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Educating the Girl Child

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Introduction

Education is extremely essential for the overall development of a child. It ensures knowledge, skills of a trade and makes one eligible for a job or a business. Education is also linked with a person's social status. However, the importance of education for girl child is often ignored. According to UNESCO there are around the 796 million adult illiterates in the world and two-thirds of the world's illiterate adults are women (UNESCO, 2010). From the year 1990 to 2000, the world literacy rate increased from 76 percent to about 82 percent. However, the progress has slowed down in the decade since then. In India alone there were 1.7 million out of school children by 2010 data (there is no new data for 2011). According to the World Bank, in 2010 India had the third highest number of out of school girls in the world. According to the United Nations, 'Women are over half of the world's population, yet they do two-thirds of the world's work, earn one-tenth of the world's income, and own less than one-hundredth of the world's property.' Statistics after statistics show the disparity in literacy rates between males and females around the world. In developing countries where the literacy rates are low in general, females dramatically lag behind males. The two major factors contributing to this disparity include cultural views on educating females and poverty.

Importance of Education for Girl Child

The role of women in society is extremely significant and cannot be overlooked. Lack of education denies the girl child, the knowledge and skills needed to advance their status. Education enables the child to realise her full potential, to think, question and judge independently; to be a wise decision maker, develop civic sense and learn to respect, love fellow human beings and to be a good citizen. Education is the single most powerful way to lift people out of poverty. Education empowers the girl child and helps to remove burden from poor families. In poor families in most Third World countries a girl child is usually seen as a bread winner and forced into child labour. Education helps in ensuring gender equality and the advancement of women. Education enables a person to claim his/her rights and realise one's potential in the economic, political and social arenas. Education plays an important role in enabling girls and women to secure other rights. Basic education provides girls and women with an understanding of basic health, nutrition and family planning, and empowers them to decide over their own lives. Education of girls directly leads to better family health, economic growth, for the family and for society, as well as lower rates of child mortality and malnutrition. Therefore, education should be an intrinsic part of any strategy to address the gender-based discrimination against women and girls that remains prevalent in many societies.

There are several issues related to the neglect of education of the girl child. Several problems persist: issues of 'social' distance – arising out of caste, class and gender differences – deny

children equal opportunities. Social traditions and deep rooted religious and cultural beliefs are most often the barriers to expanding girls' educational opportunities. Child labour in some parts of the country and resistance to sending girls to school remain real concerns. Girls belonging to marginalised social and economic groups are more likely to drop out of school at an early age. Several factors such as culture, religious beliefs, and economic situations contribute to the staggering global illiteracy rates among young girls and women. Some other factors are:

- Cultural and traditional values stand between girls and their prospects for education. Social beliefs, attitudes and practices do not let the girls benefit from educational opportunities to the same extent as boys. In most societies there exists a powerful economic and social rationale for investing in the education of sons rather than daughters.
- There exists indifference in attitudes and practices towards the health and well being of the girl child. There is also a lack of awareness about the importance of education for girl child, especially among illiterate parents and guardians. They do not see the value of sending their daughters to school and mostly poor learning outcomes are further instrumental in dissuading them from doing so.
- Low value is attached to education of girls and this reinforces early marriage. Too often marriage is seen as a higher priority than education, and the girls who are married (even if they have been forced into early marriages against their will) are excluded from schools.
- Mostly girls are burdened with various domestic responsibilities along with the necessity to earn money from 13-14 years of age. Thus crisis at home curbs the interest in study. Often there is no parental support leading to lack of aspiration. This leads to physical and mental fatigue, absenteeism and poor performance and thus affects their performance and attendance in schools.
- Various problems of rural isolation, migratory lifestyles, and lack of infrastructure pose additional challenges to the education of the girl child. Discrimination of different kinds also restrains the child from making use of the available educational opportunities.
- Often financial constraints of various types hamper the education of girls. In most countries education is not free and due to social and economic barriers parents choose to invest in education of the male child and not the girl child.
- Lack of schools (especially in interior villages, hamlets and disadvantaged areas), schools at large distances, poor infrastructure at schools and lack of basic facilities such as toilets and drinking water, violence against girls, fear of sexual assault, and limited number of female teachers are some other factors that keep girls away from school.

One reason for denying girls and women their right to education is rarely articulated by those at the helm of affairs: It is their fear of the power that girls may acquire through education. There is still some resistance to the idea that educated girls and women can be trusted. Education is also seen in some societies as a fear of change and now with globalisation, the fear becomes even greater — fear to lose the cultural identity or the fear of moving towards the unknown.

