



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

UNESCO Bangkok
Asia-Pacific Programme of
Education for All



Advocacy Brief

Removing Gender Barriers to Literacy for Women and Girls in Asia and the Pacific

Removing Gender Barriers to Literacy for Women and Girls in Asia and the Pacific
Bangkok: UNESCO Bangkok, 2012.

20 pp.

1. Basic education 2. Literacy 3. Gender roles 4. Education policy. 5. Non-formal education 6. Lifelong learning

ISBN 978-92-9223-425-6 (Print version)

ISBN 978-92-9223-426-3 (Electronic version)

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Published by the
UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education
Mom Luang Pin Malakul Centenary Building
920 Sukhumvit Road, Prakanong, Klongtoey
Bangkok 10110, Thailand

Chief editor: Dieter Schlenker
Copy-editing: Clive Wing
Design/Layout: Sirisak Chaiyasook and Warren Field
Cover photo: The Janakpur Women's Development Centre in Nepal,
Artist: © Poono Das,
Subject: Old age literacy class education

Printed in Thailand

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APL/12/045-300

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Acknowledgements

This advocacy brief was prepared for UNESCO Bangkok by Cecilia Victorino-Soriano and Maria Lourdes Almazan-Khan with the assistance of the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE) Literacy Team headed by Rene Raya. It has benefited from the review and comments of Nantip Aksornkook, Ulrike Hanemann, Maki Hayashikawa, Ichiro Miyazawa, Idit Shamir, Chu Shiu-Kee, Nozomi Yamada, Mari Yasunaga and Rika Yorozu.

In addition, valuable inputs were received from Adrien Boucher, Fuchsia Hepworth, Min Bista, Nantawan Hinds and Jessica Aumann at UNESCO Bangkok. The contributions of all involved are much appreciated.



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Overview

In an age of digital literacy, where the ability to sort, use and analyse massive amounts of information through information communications technology has become indispensable, 793 million adults still lack basic literacy skills (UNESCO, 2012). Two-thirds of them are women, many living in remote rural communities in Asia-Pacific countries. The barriers to acquisition of literacy mirror the difficulties confronted by women in everyday life. Restrictions to movement, poverty, early marriage, domestic work, discrimination, violence, non-ownership of assets and political disenfranchisement are all intertwined causes of illiteracy.

To build inclusive and just societies, the eradication of illiteracy should be considered a key priority by governments. To make progress, governments will need to increase investment in literacy and build strong support for literacy through partnerships with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), international development partners and society at large. The evidence suggests that if governments and development partners work together to eradicate illiteracy, it is possible to make progress in terms of ensuring access to quality basic education, second-chance options for girls and young women, and affirmative literacy programmes for women. Nevertheless, existing literacy challenges point to the need to step-up collective efforts. In the Asia-Pacific region alone, almost USD 9 billion per year for the next five years is needed to reach the Education for All (EFA) Goal 4 of improving the adult literacy rate by 50 percent (UIL, 2010). Outside of education, gender-responsive policies in other sectors such as labour, health, environment, agriculture, security and development, as well as gender-sensitive budgeting, can complement initiatives to promote women's literacy.

This advocacy brief discusses the situation of literacy in the Asia-Pacific region, highlighting how gaps in literacy achievement reflect broader patterns of marginalisation for women. It analyses the obstacles to achieving literacy for women and girls and illustrates the importance of a favourable policy environment and commitment to sustainable funding for adult literacy. The brief concludes with a series of specific policy recommendations.

The Face of Illiteracy in Asia and the Pacific

Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve his or her goals, develop his or her knowledge and potential and participate fully in community and wider society (UNESCO, 2005).

The power of literacy is widely accepted. Literacy enables people to secure sustainable livelihoods and participate actively in the social, economic and political arena. As stated by UNESCO's *Education for All Global Monitoring Report* "literacy skills are fundamental to informed decision-making, personal empowerment, active and passive participation in global social community" (Stromquist, 2005, p. 12 cited in EFA-GMR, 2006). However, the right to literacy remains elusive for the 793 million illiterate adults (UNESCO, 2012). Illiterate populations consist of adults living without literacy skills, due either to not being

taught literacy fundamentals or, for those taught such skills, not having the opportunity to maintain their abilities. Additionally, new generations are entering adulthood without basic literacy and numeracy skills because they did not complete schooling or received poor quality education (*ibid*).

