

Barriers to girls' education

We should not be too quick to attribute low literacy among girls to poverty alone. A number of other factors are just as responsible. Wahidul Hasan Khan lists some of these.

June 2008 - The conventional view of illiteracy is that it is closely linked to poverty. While that is certainly true, there are numerous other factors responsible for the low levels of literacy, especially among females, and it is only by understanding the impact of these other factors that significant - and meaningful - increases in illiteracy can be achieved. In this article, I identify a number of these other conditions that lead to illiteracy.

Inadequate School Facilities: Many states do not have enough classrooms to accommodate all school-age children. And the classrooms that are available often lack basic necessities such as sanitary facilities and water. The Public Report On Basic Education (PROBE) reports on a 2997 survey of 1221 primary school in 188 randomly selected villages in Bihar, M.P., Rajasthan and U.P.

44 % of schools does not have a playground.
54 % of schools did not have drinking water.
72 % of schools did not have a library.
84 % of schools did not have a toilet.
12 % of schools had a single teacher.

Although it is heartening to note that the growth in female literacy has been higher at 14.87 percent than males at 11.72 percent during this decade, it still trails male literacy by more than 21 percentage points.

Lack Of qualified female teachers: Girls are more likely to attend schools if they have female teachers. Girls are more comfortable and more vocal with lady teachers, thus actively focusing and participating in the learning process. Also, parents - especially in rural areas - are hesitant to send their girls to schools that have only male teachers. Nearly all committees and commissions that have looked into illiteracy have recommended increased recruitment of women teachers.

Lack of transport facilities: Particularly in rural areas, transportation is needed for girls to attend middle and secondary schools, which are often far away from their homes. Primary education is often accessible much closer, but secondary education facilities assume that children will drop out as they age, and therefore fewer schools are established to cater to older children. Necessarily, therefore, these schools tend to be inaccessibly far away from many school-age girls. This perverse assumption must be discarded, and equal numbers of schools at all levels must be established.

Lack of hostel facilities for girls: Many girls desirous of pursuing education above middle level, facilities for which are available away from their homes, cannot avail themselves of these facilities due to lack of hostel arrangements. Girls, particularly those belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes would continue their education at middle and above levels if they could find free or inexpensive residential facilities nearer the educational institution.

Fear of sexual harassment: Parents often complain about insecurity for girls attending schools. Instances of abduction, rape and molestation of girls dampen the enthusiasm of parents and girl students in pursuing education beyond a certain age; thereafter they remain bound to their homes.

Fixed schooling hours: Fixed schooling hours do not suit girls in rural areas, as they are needed for domestic work at home or in farms and fields during these hours. This is one of the causes of lower participation rates of girls in education. The enrolment rates of girls and their retention can be improved if educational facilities are made available to girls during periods suitable to them when they are free from domestic chores. Flexible school timings have been tried in Rajasthan through the Shiksha Karmi Project and Lok Jumbish, and the results are encouraging.

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These factors combine to produce unattractive environments in which girls must run the gauntlet of difficulties to remain in school, as a result of which their learning is severely compromised even if they do remain. A discriminatory attitude builds up among teachers and the greater society that witnesses girls dropping out in large numbers. Understanding the structural, budgetary, and security failures behind public education for girls can help us limit the debilitating effects of poverty - which is real - and greatly increase the number of children whose learning years are spent where they belong.

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