivity, skills training that can equip women in production techniques, and basic child care. Nongovernmental organizations, such as Shiksha Karmi in India, and strategies such as provision of free education and midday meals have attracted a great deal of attention, as have the Bangladesh Rural Advance Committee, Cheli Beti in Nepal, and Khwendo Kor in the North-West Province of Pakistan. The emphasis is not so much on literacy skills as on health and child care issues, which also could include basic literacy skills. These countries have been formulating specific policies such as the establishment of separate education cells for women in governments, the appointment of specialists to formulate non-gender-biased curriculum, flexible school timing, and school calendars specific to an area. It is hoped that efforts made by the individual countries and international organizations will increase literacy, leading to greater equity.

See Also

DEVELOPMENT: SOUTH ASIA; EDUCATION: GENDER EQUITY; HOUSEHOLDS AND FAMILIES: SOUTH ASIA; LITERACY; WOMEN’S STUDIES; SOUTH ASIA; WORK: OCCUPATIONAL SEGREGATION

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