518 million of the world’s adult illiterate population live in the Asia-Pacific region. 65 percent of these people are women. South and West Asia subregions have the biggest concentration with 416 million, more than half of the world’s total (UNESCAP, 2011). Despite literacy rates in East Asia and the Pacific being higher, the combined number of adult illiterates is also large at 105 million (UNESCO EFA-GMR, 2011).

Women living in remote areas or with backgrounds of urban poverty are the face of illiteracy in Asia and the Pacific. Huge gender disparities are seen in literacy levels in the region. Women comprise two-thirds of adult illiterates worldwide. The overview of global literacy rates provided in Table 1 shows that not only are women far less likely to be literate than men, but by 2015 the projected percentage of women illiterates will be the same as in 1985, with no positive change in global literacy rates for women over 30 years.

Table 1: Global Adult Literacy Rates

Year	Literacy Rate Male	Literacy Rate Female	Adult Illiterates	% Female
1985-1994	82%	69%	864 million	63%
1995-2004	87%	77%	774 million	64%
2005 – 2008	88%	79%	796 million	64%
2015 (Projected)	90%	82%	709.5 million	63%

Sources: UNESCO EFA-GMR, 2008; UNESCO EFA-GMR, 2010; and UNESCO EFA-GMR, 2011.

Disparity in literacy is contextual and the literacy situation within countries can only be understood through careful analysis beyond national statistics. Considering the five countries with the highest number of illiterate people in the Asia-Pacific region, Table 2 looks at the number of youths compared to adult literates. It shows that young people are more likely to be literate than adults. As women make up the majority of the illiterate population, adult women are the most at risk of illiteracy. Women’s disadvantage is highest among older populations, with younger women more likely to be literate. This is the case in China and Indonesia. In Bangladesh, young male illiterates actually outnumber their female counterparts.

Table 2: Youth and Adult Literacy Numbers in Countries with Highest Number of Illiterates

Country	Number of adult illiterates (15 years and over)	% female	Number of female adult illiterates	Number of youth illiterates (15-24 years old)	% female	Number of female youth illiterates
India	283 million	65	189.95 million	40.7 million	67	27.269 million
China	67 million	73	48.91 million	1.6 million	55	0.88 million
Pakistan	51 million	63	32.13 million	11.6 million	64	7.424 million
Bangladesh	49 million	55	26.95 million	8.44 million	47	3.967 million
Indonesia	13 million	70	9.1 million	1.39 million	55	0.765million

Source: UNESCO EFA-GMR, 2011.

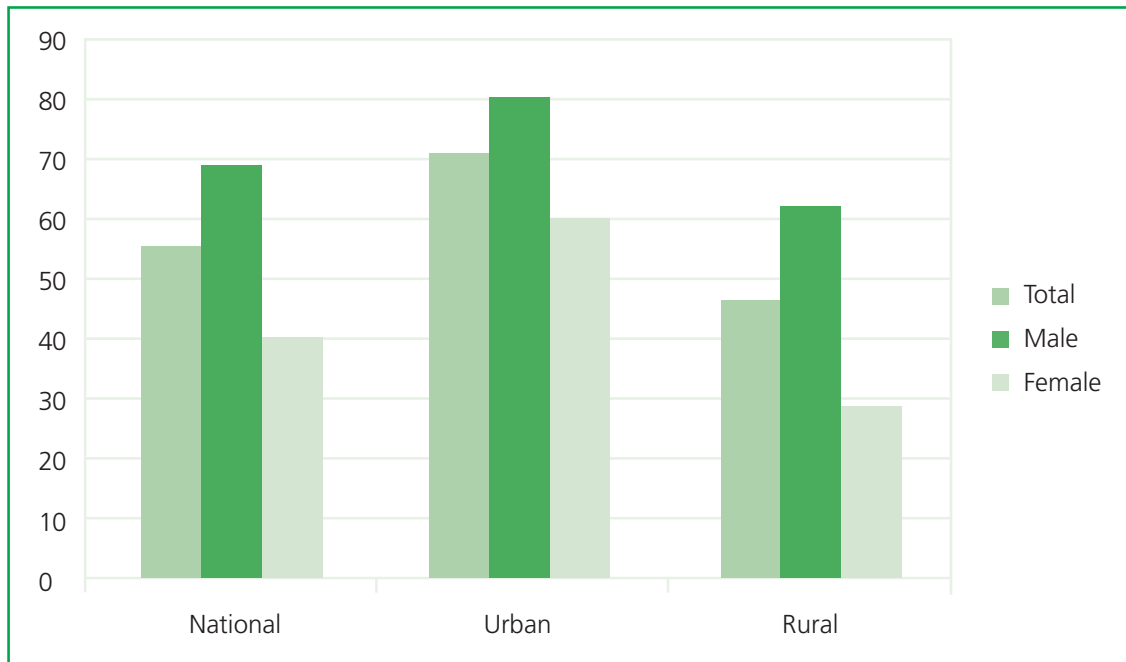
Understanding Gaps in Literacy Achievement

