Women’s Education in India

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“If you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate a household,” is a quote from Ghanaian scholar Dr. James Emmanuel Kwegoir-Aggrey, relayed to me by Mr. Ramaswamy, President of the Monterey Institute, during my recent interview with him on gender and access issues of education in India. This quote tells us that the influence of an educated mother is profound and immeasurable. When it comes down to it, women are the primary caregivers of newborns in most societies, be it a mother, a nanny, a loving grandmother, or an older sister. From the womb through early childhood, the baby is surrounded by women most of the time, whose words, facial expression, body language, and expectations play a vital role in shaping the child’s future destiny. Little surprisingly, George Washington, the first President of the United States, spoke of his mother with great admiration: "All I am I owe to my mother...I attribute all my success in life to the moral, intellectual and physical education I received from her" (as cited in Nyamidie, 1999).

Indeed, when women are educated and empowered, the benefits are enormous. Studies have shown that women’s literacy leads to increased life expectancy, reduced child mortality, and ultimately healthier and educated children. Apart from these social benefits, many scholars including Oyitso and Olomukoro (2012) have also discussed the exponential economic and political benefits brought by literate women. In spite of the abundance of good things women literacy can bring to a society, such benefits have not been recognized in many developing countries, such as India. This paper starts with the history and status quo of women’s education in India, followed by an illustration of factors that have been holding women from going to school; then, based on these factors, recommendations are offered on how to address women’s illiteracy problem in India, and it concludes with a brief summary.
**History and Present**

Historically, women have a much lower literacy rate than men in India. From the British Raj to India’s independence, literate women accounted for only 2-6% of the total female population (Raman, 2006). Upon the establishment of the Republic of India, the government has attached great importance to women’s education. An RGCC (Register General and Census Commissioner) report cited by Velkoff (1998) found that India’s female literacy rate reached 22% in 1971, nearly half of the male’s 46%. These figures jumped to 39% and 64% respectively two decades later (p. 1). The trend continues: a 2011 survey showed that the average female and male literacy rose to 65.5% and 82.1% respectively (RGCC, 2011, p. 126). Despite the fact that many more women are becoming literate, as indicated by the figures, the gap between male and female literacy rates persists. If we look closer at how much education the literate women had, the situation becomes even more discouraging. In 2001, among all the literate women, nearly 60% of them received only primary education, a mere 5.9% attended high secondary education, as shown in the Table 1 below.

**TABLE 1: NUMBER AND PERCENT LITERATES BY LEVEL OF EDUCATION: INDIA 2001#**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of education</th>
<th>Absolute Numbers (000')</th>
<th>Percent to Literate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Persons</td>
<td>Males</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literate</td>
<td>560,688</td>
<td>336,534</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literate without educational level</td>
<td>20,023</td>
<td>11,361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below Primary</td>
<td>144,831</td>
<td>81,148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>146,740</td>
<td>83,525</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>90,227</td>
<td>55,940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High secondary/Intermediate/PreUniversity/Senior Secondary</td>
<td>37,816</td>
<td>24,596</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non technical diploma or certificate not equal to degree</td>
<td>386</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical diploma or certificate not equal to degree</td>
<td>3,667</td>
<td>2,901</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate and above</td>
<td>37,670</td>
<td>25,533</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#India figures excludes Mao Maram, Paomata and Purul sub-divisions of Senapati district in Manipur state as census state as census results were cancelled due to administrative and technical reasons.

Source from: RGCC, 2001
Over the past decades, great progress has been made in promoting women’s education; the gap between male and female literacy rates declined from 26.62% to 21.69% between 1981 and 2001 (Sharmila & Dhas, 2010), which was further reduced to 16.6% in 2011. However, the 34.5% illiteracy rate in 2011 means there were 252, 249, 642 women unable to read or write in India today, as shown in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: India’s Literacy Distribution in 2011**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Item</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>51.5%</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>48.5%</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>623,700,000</td>
<td></td>
<td>586,500,000</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,210,193,422</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literate</td>
<td>444,203,762</td>
<td>82.1%</td>
<td>334,250,000</td>
<td>65.5%</td>
<td>778,453,762</td>
<td>74.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illiterate</td>
<td>179,496,238</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
<td><strong>252,249,642</strong></td>
<td>34.5%</td>
<td>431,745,880</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source from: (RGCC, 2011, p. 128)

With more than 252 million illiterate women, clearly India has failed to tap into half of its human resources. Referring to a UNESCO 2002 report, Oyitso and Olomukoro (2012) stated that, “There is now the realization that sustainable human development cannot be effective if half of the human race (the womenfolk) remain ignorant, marginalized and discriminated against” (p. 67). Velkoff (1998) echoed this concern stating that the lack of education of a population would impede the country’s economic development (p. 1). The truth is, since their independence, the Indian government has made great efforts to incentivize girls to attend school through programs that provide midday meals, free books, and uniforms. Moreover, free compulsory education has been offered for both girls and boys aging 6 to 14 across the nation. Why aren't Indian parents taking advantage of the free education for their daughters? What are the factors that have kept Indian girls from going to school?
Factors Holding Women from Going to School

Much research has been done to explore the root causes of the undesirable women literacy rate in India; for example, Velkoff (1998) listed the barriers to be poverty, parents’ negative attitudes, insufficient school infrastructure, shortage of female teachers, and a highly gender-biased curriculum; whereas Sharmila and Dhas (2010) countered that rural poverty actually acted “as a push factor for women’s education rather than as an obstacle to women’s education”; that urbanization “had been playing a beneficial role in the attainment of women’s education in India”; and it was the drop-out rate caused by inadequate school infrastructure that “had a negative effect on women’s education” (p. 11). Based on my research, the various attributing factors can be grouped into two categories: conceptual factors (discrimination against women) and socioeconomic factors (poverty), as elaborated respectively below.