Girl Child Education in India

There has been a major improvement in literacy rates in India over the past decade, though the number of children who are not in school remains high. There exist gender disparities in education with far more girls than boys failing to complete primary school. The national literacy rate of girls over seven years is 54% against 75% for boys. In the Northern states of India, which are Hindi-speaking, literacy rates of girls are particularly low, ranging between 33-50%. The literacy rate jumped from 52 per cent in 1991 to 65 per cent in 2001. The absolute number of non-literates dropped for the first time and gross enrolment in Government-run primary schools increased from over 19 million in the 1950s to 114 million by 2001. Around 20 per cent of children aged 6 to 14 are still not in school and millions of women remain non-literate despite the spurt in female literacy in the 1990s.

Although lower primary schools are within one kilometre of 94 percent of India's population, on an average every second girl child in India has not got enrolled. While the enrolment rate is high in urban areas, it is conspicuously low in rural areas and so also among the backward and minority communities. The disparity is also regional with higher literacy rate across the Southern and North-Eastern states, but very low in some of the most densely populated Northern states. In Uttar Pradesh, the most populated state in India with a population of 172 million an average of only one out of four girls is enrolled in the upper primary school. Amongst the marginalised communities in the state of Bihar, the situation is far worse where only one out of every six girls is literate. The national average shows that there are twice as many illiterate women as there are men.

The Indian government has expressed a strong commitment towards 'Education For All'. It has taken certain active steps towards status and education of women. In 1994, the Government of India passed a universal female education bill that offers incentives to parents for access and gives punishment for keeping a girl out of school. In another important initiative, the government also announced free and reduced cost of education for girls. The programme has been designed with the aim to offer free education at high school level to all girls of single child families. There is a provision for fellowships to girls undertaking higher studies. The *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)* Programme for universalisation of primary education and the *Mahila Samakhya Programme (MSP)* which has set up alternative learning centres for imparting education and providing empowering skills to girls from disadvantaged communities are among the major initiatives to improve literacy levels. The *Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalyaya Scheme (KGBV)* aims to provide education to girls at primary level. Under the scheme of National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL) 'Model Schools' have been set up to provide better opportunities to girls.

Other agencies and NGOs have also come together to ensure quality primary competency and education for the girl child drawn from poor and disadvantaged communities. A number of NGOs highlighting the importance of education for girl have been set up. The objective is to change the mindset of the society and stop discrimination against girls. IIMPACT is one such NGO with belief that when you educate a girl you educate generations to follow. The emphasis is on bringing 'never been to school' and 'school drop-out' girls in the age group of 6-14 years in the rural areas back in the fold of education with emphasis to provide them with life skills.

IIMPACT's Model

The issue of providing basic education to girls in India is faced with unique problems which need unique measures. IIMPACT, through its simple, scalable and innovative model, has demonstrated a solution involving rural out-of-school girls by effectively bringing them back in the fold of primary education. This model is centred on a Learning Centre or *Prashikshan Kendra* which is placed in a village with about 30 pre-teen out-of-school girls in them. One teacher is attached to each Learning Centre (LC). These LCs are established under complete support and watch of the parents and community members and cater only to out-of-school girls from the village. They are run for a period of 5-6 years during which the village community is sensitized enough to the value of education for the girls, thereby putting them firmly on the educational track. After 5-6 years of primary education and skill based training at the LCs, the girls are placed in formal government schools to continue their future education. Since the community stands sensitized, a trend is then set up for younger girls to also follow suit thereby reducing the need for the LC. Alternatively, the village community takes over charge of their LC as a matter of pride with background support of IIMPACT. In this entire model the role of teacher is extremely crucial and great value is placed on the teacher's competency to deliver. The teachers are all sourced locally from the community and then trained and re-trained to impart multi-level multi-grade teaching in four subjects Hindi, or the local language, English, Mathematics and Environmental Studies.

Starting in 2003 with 450 girls, IIMPACT currently has 25,000 previously out-of-school girls in its LCs in 760 villages. Till date, IIMPACT LCs have helped about 4,000 girls complete their primary competency and education and go beyond to government schools. 16 of these girls are currently doing their graduation in various colleges and universities.