In the first instance, literacy is promoted by ensuring young people have access to education. While girls are increasingly participating in school, the *UNESCO-IIEP Outcome Report on Gender Equality in Education* (2011) cautions that despite significant progress in many areas of enrolment and gender parity, there remain significant gaps in terms of learning achievement. Multiple roots of disadvantage affect access to educational opportunities and the actual learning of girls from certain backgrounds. The *World Development Report 2012 on Gender Equality and Development* (World Bank, 2011) states that gender disparities in literacy achievement remain large only for those who are poor. As poor girls often live in environments which do not have any reading materials, they frequently have limited literacy, or see a reversal of literacy because they leave school earlier. In both India and Pakistan, while boys and girls from the top income quintile have similar literacy rates, in the bottom income quintile boys get on average five years more schooling than girls. To illustrate this, in India, the median boy and girl (aged 15-19) in the wealthiest fifth of the population reach grade 10 but the median boy in the bottom fifth reaches only grade 6 and the median girl just grade 1 (*ibid*).

Besides poverty, ethnicity, geographical distance and other factors such as disability compound gender gaps in literacy. For instance, large gaps between urban and rural literacy rates are seen in many countries. The *End-of-Decade Notes on Youth and Adult Literacy (Goal 4) in Asia and the Pacific* (UNESCO, 2011) reports that while urban literacy rates are over 70 percent in most countries in the region, rural literacy hovers at just 50 percent in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, India and Lao PDR. Urban-rural disparities compound gender disadvantage. Data from 2006 in Nepal shows the pronounced gender gap between the most advantaged urban centre and most disadvantaged rural community. The literacy rate of urban men in Kathmandu Valley is 93.6 percent, compared with just 28.1 percent for

rural women in the Central Terai, a gap of 65.5 percentage points. Pakistan’s literacy rates in 2008 illustrated the same trend. The urban literacy rate is reported as 80 percent with a male literacy of 71 percent and female literacy of 60 percent. Rural literacy is lower at 62 percent with a female literacy rate of 28.7 percent compared to a male literacy rate of 46.3 percent (*ibid*).

Figure 1: Urban and Rural Literacy Rates Pakistan 2008



Source: UIS, 2011b

Despite the EFA goals established in Dakar, Senegal and adult education agreements in Belem, Brazil, governments, multinational and community development partners are simply not delivering on commitments for adult literacy. According to the 2011 *Education For All Global Monitoring Report* on armed conflict and education, progress towards the goal of halving adult illiteracy rates by 2015 has been “disappointing at best and desultory at worst” (UNESCO EFA-GMR, 2011, p. 65). Similarly, the *Global LIFE Mid-Term Evaluation Report 2006-2011* noted it has been difficult to create, renew and maintain momentum for literacy (UNESCO, 2012, p. 20). Among other things, insufficient funding by governments and development partners is a major factor contributing to unsatisfactory progress. The *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* (GRALE) highlighted that while financing for education in schools witnessed tremendous leaps in the past ten years, investment for adult literacy has remained at minimal levels (UIL, 2010). Table 3 shows that in many Asia-Pacific countries in the past decade, the share of the national education budget allocated to adult education ranged from less than one to three percent. This financing is below the benchmark of 3 percent recommended by the Global Campaign for Education (GCE and ActionAid, 2005).