Conceptual Factors – Discrimination Against Women

In my first research paper, I mentioned that historically, women were looked down upon in India, as in many Oriental countries. The Reverend K. M. Banerjea, an eminent Indian convert to Christianity, wrote in 1841 that Bengali women “drag on lives of the utmost wretchedness and degradation, and are regarded only as servants of the household, and ministers of carnal gratification to their husbands” (Seth, 2007, p. 133). My interview with President Ramaswamy leads me to believe that such discrimination still exists in India today, and it is manifested in three aspects. First, men are considered to be much more important and intelligent than women; as such, they have almost exclusive rights to access resources. For example, as President Ramaswamy confirms, properties are usually passed down to the male heir of the family rather than the female heir. Similarly, if a family cannot afford for both their son and daughter to go to school, it is always the son who will be given the opportunity.
Second, as the above quote suggests, women have traditionally been regarded as “ministers of carnal gratification to their husbands” (Seth, 2007, p. 133), women will have to be married off at a certain age. Therefore, parents tend to consider their daughters as future outsiders of their family, and are not willing to make any investment in their education.

Third, traditionally, women are considered to be inferior to men, and their role is to take care of children and the household; whereas men are the owners of the family who have absolute power. Under this concept, a woman’s place is confined within the four walls of their house, and there is no need to be educated or learn any skills. President Ramaswamy explains the way of thinking of many Indian parents, “If a woman is over educated, it is unattainable for her to maintain traditional lifestyles. If a well educated girl gets on, and does better and better, it will be very difficult for her to find a groom who is better qualified in the traditionally arranged marriage, which still exists in many parts of the country. It is hard to maintain a harmonious marriage if her husband is less qualified.”

When you put all these pieces together, President Ramaswamy concludes that not surprisingly, in the eyes of many parents, female literacy is considered to be either a luxury or a waste of time. The above attitudes have been rooted in the minds of the Indian people for generations. As a Chinese saying goes, “Attitudes are everything.” With such discriminatory attitudes, even if a woman is born into a rich family, the chances of her going to school are still very slim. The deep-rooted discrimination of women plays a decisive role in the parents’ decision of keeping their daughters home, which is usually compounded by socioeconomic factors – poverty.

**Socioeconomic Factors – Poverty**

India has been struggling with poverty for centuries. In 2005, nearly half (42%) of the
population was living on less than US$1.25 per day (UNESCO, 2013). According to CIA World Facebook, in 2011, India’s GDP per capita was $3,700, ranking 164 in the world (index mundi, 2013). Harma (2011) conducted a study in 2010 involving 250 households living in 13 villages, and found that even with the emergence of LFPS (Low Fee Private Schools), the poorest still couldn't afford to send their children to private schools – their first choice. Therefore, “the government sector has become the option of last resort for the poorest and most marginalized” (p. 356). Socioeconomic factors lead to three derivatives: insufficient school infrastructure, poor teaching conditions, and lack of social security.

In India, many schools do not have sufficient facilities including enough classrooms for school-aged children, sanitary facilities or drinking water. In my second research paper on India’s poor teaching quality, I mentioned that Kaushik Basu, Professor of Economics from Cornell University, conducted a study of 188 government-run primary schools in central and northern India, discovering that 59% of the schools had no drinking water facility and 89% no toilets; and most alarmingly, many teachers were found absent at the time of the survey (Basu, 2004). Sharmila and Dhas (2010) conducted a study on India’s investments on education and its infrastructural supports, and acquired the following statistics:

1. All together, only 47 percent of schools across 58 districts had common toilets in school, while 32.7 percent schools had a separate toilet for girls in 2005 (p. 10);
2. In the same year, 41,079 schools didn’t have school buildings, of which 92.01% (37,795) were in rural areas, and only 7.99% were in urban areas. Moreover, in the case of independent upper primary schools, the number of building-less schools was as high as 12.53 percent (8,614) (pp. 8-9);
3. Nearly 20% of schools (all categories) did not have a drinking water facility
available in 2005, including 80.56% of schools in rural areas (p. 9).

