

# Literacy : A Key To Women's Empowerment

Though there has been broad progress towards universal literacy, a huge historical deficit remains among today's adult

THE young girl, a fifth grader, says good-bye to her classmates. Her mother died recently and she now has to stay home to cook and bring lunch to her father in the field where he works. At home, her grandmother, who is very old and blind, chides her son for withdrawing his daughter from school. "I will cook," she says. "But how can you? You are blind," he says. "What I can see being blind, you cannot see with your eyes open," the old woman replies.

The message of this dramatized public service announcement, broadcast frequently on national television in Bangladesh, is clear. Bangladesh, like many other countries, is opening its eyes to the reality that with almost two thirds of its female population illiterate, national development is severely hampered.

Over the past 30 years, an "education avalanche" has been sweeping across much of the world. Overall, student enrolment has increased, spending on basic education has grown, national and international actions have been taken to raise literacy rates. In most developed regions and in a growing number of developing countries, near universal literacy for young people has been achieved.

Women, too, have benefited from this "quiet revolution." Today, more girls and women are entering school. In some countries, such as Qatar, Dominica and Lesotho, there are even more women than men enrolled in higher education.

Despite this progress, years of neglect have left very high illiteracy rates among adult, especially rural, women in most developing countries. Huge gaps also exist in women's educational achievements. Women and girls in both developed and developing countries still do not have equal access to educational and training resources.

## Cold statistics, hard facts

Poor, overworked and illiterate — this is the profile of most adult, rural women in the majority of developing countries. Although they are largely responsible for the health and welfare of family members and in many societies grow a good part of the country's food, these women are

## women which denies them full partnership in society.

often deprived of the very means to perform these functions more efficiently. They can neither read nor write.

According to the 1993 World Education Report of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 905 million men and women — almost a quarter of the world's adult population — are illiterate. About 587 million, or 65 per cent of them, are women. In 1985, the number of illiterate women and men was 592 million and 352 million respectively.

There is also some good news. According to a recent study by the Population Action Council, a US-based study group, of roughly 885 million children going to school in 1993, about 400 million are girls. In some countries, especially in developed ones and some parts of Latin America and the Caribbean, there is already no significant gender gap in education at the primary level. The only regions where male/female disparities remain pronounced are South Asia, the Arab States and Sub-Saharan Africa.

• In much of South Asia and the Middle East, only one student in three is a woman. In Africa less than one primary or secondary student in three, and less than one tertiary student in five, is female.

• In some South Asian and African countries, the illiteracy rate for adult women is over 80 per cent. According to the UN's World's Women: Trends and Statistics 1970-1990, among women aged 30 years and above, illiteracy rates are 93.4 per cent in Nepal, 89.2 per cent in Pakistan, 98.2 per cent in Burkina Faso, 97.9 per cent in Mali and 90.4 per cent in Togo.

• Illiteracy in rural areas continues to be high in most regions, even in countries where urban women have made significant progress. According to World's Women, this is sharpest in Latin America — where the rural illiteracy rate among women aged 15-24 is 25 per cent, compared with 5 per cent in urban areas. In Asia and the Pacific, rural rates are double urban rates (43 per cent compared with 22 per cent) and in Africa three quarters of rural women aged 15-24

are illiterate, compared with less than half in urban areas.

• The drop-out rate among girls is much higher than among boys. In Mali, a recent study found that 80 per cent of girls have never attended any school and 60 per cent of those who have attended dropped out during primary school. In Brazil, only 63 per cent of children who start primary school reach second grade, and only 47 per cent make it to fourth grade.

Favouring education for boys over girls is not exclusively a "third world matter." In developed countries, the ratio of boys and girls going to school is roughly the same at the primary and secondary levels when education is compulsory. But at the tertiary level, boys easily outnumber girls. Similarly, women's access to scientific and technical areas remains limited.

• According to the Human Development Report 1993, published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) the ratio of female to male third-level students in scientific and technical fields in Spain is 28 per cent, in Austria 25 per cent and in Canada 29 per cent.

• In the US according to a recent study by the American Association of University Women, girls are systematically excluded from equal educational through stereotyping and prejudice. Boys are preferred over girls in such subjects as math, science and technology.

## Education :

### A critical area of concern

According to Mrs. Gertrude Mongella, Secretary-General of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, though there has been broad progress towards universal literacy, a huge historical deficit remains among today's adult women, especially rural women, which denies them full partnership in society.

If women are to contribute effectively to national development into the twenty-first century, "the fundamental question is whether they will be sufficiently equipped to participate fully by receiving a quality education that will prepare them to enter any field, expose them to sci-

ce, technology, and communications and stimulate their creativity," said Mrs. Mongella.

Education is one of the ten critical areas of concern identified by the United Nations for discussion at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in September 1995. It is also an indispensable objective for two other United Nations conferences — the International Conference on Population and Development (September 1994, Cairo, Egypt) and the World Summit for Social Development (March 1995, Copenhagen, Denmark).

Since 1975, when the first World Conference on Women was held in Mexico City, education for women has remained a key issue on the international agenda. The Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000, adopted at the Third World

Nairobi in 1985, described education as the basis for the full promotion and improvement of the status of women, a basic tool that should be given to women in order to fulfil their role as full members of the society.

In 1990, when the world observed International Literacy Year, the question of equal access to education by women was widely discussed. The same year, the World Conference on Education for All was held in Jomtien, Thailand. The Conference designated education for girls as a top priority. Co-sponsored by UNESCO, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Bank, the Conference initiated a number of programmes aimed at reducing the disparity in illiteracy rate between the sexes and eliminating the social and cultural barriers that have discouraged women and girls from seeking equal opportunities in all aspects of their lives. Since the Conference, the World Bank has almost doubled its lending to basic education, from about \$500 million in 1990 to \$1 billion in 1993. Similarly UNDP doubled its expenditure and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) agreed to allocate one fourth of its total budget for basic education.

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