Table 3: Allocation to Adult Education as a Share of the National Education Budget

COUNTRY	Percentage Allocation (%)	Year
China	1.87	2005
Lao PDR	1.0	2006-2007
Nepal	1.13	2005 – 2006
Pakistan	0.74	1998-2003
Philippines	1.0	2008-2009
Viet Nam	2.83	2005

Source: UIL, 2010

Obstacles to Achieving Girls' and Women's Literacy

The difficulty in accessing quality education as well as cultural and structural barriers in the family, school, community, institutions and wider society have disadvantaged girls and women for generations. Cultural beliefs and practices discriminating against girls reduce their likelihood of attending school, or participating in the classroom if they do get to school. It also increases the possibility of leaving school early to work or to get married. These barriers to literacy skill acquisition in the early years mean generations of girls are entering adulthood as illiterates.

Access to education

Gender disparities in literacy can be traced back to whether or not families decide to educate girls. The decision to send a girl to school depends on how the family values education for the girl, as well as for the entire family (King and Hill, 1995). In Cambodia, for example, girls comprise 58 percent of the 200,000 out-of-primary school aged children (UNESCO EFA-GMR, 2011). While schooling is officially free, out-of-pocket expenses related to education are identified as a major deterrent (*ibid.*, p. 341). Research conducted by the National Education Partnership in 2007 shows that total informal school fees expenditure for parents sending one child to a public primary and lower secondary school are on average KHR443,800 (USD109) or 8.6 percent of an average family's annual income. With an average of 5.7 children per family, the cost of educating all their children becomes difficult for Cambodian families. Faced by such a financial constraint, families tend to decide to send boys to school rather than girls (NEP, 2007). The same trend is observed in Turkey, where girls are more likely than boys to drop out of school in response to low household budgets; and in Indonesia where girls are more likely to be withdrawn from school in response to crop losses (World Bank, 2011).

Exclusion of indigenous people

For indigenous people poverty, exclusion and discrimination are obstacles to literacy. Non-recognition of indigenous knowledge systems, absence of diversity in schools and lack of mother language education deny access to literacy and education that can foster well-being within indigenous communities. In 2001, an estimated 476 million (approximately 50 percent) of the world's non-literate population were speakers of lesser-known languages (SIL, 2001). Girls and women are most affected. Globally an estimated two-thirds of girls out of school belong to ethnic minorities in their countries (World Bank, 2011).

Quality of education

The success in expanding access to education and literacy has not been met by comparable progress in improving education quality. Education quality issues affect all children regardless of their gender. Learners from poor and difficult households, rural communities, urban slums, ethnic minorities and those living in conflict zones tend to receive a poor quality education. Low quality education denies children their right to a useful education that fulfils their needs. In India, only 27 percent of enrolled children aged 10 and 11 can read a simple passage, do a simple division problem, tell the time, and handle money (World Bank, 2011). This low learning occurs in nearly all low- and middle-income countries (*ibid*).

Gender stereotyping

Gender stereotyping in schools as manifested in curricula, textbooks and teaching processes discriminates against girls and transmits discrimination into the broader community. While a link between differential treatment and lower literacy has not been established in the region, findings from the Asia-Pacific region suggest that the lack of gender sensitivity in education can reinforce and reproduce gender stereotypes (UNESCO, 2011). In Bangladesh, teachers in a focus group discussion said that they did not want their own daughters to work after finishing their education. These observations suggest teachers express values that systematically differentiate expectations and treatment of boys and girls in education and reinforce gender stereotypes (UNESCO, 2011).

Lack of facilities

A lack of infrastructure in schools prevents girls from completing their education. An ASPBAE-UNGEI report on *Gender, Equality and Education in South Asia* found that many girls drop out of school at the onset of menstruation, partly because there are no separate toilet facilities for them (Narayan, Rao and Khan, 2010). A study in Nepal also reported that the lack of separate toilets for boys and girls and school water supplies can be damaging to girls in terms of their attendance and learning achievement, especially in higher grades (CERID, 2009).

