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Disparities in education

Although great strides have been made in Latin America, Sri Lanka, the Republic of Korea, Thailand and the Philippines, with female literacy rates now averaging 80 per cent or more, fewer than 40 per cent of women in most of Asia and Africa can read and write. Since 1970, the gap between male and female literacy has actually widened in Afghanistan, Nepal and Pakistan. In 1985, the world wide illiteracy rate for men was 21 per cent, compared to 35 per cent for women.

Partly because they do not have many informal learning opportunities beyond their domestic duties, rural women have high rates of illiteracy—in Nepal up to 92 per cent, Egypt 87 per cent, China 53 per cent and South Yemen 97 per cent. Even if they succeed in going to school for a year of two, lack of practice makes retention of what they have learned unlikely.

Women have many basic learning needs that have gone unmet. They need skills not only in their role in the family, but also those related to work and community life. They need to learn not only child care, nutrition and family planning, but also animal husbandry, marketing, local laws and other forms of training in the various modern economic sectors.

In Africa, women do most of the agricultural work, but receive little the agricultural training. Because programmes in the past have his-identified the actual agricultural producers, women have been taught less technologies than men.

No literate mother has ever allowed her children to be illiterate. So, increasing the literacy of women helps to ensure the education of the next generation. Nevertheless, disproportionately fewer girls than boys start and finish primary schooling. Girls certainly deserve high priority in educational policy.

What can be done to encourage girls to attend school and once there, to finish? In some cultures, women teachers are important to attract and to retain girls. In Nepal, for example, the presence of a woman instructor makes the parents feel that school is a safe place for their daughters.

Providing same-sex schools as in the "mohalla" project in Pakistan that holds classes in homes, usually increases girl enrolment. On the other hand, girls in Yemen tend to be removed from school by the age of 10 or 12 if a separate institution is not available.

Any way to reduce a family's need for a girl's domestic labour, such as providing day care for her young siblings, will act as a positive incentive. Eliminating school fees, offering free textbooks and transport and reserving scholarships for girls all help and encourage girls to complete school.

Besides disparities between male and female education, other systemic differences require attention. There exists a pronounced urban-rural imbalance. Rural areas generally have fewer schools, teachers and textbooks. The language of instruction may differ from the one that is used at home. Because most countries allocate more resources to urban schools, there are lower rates of enrolment and completion and higher drop-out rates in the countryside.

The distance to school is very important. In Egypt, if a school is one kilometre instead of two kilometres away, enrolment goes up 4 per cent for boys and 18 per cent for girls. In Thailand, the government provides bicycles for children in rural areas, thus increasing attendance.

Adapting the school calendar to the agricultural cycle frees children to work during the harvest season and study during the school year, thus lowering the indirect or opportunity costs to parents. Dividing the school day into multiple shifts helps alleviate the teacher shortage, allows for girls-only sessions and reduces ecosts, in Zambia by 46 per cent and Jamaica by 32 per cent.

Rapid urbanization has led to increasing numbers of children who now live in city streets. The Brazil Street Children Project places the primary emphasis on the child as decision-maker and has found that programmes are most successful when they respond to what the children want to learn, in this case money-making skills. In East Africa, an alternative educational vehicle, stressing basic education and self-reliance provides street children with an accelerated basic skills programme taking only three years to complete. Both programmes stress the need to adapt education to the needs and abilities of students.

At least one in 10 children is born with or acquires a physical or mental disability. In Kenya, the Karatina School teaches mentally disabled pupils to earn a living through animal husbandry and growing vegetables on small plots. The curriculum is aimed at training for adjustment so that students can function fully as members of their community. Land for the school was donated and the agricultural inspector was trained locally. The harvest is used for the lunch programme. Expenditures are low. The school is a pioneer community-based programme in using existing resources to serve special

Refugees in Ethiopia generally do not like their education interrupted. After other basic needs are met, education is the next thing they want. They see their future as tied to education, not in terms of getting a better job but in acquiring the necessary language skills so that wherever they go they will be prepared. The refugees know they might end up in a place very different from the one they left.

The year 2000 will be very different from the world of today. For the rural girl in India, the woman in Egypt, the street child in Brazil, the mentally disabled boy in Kenya, the refugee in Ethiopia, education can make the difference — for all.