

From the Field

Innovative Education for Girls and Women in Rural India

Thaiza Diaz and Jacob Sztokman

In this article, the authors detail the various challenges that exist in educating girls in rural India. They then offer three approaches to overcoming these obstacles and promoting education for girls in underserved rural villages.

Jyoti is a vivacious, energetic eight-year-old girl from the remote village of Bendgaon in the rural Palghar district in India's State of Maharashtra. Jyoti has never opened a book, and her family did not send her to school for a variety of cultural and socio-economic reasons, unlike her brother who was sent to school, as boys' education is valued. The local school is five kilometers away, too far for a girl to walk by herself. Jyoti's parents would prefer her at home, learning to cook and maintain a household. Not that an education would help Jyoti much; teaching methods in the nearest school are rigid and archaic, the teachers undertrained and unreliable. Besides, by the time she reaches adolescence, she would have likely dropped out of education anyway, either to prepare for marriage or simply because she would have begun menstruating.

Jyoti is not alone. According to the 2011 Census of India, only one out of every 100 girls in rural India reaches twelfth grade. The organization Educate Girls found that 2.5 million Indian girls have never been to school – in part because only 55 percent of schools have toilets for girls.¹ The Nielsen Corporation reports that 25 percent of girls quit school when they begin menstruating because they have no sanitary facilities.

The education of girls in India is vital, not only for the girls in question but also for entire communities and societies. A great deal of research has demonstrated that when girls in developing communities are educated, the benefits create ripple effects for entire villages and regions. However, achieving this means overcoming centuries-old social and cultural attitudes and practices.

Origins of Educational Inequality

The Indian educational system has long been influenced by religious and political powers that have an interest in retaining social hierarchies and inequalities. In the Hindu caste system, elite priestly castes learned scripture while warrior castes learned methods of war. Traditional schools called gurukuls catered to higher castes, while lower castes were denied any formal education. Although literacy rates steadily increased under British colonial rule, the Western educational system implemented in villages was rigid and geared toward educating the masses in ways that could best serve the colonial powers. Simultaneously, the educational system was geared towards boys, favoring males from select social classes, and ensuring that the most rigid hierarchy – the gender hierarchy – stayed in place.

The current Indian educational system mirrors the antiquated British colonial educational framework in its structure, function, and attitudes toward gender – especially in vulnerable rural communities. While more affluent urban schools have adopted progressive approaches to education, these changes have yet to reach more remote rural areas. The 2009 Right to Education Act (RTE) guarantees the fundamental right of education for all and is a major step forward. Tellingly, however, this law includes a threat of imprisonment for schoolteachers and headmasters who do not allow girls or members of low castes to enter – offering a glimpse into the power of existing social attitudes. Although the RTE law has resulted in massive increases in the number of students enrolled, it has failed to raise the quality of education to meet the needs of girls and lower caste members.

The result has been that children from vulnerable communities, especially girls, have slipped through the educational cracks, with family commitments or economic pressures taking precedence over their education.² Girls in this culture are often valued more for their servitude towards family than for their minds.

1 Jacqueline Bhabha and Anisha Gopi, *Triggering Success: Innovative Interventions to Promote Educational Access in India*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Southeast Asia Institute, 2016), 10, <http://www.educategirls.ngo/pdf/Triggering%20Success%20Innovative%20Interventions%20to%20Promote%20Educational%20Access.pdf>

2 Sabrina Fernandes, "Girls Versus Boys: Parents' Attitudes Toward Children's Educational Attainment in South Asia," (Population Association of America Annual Meeting, Los Angeles, 2006), <http://paa2006.princeton.edu/papers/60544>.



Picture by Jacob Sztokman, India

“Initiatives that are top-down or that fly in like helicopters onto the ground without engaging with members of the local community are doomed to failure.”

Girls’ Education

Over the past few years, a shift in the attitude towards girls’ education in India has begun, thanks to the work of a plethora of educators, researchers, policymakers, and activists. Many NGOs and think tanks are working on powerful initiatives to bring much-needed education to girls in the most remote rural areas of India.

However, even the most well-meaning initiatives sometimes fail to bring girls into the classroom. The primary obstacle is not always the lack of initiatives; sometimes the biggest obstacle is a system of entrenched cultural beliefs and practices.

According to research by UNICEF³ – and confirmed by our experience working with vulnerable communities in remote rural regions of Maharashtra, India – three key factors are crucial for enabling the best possible outcomes for educating girls in remote rural areas: innovative pedagogy, community empowerment, and holistic child development.

Innovative Pedagogy

The first obstacle to girls’ education is archaic teaching methods and the lack of proper training for educators. The idea that rural children of all castes deserve the same progressive pedagogy as everyone else is sometimes considered radical. Changing this attitude in order to enable rural children – both girls and boys – to have access to quality education is the first step in advancing girls’ education. Such a change entails not only breaking out of the old “chalk and talk” methods but also recognizing the potential of each child, no matter who they are.

Community Empowerment

Initiatives that are top-down or that fly in like helicopters onto the ground without engaging with members of the local community

are doomed to failure. This is a lesson that is constantly being learned in the world of development, and girls’ education is no different. Change only happens when local community members take charge and are fully empowered as agents of change. Where NGOs work with local women and seek to educate them as teachers and counselors, change will happen more readily. When local women become school leaders, the girls in class – as well as the boys – see their teachers as role models and internalize the potential of women.

Holistic Child Development

When working with vulnerable communities, it is not enough to provide literacy without attending to other crucial elements. A child who comes to school hungry or is malnourished is unable to receive the greatest benefit from his or her lessons. Education for vulnerable communities such as remote rural girls must also mean attending to health, nutrition, and hygiene, alongside literacy. For girls there is a crucial extra component: schools must find solutions for menstruating girls. This means providing adequate bathroom facilities, hygiene products, and proper education regarding the body. It also means teaching the girls and their families that they can continue to study well into adolescence and beyond.

Taken together, these components offer the best chance of success in educating girls and empowering women. Every time a girl is educated, the entire community benefits.

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³ “Basic education and gender equality: Indian girls demand equal access to education,” UNICEF, April 11, 2005, https://www.unicef.org/education/index_25979.html