As Velkoff (1998) put it, “Lack of latrines can be particularly detrimental to girls’ school attendance” (p. 4). The inadequate school facilities make going to school a very unattractive endeavor; which also renders teaching an unwanted profession. Moreover, the limited government budget on education leads to very low teacher salaries. In my previous research, I discovered that teachers’ salaries in India should be between Rs. 8,000 (kindergarten level) to Rs. 17,500 rupees (post graduate teacher level), which is equivalent of US$146.1 to 319.6 (Khemaka, 2006). As a result, few people want to teach in India, as testified by the two Indian students I interviewed (Manjari and Madhu, as shown in the two videos). It was also not surprising that Professor Basu would find many teachers were absent from their classrooms during his survey. With teachers unmotivated and not caring about their students, it is hard to imagine that going to school would be an inviting experience for either boys or girls. It is even less tempting for girls since so many schools do not have appropriate facilities for them.

President Ramaswamy also points out that with the poor socioeconomic status in India, there is a lack of social security. Parents cannot afford to send their younger ones to day care; neither do they have the money to pay a nanny or an au pair. Instead, they make use of what they have – asking older daughters to take care of younger siblings. In the case of the poorest families, in order to survive, they need their daughters to work either in the field or a factory; sending them to school is simply not an option.

**Recommendation**

In view of the aforementioned key factors that have been holding girls back from going to school, the following four primary approaches could be undertaken or enhanced by the Indian government and NGOs: increasing people’s awareness on the fundamental benefits of women’s
education, adopting a gradual approach, investing more on K-12 education (mainly on improving female-centered school infrastructure), and providing informal or non-formal education to women that incorporate life skills.

**Awareness Campaign**

As said before, attitudes are everything; they determine people’s way of thinking and behavior. If the discriminatory attitudes towards women are not eradicated, women’s education in India will get nowhere. Therefore, awareness creation programs should be designed through media (mainly traditional media such as radio and TV) to inform people of the great value women’s education can bring to themselves, their children, their family, and ultimately, the society. Such a campaign can take the form of documentaries of successful life stories of educated women, serving as inspiring examples to girls in India.

**A Gradual Approach**

Judging from the current situation, obviously, it is not realistic for every girl in India to go to college, which would be a daunting task for most parents. As such, President Ramaswamy suggests that the government should take a gradual approach: for the time being, every girl should aspire to finish at least K-12; and go to college only if they have the desire and potential. This approach makes perfect sense; an unrealistic goal will not motivate people; instead, it will scare people away and soon it will be put on a shelf to gather dust. However, if we take the big goal step by step, the goal becomes easier to manage, and more people will be encouraged to follow through.

**More Investment on K-12 Education**

While working on changing people’s attitudes, the government should also enhance its efforts on making going to school attractive. This means, more female-centered educational
infrastructure should be established and programs that have been implemented to encourage
girls’ school attendance such as midday meals, free books and uniforms, should be strengthened.
As President Ramaswamy suggests, the government should take a paradigm shift, instead of
focusing on higher education, much more attention should be paid to K-12 education. After all,
the K-12 system is the foundation of the edifice of education; without a solid foundation, it
doesn't matter how beautiful the roof is, the edifice is not going to sustain.

Provision of Informal or Non-formal Education

Coombs and Ahmed (1974) defined informal and Non-formal Education as follows:

Informal education...

is the lifelong process by which every person acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills
and attitudes and insights from daily experiences and exposure to the environment – at
home, at work, at play; from the example and attitudes of family and friends; from travel,
reading, newspapers and books; or by listening to the radio or viewing films or television.
Generally, informal education is unorganized and often unsystematic; yet it accounts for
the great bulk of any person’s total lifetime learning – including that of even a highly
‘schooled’ person (as cited in Rose, 2007, p. 6).

Nonformal education...

is any organised, systematic, educational activity carried on outside the framework of the
formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular sub- groups of the
population, adults as well as children. Thus defined, nonformal education includes, for
example, agricultural extension and farmer training programmes, adult literacy programs,
occupational skill training given outside the formal system, youth clubs with substantial
educational purposes, and various community programs of instruction in health, family
planning, cooperatives and the like (as cited in Rose, 2007, p. 6).

Since formal education has failed to meet the needs of all school-aged girls and boys, there is a need for informal and non-formal education to fill the vacuum. Actually, the Indian government has already taken steps in this direction. For example, the government launched the Saakshar Bharat Mission for Female Literacy program, which “aims to promote and strengthen adult learning, reaching out to those who missed the opportunity to access or complete formal education. As well as basic literacy/basic education, it covers vocational education and skill development, applied science and sports. Due to its approach Saakshar Bharat is described as a ‘people’s programme’, with the government acting as facilitator and resource provider, but working closely with local communities to tailor the programme to their needs” (UNESCO, 2013). Such community-centered programs are a very effective grassroots way to reach people; thus the government should attach greater importance to them, and provide them with more resources.

**Conclusion**

Due to the historical discrimination against women, compounded by prolonged poverty, the development of women’s education in India has been a rocky journey. Despite the efforts made by the Indian government over the past decades, the large gap between male and female literacy rates in India persists. In view of the potentially significant social, economic, and political benefits brought by women’s literacy, the Indian government has no choice but to step up its efforts in advancing women’s education in order to fully tap into the underutilized half of its human resources.
References


Rose, P. (2007). NGO provision of basic education: Alternative or complementary services delivery to support access to the excluded? *Consortium for research on educational access, transitions and equity*. 1-41.