Violence

Violence remains an important barrier to girl's participation. The ASPBAE-UNGEI report on *Gender, Equality and Education in South Asia* also noted "two out of every three school-going children in India have confided to being victims of corporal punishment or physical abuse" (Narayan, Rao and Khan, 2010). Girls often experience gender-based harassment such as teasing and physical contact by boys and male teachers and these incidents go unreported (DFID Human Development Centre, 2012). School based violence, particularly sexual violence and other threats to girls' physical safety, hinder attendance at school and,

therefore, acquisition of literacy. Furthermore, girls' mobility is often limited by parents for fear of attack or pregnancy.

Rurality

Being from a rural setting affects both boys and girls negatively at the beginning of primary school, but by the later grades only girls are negatively affected. The reason may be that in rural areas as girls grow up, more demands are made on them to perform household tasks. Rural girls are less encouraged to pursue their education and in some cases have to prepare for marriage (UNESCO-IIEP, 2011). In South Asia, 48 percent of girls are married before the age of 18, and therefore leave school before being able to complete their basic education (UNICEF cited in Narayan, Rao and Khan, 2010). Expectations of early marriage also results in foregoing education for girls early on.

The Benefits and Impact of Literacy for Women

The UN General Assembly Resolution on the United Nations Literacy Decade states

literacy is crucial to the acquisition by every child, youth and adult, of essential life skills that enable them to address the challenges they can face in life, and represents an essential step in basic education, which is an indispensable means for effective participation in the societies and economies of the twenty-first century. (United Nations 2002 cited in EFA-GMR, 2006, p.155).

Literacy enables people to act on their realities and transform communities. Nirantar, a centre that promotes women's literacy and gender equality in India argues "literacy is essential for building women's leadership and for strengthening grassroots women's organizations" (Nirantar, 2008). The right to literacy opens the door to the fulfilment of other human rights and maximizes individuals' choices and 'life chances' while widening opportunities for effective social participation.

The benefits of literacy to individuals and the broader impact to literate women's families and communities can be immense. Literacy is also a foundation for further learning. However, caution should be exercised as measuring the impact of literacy with precision presents some challenges. The relation between literacy and the economic, political, social and cultural status of women cannot be measured by considering these dimensions in isolation, as changes in one influence the others. Similarly, while ethnographic studies of literacy programmes are used to identify benefits to specific communities, it is problematic to use the findings of such studies to generalize across cultural contexts for policy purposes (Robinson-Pant, 2005). The benefits of literacy programmes must be viewed within women's specific contexts, the wider power relations between women and men within the family and community and in relation to women's perception of what is beneficial to them.

Literate Women are More Aware of Health Services

Literacy can support women to become proactive in addressing health risks by helping them seek information on the kind of health services available to them. In developing countries where illiteracy rates are high, women are around 36 times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than women living in developed countries (UNFPA, 2010). Illiterate women are vulnerable to the spread of HIV and other communicable diseases. While literacy alone cannot protect women from the spread of disease, being unable to read health information puts them at a much higher level of risk. “Illiteracy does not directly contribute to the spread of the human-immunodeficiency virus (HIV). However, as illiterate women and men have no access to written information, they remain unaware of many... issues affecting them that are increasingly being communicated through printed materials.” (UIL, 2007).

In Nepal and Bolivia, women who participated in literacy programmes improved their income-earning activities, reproductive health, and became more active in their communities and in decision-making processes in the home (Burchfield 2002 cited in Farah, 2005). Nepalese women gained confidence as skills and knowledge increased. They became more aware of family planning and sexually transmitted infections, including ways of preventing HIV transmission. Similarly, Bolivian women learners were found to be more active in accessing medical services such as seeking immunization for children and family planning assistance. They exercised greater influence in important household decisions concerning health and education spending, allocation of self-earned income and family-planning methods.

Looking at the long-term benefits for a group of mothers who participated in a basic education and literacy campaign in Nicaragua, Sandiford et al. (1995) found a statistically significant drop in infant mortality amongst participating mothers as compared with those who had not participated (cited in Lauglo, 2001). A study by Schultz (1993) showed that “while the effects of mothers’ education on child health vary across countries, on average, each additional year of a mother’s schooling reduces the probability of the infant mortality rate by 5 to 10 percent” (cited in King and Hill, 1995).

