



Addressing the Health and Education Divide- Female Literacy

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ABSTRACT

Education plays a significant role in the holistic development of one's personality. But in the Indian context, importance in other spheres of life and specially education, weightage and preference is shown towards the male gender resulting in discrimination. Gender inequality and is now a very prominent feature of the Indian society. A huge disparity between male and female literacy rate is quite alarming and calls for special effort to bridge this gap. In addition to it, the issue of health awareness for females also needs immediate attention which has been a neglected field since times immemorial. The paper has tried to address and touch upon the issues of female literacy, gender disparity, health, women empowerment and expressed the need for social change through supporting and encouraging women to embark upon a journey which will not be at crossroads but meeting at a point where education and health will be at utmost priority leading to live a life full of contentment and quality.

KEYWORDS : Female literacy, Gender Equality, Community health, Women empowerment

There is a saying "if you educate a man, you educate one person, but if you educate a woman, you educate the whole family, community and society at large". **M.K Gandhi**

Background

In a country having large scale illiteracy causing social and economic backwardness accompanied with other maladies like exploitation, poverty, poor health, high mortality rate, disease, malnutrition, high infant mortality rate etc., the efforts and the steps taken by the government are not adequate. Despite having constitutional provisions for eradication of illiteracy, first to begin with, the provision in the directive principles of state policy and later through constitutional amendments making education a fundamental right, unfortunately has not yet created the desirable impact. Girls education has always received a step motherly treatment and the statistical data gives a very dismal picture of the whole situation.

India's literacy panorama

Indian had signed the Charter of Human Rights in 1946 which spoke not only of the right to education, but also free and compulsory education. The charter particularly emphasized free and compulsory education for girls. But when the Indian Constitution was adopted in 1950, it was not included as a fundamental right. Education for girls was extremely neglected. There was a sheer absence of political will.

The Prime Minister of India in his address to the nation on the occasion of Independence day i.e. 15th August, 2014 showed his concern for the low sex ratio between boys and girls i.e. 940 girls for 1000 boys which could be attributed to the attitude of parents as they think that their sons will take care of them in old age.

It may not be out of context to quote a small poem written by young students viz. Pooja, Ramya, Anuj and Utkarsh, students of Class VII from Baroda quoted in the Position paper of the National Focus Group on Gender issues in Education prepared by NCERT it may be noted that the stereotypic roles of males and females is also reflected in our text books and other teaching material which not only creates a biased vision in the young minds but also prevents the development of a healthy attitude towards the two genders. Gender sensitisation is a social and people's issue and therefore closely linked with the process of socialization. Challenges begin at home and gender like other biases refers to inequality. Gender sensitization for what? It is directly related with women empowerment and no discrimination which is unknowingly reflected on various occasions in our language and behaviour. We all know that our perception and concepts differ from culture to culture. Challenges begin at a very young age and that too from home. In fact gender unlike other biases may in fact be the most pervasive form of inequality as it cuts across all classes, castes and communities which make it a more complex problem. The ultimate of curriculum is not to create empowerment but has to make individuals empowered. The idea has to grow into a movement and we have to produce individuals who take active role in building an inclusive de-

mocracy. So it is up to us to view it as a process of socializing learning into existing norms, values, power structure rather make it a process of expanding human capacity to create a just and compassionate society.

Trend of Female Literacy in India

According to the 2001 census, the literacy rate in India was 64.8% and as per NSS 61st Round Survey Report, the literacy rate was 67.3% during 2004-05. Further, the gender gap in literacy was estimated to be roughly 20% (Source: www.knowledgecommission.gov.in/downloads/baseline/school.pdf) As per India population survey 2011 (source: <http://www.census2011.co.in//literacy.php>) the total literacy of India was 74.04 while for male it was 82.14% and for female it was 65.45%. A huge disparity of 8.66% between male and female literacy rate is quite alarming and calls for specific efforts to be made to cover this gap. The 2001 census report also reveals that in the age group of 7-9, literacy rate was 75.85 for male against 54.16 for female. This wide gap of male and female literacy is 21.70 as per the last census report.

Gap in Literacy and its impact

Kothari Commission on Education (1964-66) traced the causes for failure to achieve universalisation of education to (1) lack of adequate resources (2) tremendous increase in population (3) illiteracy and apathy of people and resistance to women's education.

This resistance is on various grounds (1) Historical (2) cultural (3) social.

Gender disparity

Recently we have seen that in defence services there was a glaring disparity and discrimination between men and women officers. However defence ministry has now recognised this injustice and steps have been taken for removing them.

It is a fact that women have been denied the basic right to education for centuries. Tracing the history of last five hundred years in the country, right from the time of Moughals, and later British rulers, gender disparity has been alarming. Today in the 21st century, when we are talking of women's liberalization, social, political, educational and employment equality, the gender disparity still prevails.

The fact is the negligence of female education in the country is responsible for various kinds of social disorder.

Correlation between female literacy and maternal mortality

Surveys and Research findings reiterate that investing on educating girls and women is the best possible investment for development. Educated women are better able to perform their roles within the household, in the work force and in the country. High fertility, higher rate of mortality, infant mortality, all these problems are directly associated with standard of living and illiteracy and ignorance of women.

Experts also agree that education of women is associated with reduced fertility. In Brazil, for example, the average family size for women with secondary education is 2.5 children compared to 6.5 children for women with no education. This also applies to Indian conditions. Small size family is having direct impact on high standard of living as well as higher degree of education and awareness in women.

Promotion of maternal and child health has been one of the most important components of the Family Welfare Programme of the Government of India. One of the objective is for each pregnant woman to receive at least three antenatal check-ups plus two tetanus toxoid injections and a full course of iron and folic acid supplementation.