The Learning Centre (or *Prashikshan Kendra*) approach has huge advantages for deprived communities. Parents and village community elders are directly involved in these learning centres thereby easing out any issues of educational content and its implementation. The continuous parental support and proximity to residential areas also leads to high enrolment and low dropout. These LCs are set up in villages and areas with low female child literacy rates. Increased focus on girls from the neglected and deprived communities helps in making the *Prashikshan Kendras* completely inclusive. The girls from illiterate families (85% of fathers and 95% of mothers) are benefitted with parental support and awareness thus breaking the cycle of illiteracy. The mechanism ensures that the girls get to study near the place of residence under watchful eyes of parents. This also enables the girls involved in domestic work, sibling care, and other activities get to avail themselves of educational opportunities. More trust is generated among the parents as only female teachers are employed. The emphasis is on quality demonstrated through learning outcomes, parental recognition and appreciation. A flexible and attractive curriculum is designed which is appealing to the children and every child is free to learn according to her own pace and capacity.

Lives of girls undergo tremendous transformation once they start coming to the LCs regularly. Parents get sensitized as they see learning outputs. They start treating girls at par with boys. The village community begins to respect girls and value them as they can read and write. Educated girls look after themselves better, and their chances of getting exploited

are reduced. This also has reduced the instances of child marriages as parents want to educate their daughters for more number of years. There is a marked improvement in health, hygiene and grooming among girls in the LCs. Learning outputs have tremendously improved as girls have access to quality methods and materials of teaching. There is continuity in education as around 50% of about 4,000 girls from IIMPACT who have passed the State Government's Class V exams went on to complete Class VIII and 35% pass Class X.

Innovative Techniques

Innovation lies in the simplicity with which an educational model addresses contentious issues and produces consistent quality results. The model should be scalable while preserving learning outcomes and quality parameters. Some other strategies and activities which can be successfully adopted include:

Proper Identification of Needy Areas and Beneficiaries: The data on out-of-school children in India is not completely reliable as compared to actual grassroots surveys. Moreover, while such available data may be a good indicator, proper details on out-of-school children is not available at the local level. A process of door-to-door surveys in the villages to identify out-of-school girls within the age-group of 6 to 14 years helps in creation of an authentic database of non-school going girls and enlisting reasons and issues for their present situation. Such a database helps not only in implementing the educational projects in deserving areas but also in assessing the awareness of the concerned stakeholders.

Mobilization of Volunteers and Civil Society Organizations: Social projects and schemes suffer largely because of lack of local community involvement. The educational model should be based on partnership and the village based learning centres should be jointly facilitated, conducted and monitored by local NGOs and the local community. Volunteers can be enlisted at the village level, to help right from the survey stage to project implementation and its continuous monitoring. Partnerships help in quick scaling up and also in reaching difficult areas.

Engaging Teachers from Local Areas: In the present primary education scenario in the country there is a huge paucity of qualified teachers. Various other teacher related issues are also well recognised. Village communities are more comfortable with teachers who are known to them. Teachers drawn from local areas also well understand their surroundings and are aware of local issues and ethos. A system of employing teachers from the village clusters in the project areas after proper training can be put in place. Students, preferably women, who have passed Class tenth or twelfth, are encouraged to join as teachers and are provided sustained training to be better equipped as quality teachers. This helps in preparing a cadre of teachers adept in non-formal teaching systems as well as community work, able to provide learning skills up to Grade 5 and life skills and other basic competencies.

The training of the teachers can be so designed that by the end of one primary school cycle, i.e. about 4-5 years, the teachers obtain excellent grasp over subjects, pedagogy, curriculum and innovative-teaching through trainings and practical work at the learning

centres. Many of them can then become resource persons for training other teachers. This provides a critical and scalable platform for expansion.

Focus on the Girl Child: Conventional village primary schools are pre-dominantly co-educational and cater to a large local population. The co-education system is not welcome or permissible within many communities thus affecting a large number of village girls. The need for separate learning institutions for women is felt at all levels of education and at all the times. Some developed communities also prefer separate educational institutions for boys and girls. This is an important cultural need for the village girl and therefore there is a need for learning centres exclusively for the out-of-school and never-been-to-school girl child. There are no exclusive spaces and services for women and girls in village areas. For thousands of girls who are denied education and the freedom which it brings, such educational centres can be places where they identify themselves and learn to express themselves.

Innovative and Effective Pedagogy: Poor educational achievements fail to motivate children and parents. Many a times they do not themselves know whether such achievements are good or bad due to lack of uniform comparison within their peers. In addition, lack of attractive and effective pedagogy, neglect in classroom, rote method and selective syllabi constitute poor learning outcomes. Therefore, teachers should be more adept at delivering the required information to the children in an interesting manner. Teachers should be trained in Multi-Level Multi-Grade teaching systems, curriculum division and planning, fun-induced teaching and CCE based evaluation systems that stand out in producing a higher impact from the same books and curriculum. Grouping of children as per their learning levels, learning abilities, pace and their individual learning plans, also helps. Each child receives equal learning space where he/she can create and learn. Children can be encouraged towards self learning and conceptual learning by questioning. Classrooms richly supplied with attractive and relevant teaching and learning aids, such as activity books, models, games, story books, picture cards, etc., help in drawing child to the school.