Literate Women are More Involved in their Children’s Education

Burchfield’s 2002 study of an integrated literacy and basic education programme in Bolivia concludes that

more educated women had greater involvement with their children’s educational activities than less educated women. They were more likely to help their children with homework, to visit their child’s school and to read to them, although reading to children is not a common educational practice (cited in Farah, 2005, p. 63).

Literate Women are Able to Secure Livelihoods

Literacy programmes can help women access information which will lead to increased productivity. Women make up an average of 43 percent of the agricultural labour force in developing countries; they comprise 50 percent in parts of Asia (FAO, 2011). *The State of Food and Agriculture 2010-2011* notes that women are just as efficient as men. However, because women control less land, use fewer inputs and have less access to extension services such as training, which use a lot of written material, they are less agriculturally productive (*ibid* p. 39).

Closing the gender gap in access and use of productive resources and services would unlock the productivity potential of women and could increase output substantially. Closing the gap could increase agricultural output in the developing world by 2.5 - 4 percent, on average, with higher gains in countries where women are more involved in agriculture and the gender gap is narrower. (*Ibid* p. 45).

Literacy and numeracy linked to economic empowerment can achieve more secure livelihoods for women. Nijera Shikhi in Bangladesh implements literacy programmes based on community volunteerism, where volunteers facilitate group-learning sessions. A review of the programmes noted a sustained impact on livelihoods (Cawthera, 2003). Entrepreneurial activities started within the training were sustained, with a beneficial economic impact on women's livelihoods. Many learners were introduced to the concept of saving and investing through Nijera Shikhi and were actively saving. This allowed participants to overcome a cycle of low income, low savings, low investment, low productivity, returning back to low income. Of all the reading, writing and numeracy skills developed, participants in the Nijera Shikhi programme cited that they used numeracy most often to keep account of income and expenditure (*ibid*). This demonstrates that newly literate people are most likely to maintain the skills which they perceive are the most beneficial to themselves.

Literacy Enables Interactions and Social Support

Literacy programmes are social spaces for learners to interact, learn from each other and provide support. In the ASPBAE women's literacy workshop in 2011, adult literacy practitioners noted the impact of literacy programmes on women's self-expression, self-confidence and ability to make decisions in the home. The exposure to exchanges during the programmes also encouraged women to participate in community activities. The social benefits of literacy have been shown to be enhanced when literacy programmes are accompanied by supportive interventions such as credit facilities, skills training and in the health context, access to family planning facilities or maternal child health centres (Oxenham et al., 2002, Lauglo 2001 cited in Robinson-Pant, 2005).

P Policy Implications of Women's Literacy

A favourable policy environment is critical for the promotion of women's literacy; and the right education policies and programmes are needed to address the myriad economic, cultural and social biases girls and women experience in their daily lives. Education policies also play a central role in eradicating gender disparity and inequality in literacy, and are part of the solution, in particular when they are backed up by political will. Programmes delivering literacy along with life-skills can provide opportunities for women to gain knowledge and skills. Group literacy programmes also provide social spaces that help women develop their communication, negotiation and networking abilities.

It is essential that governments in partnership with institutions such as multinational development partners, bilateral aid institutions, non-government organizations and community-based organizations financially support literacy programmes, both literacy-numeracy programmes and the broader support systems required to sustain learning and decision-making by women. The *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* points

to the importance of “publicly-funded education to prevent and alleviate unemployment associated with structural changes in the economy by training, retraining, skilling and up-skilling or re-skilling adult workers and communities” (UIL, 2010). It posits that rather than short-term unsustainable charity to individuals, “adult education represents a mechanism for activating development, along personal, social and economic dimensions” (*ibid*).

