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Massive Illiteracy Causes Women's Low Social Status

by Wilasinf Phiphitkul

UNTIL today, Thais can still be heard saying, "having daughters is like constructing a toilet in the front yard of the house" or "men are grains but women are cooked rice."

And in Vietnam, many still tend to think that "one son means having children, but the possession of two daughters really means nothing at all."

Many people in Papua New Guinea, too, are still of the opinion that "a boy inherits my land while a girl becomes another man's wife."

In Bangladesh, the saying that "the presence of women on the land that is being sown would lead to the destruction of the crops" is still heard. In Bhutan, the belief is that "a woman must be reborn nine times to gain the stature equal to that of a man."

Views like these, whether or not said in jest or even half-seriously, were presented by 21 literacy specialists who met here recently to discuss the link between women's status in society and literacy.

Their conclusion: sexual discrimination may be the primary cause of persistent illiteracy in developing countries, especially among women.

Negative attitudes towards women and girls may be at the root of massive illiteracy in developing countries, the specialists said during a meeting organised by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). The specialists stressed the need to develop curricula which highlight women's role in society.

Nearly all (98 per cent) of

the world's adult illiterate population (889 million in 1985) are in developing countries. According to UNESCO, women comprise 48.9 per cent of the illiterates in developing countries.

Two out of three unenrolled school-aged children are girls. In countries with the lowest income, the primary school enrollment rate for girls is 20

is demonstrated as early as birth. It is also not confined to the unsophisticated and uneducated.

In the Terai region of southeastern Nepal, which is close to the Indian border, it is a matter of collective sorrow for the community when a baby girl is born to any of the families. Similarly, more conserva-

strictions for women, we found that there are still fewer women than men attending many of the literacy programmes in the region.

She said there were a number of reasons for this including the parents' unwillingness to send daughters to co-educational schools or institutions without women teachers. Or there is the traditional practice of keeping girls as far away from boys as possible outside of the family circle.

Among adult women, the pursuit of literacy is often hampered by the many chores traditionally assigned to them. Dr Namtip said women are often loaded with household chores double the normal workload. "This heavy workload both inside the home and out leaves very little leisure time for the women to engage in reading and writing," she said.

The lack of materials suitable and attractive to women is another reason for the failure of many literacy programmes to really reach them. Many educational materials are designed only for women with limited skills. On the other hand, many programmes are designed to provide specific benefits to men such as training in tractor operation and similar courses.

As Shahenn Atiqur Rehman, the former minister of education in Punjab, noted, "How could they (women) understand the working of an automobile engine when a good many of them had never seen a road?" — (Depthnews Asia).

Two out of three unenrolled school-aged children are girls. In Asia and the Pacific, there are 28 million female illiterates (against 14 million illiterate males)

per cent lower than that for boys.

In Asia and the Pacific, the number of female illiterates is even increasing. During the past 15 years, their number rose to 28 million while male illiterates numbered only 14 million.

In Pakistan, for example, the literacy rate among rural women is 10 per cent and among female urban residents 40 per cent. In contrast, rural male literacy rate is 30 per cent and urban male literacy rate is 48 per cent.

In some areas, in Bangladesh, the female literacy rate is at most only four per cent. Sultana Afroze, a Bangladeshi who has actively campaigned for women's education, noted during the meeting that the link between illiteracy and the low status of women is particularly pronounced in her country and the Indian subcontinent.

This low regard for females

tive families, who are still bound by feudal traditions; often treat daughters as more inferior to even pigs and dogs.

In her native Bangladesh, Ms Afroze still hears often the saying that "the presence of women on the land that is being sown would lead to the destruction of the crops."

The literacy specialists underscored the need not only to make women literate but also to ensure that those who have acquired the basic literacy skills do not revert into illiteracy. They emphasised the need to provide education which is tailored to women's needs and of a quality which would equip them with the tools needed to cope with the requirements of everyday life.

Dr Namtip Aksorkul, UNESCO's literacy programme specialist, pointed out that "even though there has never been specially laid down re-