Focus on Key Subjects: Adherence to learning in mother tongue and state prescribed school books help to keep the girls abreast with their peers. The curriculum can include key subjects such as Language, Maths, English, Environment, Science and Computers. Special inputs in Maths and Science can be given through Mobile Science Van, whereas mathematical and scientific concepts can be explained simply through hands-on experiments and various problem solving techniques. Computer literacy using solar powered laptops and educational software can serve as a source of encouragement to the girls to learn faster than they normally would.

Recognising the challenges, IIMPACT, through its recently established Resource Centre, is working towards standardisation of delivery practices and learning outcomes across nine different states in the country, i.e. in linguistic regions as different as Odisha and Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal, Uttarakhand and Jharkhand. The Resource Centre ensures equal quality in content and delivery of curriculum as well as comparable and measurable learning outcomes among children's groups belonging to these differential linguistic and cultural regions.

Empowering Girls through Life Skill Trainings: Cultural activities play an important role in the overall development of children. Many girls are deprived of this right, mostly due to religious reservations. The girls can be involved in meaningful cultural activities and life skills trainings that help them develop into better and more confident individuals. The training in arts and crafts can be made part of the curriculum. Avoiding the rigid path of confrontation and a mechanism of convincing the communities about the meaning and simplicity of each activity can be fruitfully adopted. It is noticed that parents are becoming relatively liberal in allowing their girls to uncover their heads, or wearing a uniform to the government school which they choose to go after Grade 5. Parents become unmindful of their daughters' involvement in educational games, sports and cultural programmes on stage. These changes are small but significantly vibrant as earlier the village communities were against their girls singing a song or dancing but now they understand that educational songs help their daughters learn faster and better.

Involvement of Parents, Community and Formal Schools: Ultimately it is these three i.e. the parents, community and formal schools, which shape the children's future. It is important to work with all the three entities closely to ensure the best possible education for out-of-school girls at the village and community level. Parents can be sensitised through PTAs (parent teacher meetings) in monitoring progress of their girls and facilitating their education and development at the village level. The community can be engaged to monitor the learning centres and local schools through School Management Committees or Village Education Committees. Formal schools can also be made accountable for out-of-school children by changing the present state of affairs and allowing admission of the eligible girls into the mainstream education.

Mainstreaming Girls into the Education System: The out-of-school girls can be involved in non-formal setting of the local learning centres for 4-5 years. The early mainstreaming of left-out and deprived girls who have been brought in the fold of education through non-formal educational efforts is not advisable. These are quick fix solutions which do not hit at the root cause of the problem which creates out-of-school and never-been-to-school girls. Children who are mainstreamed hurriedly again dropout due to weakness in their basic capabilities and an externally forced value of education, which is not intrinsically ingrained in their psyche. This is strengthened by the District Information System for Education (DISE) data on hurriedly mainstreamed children in 2002-03 under the SSA Programme of GOI. Over 80% of mainstreamed children during these two years had dropped out after 1-3 years of schooling (DISE data). However, it has been found that quality education at primary stage better prepares children for higher classes. Mainstreaming of girls after primary level is more meaningful as:-

- Well educated grown-up girls know much more and can carry themselves well, e.g. they can catch a bus if the school is far. They can also learn cycling.
- Older girls travel in groups, and if they are from same LC, they all go together.
- Educated grown-up girls have much greater convincing powers over their parents.
- Girls used to a good standard of teaching become change agents for better learning levels beyond primary schools.
- Girls exposed to self learning techniques and attaining high marks for five years at the LC will do the same in a formal setting also. Therefore liberating themselves forever.

Therefore, 4-5 years of high quality near-to-home education in a non formal setting of a *Prashikshan Kendra* or informal learning centre prepares pre-teen girls well for mainstreaming and continuity in higher education.

Conclusion

Better educational opportunities at grassroots can go a long way in helping pre-teen girls from disadvantaged communities with poor access to schooling gain high quality primary competency, education, and life skills. This in turn leads to a big change in their lives, and even those of their parents and those of their communities and their surroundings. It is essential to think of innovative strategies for reaching out to these girls and providing education.

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