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The Other Half: Women And Literacy

'We need 10 years of constant work.'

WHEN it comes to education, some people might say a seven-year-old girl living in Nigeria is lucky. In a country where 58 per cent of the children between six and 11 years old attended school in 1991, she could have been one of the 51 per cent of girls enroled. If she lived in Pakistan, where 29 per cent of six to 11-year-old children attended school, three would have been a much smaller chance for her to be one of the girls in that group, just under 21 per cent. Still, if she was a boy, she might have been one of the 64 per cent who attended school in Nigeria or 37 per cent in Pakistan.

The numbers change but the situation is common, for both genders, illiteracy ramains one of the world's biggest problems, particularly in the developing world. But the evidence shows girls to be at a clear disadvantage.

"There is definitely a feeling of Why educate girls at all?" says Mrs. Attiya Inayatullah, a UNESCO Executive Board member from Pakistan who works on women's issues. "When they do put them in school, the environment is not conductive to keeping them there. "School curricula is ready relevant to girls and women, she says.

Of 130 million children out of shcool in 1990, 81 million were girls according to the latest statistics. Of the 905 millions illiterates that year, two-thirds were women. In fact, about one-third of all women were illiterate, compared to fewer than one-fifth of men. In the developing world, where 97 per cent of the illiterate population lives, the rate rose to 45 per cent, and to 79 per cent in the lease developed countries.

Some blame at least part of the disparity on the economic crisis and adjustment policies of the 1980s, which led governments to make substantial cuts in health and education spending. That left fewer schooling opportunities, especially for young women and girls, whose education often is seen as loss important than that of men and boys.

"With very few exceptions, literacy for women is hardly ever visualized as being a specific national goal, "says Ms. Krystyna Chlebowska, as literacy specialist at UNESCO. "In most cases, education policies betray a patent lack of interest in, and ignorance of women's potentialities. "Yet a 1992 World Bank study of 200 countries indicates that nations investing heavily in educating girls enjoy lower infant mortality, longer live expectancy, broader knowledge of good nutritional practices and fewer births.

Lower Status, Less Access : In most developing societies, women have a lower status than men, the researchers say. In addition to less access to education, girls receive less health care and food than boys. And while women work longer hours, they receive lower pay. Some believe discriminations against women in hiring and salaries reinforces parents' attitudes that it is not worthwhile to educate girls.

"Boys are seen as the breadwinners and girls as the dependents. It is the cultural definition of breadwinner the hampers the girl," says Ms. Winsome Gordon, acting chief of UNESCO's Primary Education Section.

With the lack of places in schools after primary education, she says, and while countries may not have a stated quota, two boys are usually enroled for each girl. Added to the low participation of girls is a high drop out rate, often due to factors like pregnancy, for which little or no counselling exists in schools.

Women themselves are often the obstacles. When it's a struggle to provide food, many women do not see education as a primary need. They don't see a reason to become educated, and view school as an "alternative use of ...". If a village offers literacy classes, they have nothing else to do, says Ms. Gordon, who thinks if they had more role models — female teachers, social workers and others outside the home — they would be more inspired to change.

A Shrinking Gap : The gender gap does appear to he shrinking. UNESCO's 1993 World Education Report says "International awareness of female-male literacy disparities has grown over the last decade. The disparities are slowly diminishing at the global level and in all major regions."

The organization projects that by the year 2000, the proportion of illiterate women will fall by more than 5 per cent to just over 28 per cent and that of men by 4 per cent to about 15 per cent. Already, between 1980 and 1990, the proportion of girls to boys in primary school rose from 44 to 47 per cent worldwide, except in the Arab states, where it fell from almost 50 to 40 per cent, and South Asia. In Sub-saharan Africa, it rose from 40 to 44 per cent.

Ms. Gordon, who says the gap at the secondary and tertiary levels remains "abysmal", believes the situation will improve. Women's issues are coming into focus and government planning and education officials are attaching increasing importance to the issue. In Pakistan, for example, a new plan aims to increase school attendance of girls by 8.8 per cent and boys by 2.5 per cent per annum.

The governments of Nepal and Mexico also have embarked on programmes to promote education, as have other countries and international organizations. And at a UNESCO sponsored regional educational conference in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in June, ministers of education and economic planning officials in Asia and the Pacific pledged to give top priority to increasing access of women and girls to all levels of education.

Still says Ms Chlakawala, "Immense disparties remain between the development of intent and practical action ... Very few countries have made a policy commitment to basic education for girls and women and developed a corresponding strategy."

Ms Imyatullah agrees, "The good news has ended. The Director General of UNESCO has declared that in nearly half the developing countries by the end of the decade, the goal of universal primary education will have receded. The EFA goals need more than conferences and declarations. It is long overdue that political pronouncements and paper plans are converted action."

But with modernization and a push, Ms. Gordon sees "a little bit of improvement each year." Girls must be provided with scholarships, stipends and continuing encouragement to learn, she says, "Right now we need an external catalyst ... to see them through the system. We need 10 years of constant work."