The UNESCO EFA-GMR 2011 notes the failure of governments to back up their declarations around literacy with concrete measures, also noting aid donors’ lack of attention to adult literacy when compared with their efforts in formal education, in particular at primary level. The non-formal education sector must be given more attention if progress is to be made towards reaching literacy goals (UNESCO EFA-GMR, 2011). Currently, learning opportunities for young mothers, illiterate women and out-of-school girls through non-formal education are mostly short-term and on a project basis. In much of Asia and the Pacific, adult learning is dependent largely on voluntary services (UIL, 2010).

The *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* estimates that reducing illiteracy by 50 percent in the Asia-Pacific region would cost USD 9 billion annually for the next five years (UIL, 2010, p. 100). For most countries in the region, this equates to directing an estimated 3 percent to 6 percent of their national education budget towards adult literacy and education. Education services need to focus on improving access for the population groups that are currently disadvantaged due to poverty, ethnicity, caste, race, or geography. Such a focus will help address the “gender inequality traps” that affect the poor and excluded in society (World Bank, 2011). To address family attitudes towards girls and boys, policies must be enacted to enhance household perceptions of the value of daughters. Expanding economic opportunities for young women, including those already in the labour market is one way of doing this (*ibid*).

Recommendations

From this analysis of the obstacles to achieving women’s literacy and discussion of the consequent policy implications, the advocacy brief makes the following specific recommendations.

Ensure girls’ access to quality education at all levels

To become literate, girls need access to quality education. Consideration should be given first to access to all levels of basic education, from early childhood through to lower-secondary. It should be noted that literacy acquisition and development goes far beyond formal schooling and should be conceptualized within the framework of lifelong learning. Quality of learning is also an important factor for keeping girls and boys in school and ensuring they acquire knowledge, skills, values and attitudes at the end of a learning cycle. To ensure this, all aspects of education from policy to teacher education, curricula and materials, and learning assessments need to be systematically developed and must reflect the diversity of learners and be gender-responsive. In addition, infrastructure and safety in schools, as well as on the roads leading to schools, must be secured.

Collect and analyse disaggregated data on literacy by gender and other disparities

For effective and better planning of education programmes, it is critical that education planners have disaggregated data. National data should be comprehensively analysed to identify disparities in literacy by gender, ethnicity, geographic location, disability, and economic and social status. Quantitative and qualitative data from the community should be used to provide a more holistic understanding of literacy needs at sub-national and local levels and better informed policy and programmes. Effective use of monitoring, evaluation and assessment tools should be implemented to improve understanding of learners' profiles and literacy levels.

Ensure locally relevant, learner-centred programme design, curricula, materials development and assessment

Within a broad framework of multiple literacies, it is important to ensure relevance of programmes to learners' lives and aspirations. Beyond learning the alphabet and numbers, literacy programmes should enable women to develop their self-confidence to take positive actions. It is important that the design of teaching and learning methodologies, lesson times and venues are flexible and consider learners' contexts and preferences. Women should also be encouraged to participate in programme and curriculum planning. Literacy learning should build on women's socioeconomic, political, cultural and personal empowerment. Literacy curricula within a women's empowerment framework would include topics linked to social participation, sustained livelihoods, communication, negotiation, networking patterns, and shifts in family decision-making, alongside literacy and numeracy skills. Within such programmes, literacy assessments such as paper and pencil, portfolio evaluation and group work are complemented by personal testimonies and experience of using literacy.

Invest in mother-tongue based education

The Asia-Pacific region is home to diverse cultures and languages. In many countries girls and women do not have the opportunity to learn in their mother tongues. Many are forced to learn in language(s) alien to them. Therefore, mother-tongue based multilingual education should be supported for women – where language is used both as a bridge for learning and as a source of local knowledge for literacy programmes. Governments should invest in mother language education by documenting local language and knowledge, developing learning materials in local languages, mobilizing local educators and training teachers in the essentials of mother language education. The use of the mother tongue in literacy programmes should be complemented by learning in the national or regional languages that will enable women to participate in the wider economic and political community.

Strengthen partnerships between governments and civil society organizations

Civil society organizations have a long history of implementing literacy programmes within the broad framework of literacy and empowerment. These programmes should not remain at the periphery. Governments can harness these experiences, translating them into national and local policies and programmes. Additionally, governments and civil society must work together to set up a system of recognition and accreditation of literacy programmes provided by civil society organizations so that out-of-school children and youth, and those who have learnt in non-formal settings, can be (re)integrated into further academic learning in formal school or vocational and professional training. Additionally, accreditation of community educators through equivalency programmes will help fill teacher gaps, and provide

accreditation to those who may not have a college degree but have long been working as literacy educators and organizers.

