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World's Illiterates: Predominantly Female

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The cost of large-scale illiteracy to society is the individual tragedy of unrealised potential and personal growth, magnified a million times.

JAKARTA—The predominant face of the world's illiterates is female.

The facts are astounding. One of every two women in Asia is illiterate. Of the projected one billion illiterates in the world by year 2000, majority will be women. And of the 116 million children unable to attend primary school, two-thirds are girls.

The illiteracy of Asian women can be traced directly to the inordinate burden of poverty they bear, according to Gregg Biggs of World Neighbours (WN), a non-profit organisation based in the United States and working to eliminate hunger, disease and poverty in developing countries.

'While poverty causes problems for men, women and children, it is women who are the ones most responsible for the labour that will help the family survive,' explains Mr. Biggs, senior associate of WN's Public Affairs. 'Subsistence agriculture, finding water, gathering firewood, taking care of the animals—all these are typically considered to be "women's work."

Most women are generally expected to perform these survival chores instead of going to school to learn. Even before she reaches school age, a girl is already starting to perform household work. Two-thirds of all hours worked, for instance, are performed by women, according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

'Simply learning to read will not enable women to break out of poverty; but when integrated into community development activities, it can serve as a key ingredient to making a difference,' says Mr. Biggs. 'This be-

nefits not just the women, but the entire family.'

Dr. Nelly P. Stromquist of the University of Southern California agrees—'Research has identified various benefits of literacy for women, such as better maternal behaviours regarding child health and child rearing, and effective family planning,' she says.

Illiteracy, experts say, is invariably linked with poverty and high infant and maternal mortality rates. There is also a well-documented connection between the literacy levels of women, the size of families, and the mortality and nutritional status of their children,' says Manzoor Ahmed of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

The UNICEF official explains: 'The cost of large-scale illiteracy to society as a whole is the individual tragedy of unrealised potential and personal growth, self-sufficiency and economic achievement magnified a million times'.

The WN has discovered that holding literacy classes is not the ultimate answer to the illiteracy problem. Most women, for example, do not have enough time for school. A survey conducted among young girls in India disclosed that about 30 per cent of their working hours are spent

doing household work, 29 per cent gathering fuel and another 29 per cent fetching water.

Mr. Biggs cites the case of women in the Dhading region of Nepal: 'Women must tend to what they call the "unseen" work—duties for which they receive no pay but on which their whole family's survival hinges. They are usually up at the time the rooster crows to bathe their children, wash clothes, collect water and find fodder and firewood.

'By noon, they must prepare food for children returning from school or the men coming home. They also tend animals. So much of their time is spent caring for their children, husbands and worrying about other thankless or "unseen" tasks that they do not even have time to wash themselves.'

This incredible workload is sometimes further burdened by tasks their husbands give them to finish. Not only do the women feel that their work goes on 'unseen,' they feel they are even unable to communicate their needs.

To ease the work burden of women, WN first works with communities and integrates literacy training as women begin to have more free time. In Nepal, WN financially and technically supports the Human

and National Development Society (HANDS) which introduces literacy by using simple posters that help women learn about the importance of keeping a safe water supply. Having the practical immediate application of these newly learned skills, the women become enthusiastic to learn more.

'We never had the chance when we were young because parents did not allow girls to go to school,' said one woman. 'Now kids are attending school, when they come back they laugh and tease us because we don't understand. I wanted at first to be able to write my name. Now we want to learn to write letters to friends.'

Statistics released by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) have shown that in 1985 there were 297.3 million adult illiterates (age 15 and over) in East Asia, although this number went down to 228.1 million in 1990. The reverse was happening in South Asia: 374.1 million adult illiterates in 1985 and 397.3 million in 1990.

Globally, 965.1 million were registered adult illiterates in 1985 and 962.6 million in 1990.

One of the primary objectives of the 1990 World Conference on Education for All sponsored by UNESCO, UNICEF, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the World Bank is to reduce adult illiteracy to half of the 1990 level, 'with sufficient emphasis on female literacy to significantly reduce the current disparity between male and female illiteracy rates.'

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