Although the spread of HIV/AIDS is a major concern in India but a large number of women have not even heard of it. Awareness of AIDS is particularly low among women who are not regularly exposed to media, scheduled-tribe women, illiterate women, women living in households with a low standard of living, and rural women. Among women who have heard of AIDS majority of them have learned about the disease from television and some of them from radio, suggesting that the government's efforts to promote AIDS awareness through the electronic mass media have achieved some success. Among women who have heard of AIDS, however, about one-third do not know of any way to avoid infection. Different survey results suggest that health personnel could play a much larger role in promoting AIDS awareness. In a recent review article Jaishree Ganjwale (2012) while reflecting on current health status of woman in India has said that "Women are subjected to selective malnourishment from birth". She said that "There is strong preference for the male child in several states.....". This has been endorsed by several others too.

Policies of progression

One would recall that in post independent India the Constitution Framework and Policy initiatives have stressed on promoting gender equality, in all walks of life. The Constitution of India adopted in 1950 not only grants equality to women but also empowers the state to adopt measures of affirmative discrimination in favour of women. The notion of equality has also been emphasized upon the National Policy on Education, 1986. The Policy states that:

1. Education will be used as an agent of basic change in the status of women. In order to neutralize the accumulated distortions of the past, there will be a well- conceived edge in favour of women. The National Education System will play a positive, interventionist role in the empowerment of women. It will foster the development of new values through redesigned curricula, textbooks, the training and orientation of teachers, decision makers and administrators, and the active involvement of educational institutions. This will be an act of faith and social engineering. Women's studies will be promoted as a part of various courses and educational institutions encouraged taking up active programmes to further women's development.
2. The removal of women's illiteracy and obstacles inhibiting their access to, and retention in, elementary education will receive overriding priority, through provision of special support services, setting of time agents and effective monitoring. Major emphasis will be laid on women's participation in vocational, technical and professional education at different levels. The policy of non-discrimination will be pursued vigorously to eliminate sex stereo-typing in vocational and professional courses and to promote women's participation in non-traditional occupations, as well as in existing and emergent technologies.

The Programme of Action 1992 also has special parameters on the empowerment of women. It states the following. (<http://www.teindia.nic.in/Files/Reports/CCR/POA%201992.pdf>)

- ❖ Enhance self-esteem and self-confidence.
- ❖ Build a positive image of women by recognizing their contributes to the society, politics and the economy.
- ❖ Develop ability to think critically.
- ❖ Foster decision making and action through collective process.
- ❖ Enable them to make informed choices in areas like education, employment and health (especially reproductive health).
- ❖ Ensure equal participation in development process.
- ❖ Provide Information, Knowledge and skill for economic inde-

pendence.

- ❖ Enhance access to legal literacy.

The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women: 2001 also stressed upon promoting advancement, development and empowerment of women. (<http://wcd.nic.in/empwomen.htm>)

It is true that women by virtue of this Amendment (73rd and 74th constitutional Amendment Act of 1993) have acquired decision making rights at the grassroot level however, studies such as Recruitment and Posting of Women Teachers in Rural Areas 1995-97 (Department of Women's Studies) has portrayed that in some villages of district Rajgarh of Madhya Pradesh *women sarpanches* were existing only in names. Decision making in all important matters was taken by their husbands. (<http://gsera.com/73rd-and-74th-constitution-amendment-acts-1992.html>)

A high level of socio economic development is associated with women's access to education. Educated women are in better control of their own lives and are better able to take care of their children. They have wider opportunities and higher earning power. As more and more girls are educated, they can be catalyst of development.

Women Empowerment – A tool for Sustainable Development

Women's literacy and social and political awareness accompanied with economic development are synonymous. Bihar is the most economically and socially backward state in India. Interesting to note that in 2001 census report literacy rate in Bihar is 47.53, whereas female literacy rate is as low as 33.57. On the other hand literacy rate in states like Kerala, Delhi and Maharashtra, where the economic prosperity is higher, and the people are more socially and politically advanced and more aware, along with higher rate of literacy, correspondingly women's rate of literacy is also high. However, this gender disparity is clearly visible in these states also. Even as per 2011 India population census Bihar is having the lowest literacy rate for both total and female population i.e. 61.80 and 46.40 respectively. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011_census_of_India)

Recommendations for reform

In view of the above we need to take concrete steps to promote girls education. Some of them are suggested as follows:

1. Literacy and education will facilitate directly, not the productivity, development of human resource, the social, cultural and economic prosperity will come along with the growth of literacy and education.
2. There is no doubt that literacy and education for women would be a key factor for social harmony, peace and economic development. Initiative is urgently to be taken by the govt. at their level and mere resources are to be invested for the education and social welfare schemes for women.
3. In this endeavor, private initiative through various NGOs is required to be encouraged. Such massive work cannot be left only to the state, equal partnership and co-operation is absolutely necessary between the government and NGOs.
4. Special monitoring cell needs to be created by the govt. to ensure that the plans and the projects initiated for the various schemes for women for education, employment, social welfare, eradication of injustice and exploitation against women are being properly implemented.
5. Women's welfare organization working at the grassroot level should also be given due recognition. All necessary support to augment their activities for better community living should be provided.

Conclusion:

Women's education should take the form of a movement. This movement should be led by the women themselves. Women must become more confident. They would be prepared to break the barriers which are hindering their growth and development. Being a woman myself, we should address to the nation that the women's education cannot be left neglected any more. Let us all be together sending a strong message to the entire nation that the time has come to take the subject more seriously.

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