Create support systems to encourage women's participation

In many societies, women face a double burden of work and housework. For many women, it is difficult to study literacy programmes and look after children. Formal and informal support structures that encourage women's participation in literacy or adult learning programmes should be installed to avoid multiple burdens on women. Day care centres or neighbourhood playgroups can give women respite from taking care of their children and provide time for full attention to their participation in literacy programmes. Similarly, night schools or taking a family literacy approach where parents learn at the same time that their children learn in day care centres can be good strategies in addressing inter-generational literacy needs.

Given the many challenges confronting women, literacy programmes should set up a support system such as women-counselling-women or women's circles that provide psycho-social support and advice. These provide venues where women are able to develop confidence in themselves and their ability to learn beyond their homes. While literacy programmes are women's social spaces, active participation of men in supporting literacy programmes should be encouraged.

Build community-based literacy environments

Learners are able to practice and sustain literacy and numeracy skills when literate environments are provided at the community level. Immediate access to literature which is relevant to the lives of women and men, including those that have been produced by learners themselves will be valuable in promoting literacy use. Literate environments can be provided through community learning centres, reading corners in village halls, bulletin boards in markets and other ways of disseminating rich-text materials. Additionally, expanding opportunities for lifelong learning through partnerships with the media and publishing houses and by developing, for example, skills training programmes can help create long-lasting and sustainable literacy environments.

Integrate literacy in development plans and effective implementation

Governments must formulate and adopt a long term vision and national policy framework for women's literacy and empowerment keeping in mind a gender equality perspective. This vision must be crafted with deliberate participation of learners and women themselves, translating the vision into national and local plans with clear roadmaps, goals and targets. Such plans must form part of and be integrated into the broader national development strategies, national education programmes and local government's development plans. Governments should ensure that plans and policies are provided with programmatic and sustained public financing. There should be government, inter-agency and civil society coordination mechanisms to ensure programmes reach the unreached. Such collaboration should also monitor effective implementation, ensuring evaluation of qualitative aspects of literacy programmes so that changes towards women's empowerment can be measured.

Mobilize adequate resources for women's literacy

Adult education and literacy programmes in many countries are seriously underfunded. Governments must demonstrate political will by progressively raising the spending level for adult literacy and earmarking funds for women's literacy programmes. They should commit to the international benchmark of allocating at least 3 percent of their annual education budget to adult education and literacy programmes, where required (GCE and ActionAid, 2005). Multilateral and bilateral institutions should also allocate reasonable funds for adult literacy. Second-chance education and adult literacy programmes for girls and women must be incorporated as priorities into global education frameworks such as the Global Partnership for Education to ensure that funds reach those women who remain unreached by existing literacy programmes. Civil society organizations should monitor efficiency and effectiveness of use of resources for literacy programmes making sure that these are fully-costed, well-targeted, effectively designed and sustainably implemented.

Conclusion

This advocacy brief has highlighted the crucial importance of women's literacy in ensuring individuals and their families' health, livelihoods, and engagement in society, both within the community and at the political level. The brief discusses how the current situation of adult illiteracy in the Asia-Pacific region mirrors and compounds wider patterns of marginalization, predominantly affecting women living in remote areas, from ethnic minorities, and with backgrounds of urban poverty. Barriers to achieving literacy for women and girls in the region similarly reflect wider problems in providing education for all, for example poor infrastructure or a lack of quality in basic education. Nonetheless, additional obstacles such as gender stereotyping from both families and teachers, and the threat of violence at, or on the way to school, specifically affect women and girls.

The policy implications of this analysis are far reaching. Governments must work together with other stakeholders to understand fully the situation of illiteracy in their countries and thus what steps can be taken to address it, whether this is through providing flexible literacy programmes, locally relevant learning materials, or education in women's mother-language. Critically, all of this must be undertaken within a long-term policy framework and commitment to sustainable funding.

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