

The Gender Gap in Basic Education: NGOs as Change Agents

Rekha Wazir, ed.
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Gender, feminism, and women's rights have become key issues in different contexts and perspectives. It is, however, disappointing to note that there are not many practical studies done on the aspect of gender in the Indian society. In the context of this lacuna, it is indeed gratifying to read the book, *The Gender Gap in Basic Education* edited by Rekha Wazir. In the recent decade, a number of books on women's education have emerged, namely *Equality and Education* by M.I. Khan and S.R. Sharma (1993), *Women, Education and Population in India* by Nandita Agarwal (1993), *Women, education, and Family Structure in India* by Carol Chapnick Mukhopadyay and Susan Seymour (1994), *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* by Gail Minnault (1998). Most of these studies, even though oriented towards giving woman a space, unconsciously read them as objects of men's programmes of reform. Women are enlightened and benefit from the programmes of study coordinated and spread out mostly by policy makers who are generally male. Certainly, there has been an increase in education both among rural and urban women but there aren't any in-depth studies linking women's education to work, health and political perspectives. There has in fact been a paucity of studies on women and their role in development. Many of the studies based on education have also ignored the public participation of women, by their entry into education and their link with the private world of family, kinship, etc. The opposition between the Western model of education and the Indian social institutions of family, marriage, etc. is not analysed. It is at these levels that this particular work of Wazir's scores. The book is a reading of the Non-Governmental Organisations' role in changing the educational scenario and thereby closing the gender gap in education.

Chapter One is a background study positing the various themes and issues

that have gone into the production of the gender gap. Wazir takes into account some of the changes that have taken place in government policy like the proposed 83rd amendment of the Indian constitution as well as the macro and micro politics that emanate from circumstances such as nuclear tests. She also considers the widespread common links and their role in the spread of messages. Moreover, she emphasizes the fact that even though the NGOs have tried to initiate changes, the overall literacy levels have not improved. Part of this failure is attributed by the author to the NGOs but one feels that this lacuna is more to do with the existing structure of Indian society—the rampant prevalence of hierarchical structures and the lopsided gender values of society. A long overview of the NGOs as agents of development, the role, strategies and partnerships are highlighted.

Gender disadvantage in basic education and the responses of the NGOs in overcoming them have been discussed in a series of articles written by women who have done considerable work in this area. Ratna M. Sudarshan's "Educational Status of Girls and Women: The Emerging Scenario", Malavika Karlekar's "Girls' Access to Schooling: An Assessment", and Vimala Ramachandran's "Literacy, Development and Empowerment: Conceptual Issues" provide the framework of the Indian education system. The articles also focus on the drawbacks of this system taking into consideration the girl child. The articles attempt to give an idea of the NGO sector's response to the poor educational performance and its attempts to provide alternative educational pattern. Ratna Sudarshan points out the plurality of school systems that the country possesses and the difficulties these pose. She also takes into account the role of NGOs in rural areas. The NGOs also display interest in the quality of education and relevance of education with regard to girls. She outlines the

problems concerning such lack of resources and the problematic issues that develop due to lack of funding. She also highlights the fact that education cannot be a single sector to be examined and needs to be scrutinized in perspective vis-a-vis with child labour, health and environment.

Malavika Karlekar has taken into account various factors affecting girls' access to schooling. She demarcates three major factors, namely pedagogical, institutional and familial. As usual the data study provides not only exhaustive view point but is also an eye-opener to many of us who are engaged in women's studies. She clearly delineates the factors of family, domesticity, parental attitude along with the structure, environment and ideology of school, the teacher's role and commitment, and also the availability of infrastructure such as uniforms text books, food, etc. She has made an in depth study of groups such as PROPEL, a government funded action research project based in Pune, Lok Jumbish project in Rajasthan, the Rajiv Gandhi Prathmik Shiksha Kendra scheme in Rajasthan, Deepalaya in Delhi, and other smaller organisations too. Of all these, the most fascinating is the work of Deepalaya which, one hopes would expand its network and involve a greater number of youngsters in a bid to end gender bias.

Ramachandran's article is a serious study about the history of the literacy movement, the National Adult education programme, literacy and social mobilization, the connection between women's empowerment and literacy. She also makes an analysis of the Mahila Samakhya—education for empowerment, its failures and the lessons learnt—and Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangthan. Her concluding remarks are very enlightening, for her assumption is that education can be meaningful only when women themselves take the initiative. Her idea of linking education and literacy with other struggles of women

and creating opportunities for empowerment is worthy of serious consideration.

Shanta Sinha's "Child Labour and Education" and Geeta B. Nambissan's "Identity, Exclusion and the Education of Tribal Communities" are the highlights of the book. "Child Labour and Education" portrays the concept of child labour and analyses the ideology that lies behind it. The article very carefully scrutinizes the background to class and the gender issues that are involved. What is fascinating is the attempt that she makes to pinpoint the category of "missing children" who are neither at school nor at work. She has also built up carefully the causes of child labour and the degree of exploitation involved. She proceeds further to examine the policies and programmes that are taken up to combat child labour. At this point she points out the role of the NGOs and their attempt to provide education. However, she makes a discerning comment that the basic reason why the "policies and programmes adopted in the country by the government as well as by most NGOs have failed to create much of an impact on the child labour situation is that they are simply not designed to do so". In the concluding part of her article she also provides a critique based on the assumption that the cause of child labour is poverty. She argues for an alternative approach and feels that the targeted audience has to be the family and the community. It is not enough to get a child into school; it is more essential to change attitudes. She sums up this issue by stating that "any programme for increasing literacy levels among children must necessarily also be a programme for reducing the incidence of child labour and cannot be separated from it".

Geetha B. Nambissan's study takes into account the enrolment of tribal children in school as well as the education structure provided for the tribal children related to gender. Her detailed study focuses on culture and curriculum, language and culture issues, current policy of education, NGO initiatives in tribal education, the role of missionaries in North East, community

and education, strategies and schemes to provide equity in education, and gender concerns. Her study, as expected, reveals the bias against the tribals since the days of colonialism and the marginalisation that they undergo in our society. She feels that the state has to work with the NGOs if meaningful education is to be provided. It is also necessary to take into account the language and culture of the tribes initiating a certain amount of sensitivity in the teachers to tackle the tribal children and utilising the background of the tribes as 'positive resources' towards their education.

Atreyee Cordeiro in "Building Partnerships and Collaborations for Education" discusses the attempt to build up sustainable development programmes through co-ordination and collaboration. Her article underlines the differences between partnerships, collaboration and networks. She relevantly raises the question as to whether a collaboration can function when a profit based company attempts to develop a non-profit sector. She feels that any partnership or collaboration will indeed be criticised and weighed, but this is essential for the project to grow. She feels that "NGOs much view collaborations and partnerships as interventions aimed at strengthening not the individual member of the collaboration, but the communities and those local self-governing institutions which are mandated to work for these communities".

The concluding article "Making a Difference: NGO Strategies Revisited" by Rekha Wazir, apart from summing up the previous articles, also critically examines the controversial issues, such as role, strategy, mode of operation and location of NGOs within the wider economy and society. She also pinpoints the strategies for reducing gender disparities in education and enumerates a listing from Haq and Haq (1998:92) that has been successful in promoting girls' education. She feels that it is most essential for any agency that is engaged in the task of promoting education to have a vision. It is also important to have good collaboration and coordination

without which any programme would fail. The article also closely examines the work of M.V. Foundation in Ranga Reddy district in Andhra Pradesh. The article ends with a poem of Lakshmi Kaul, a school teacher in Kashmir.

The book is indeed a valuable asset to anyone working in the field of education. It is at the same time an eye-opener for the government as well as the NGOs to appreciate and overcome the problems that they may face. Unlike most run-of-the-mill edited books, *The Gender Gap in Basic Education*, is not a collection of disparate articles but a well written book with the express purpose of articulating different issues and perspectives underlying basic education and the gender inequality persisting in the Indian scenario. All six articles by different contributors are not only well-written, but well researched too and are thought provoking. The text also has enough tables and data to substantiate the various point of view.

What seemed to strike a disconcerting note in the reader was that the editor has a bias towards the upper and middle classes as they have money and are the cause of the present malady to some extent. One cannot personally agree with this viewpoint for even among upper and middle classes, the girl child is neglected and sent to inferior schools. In order to understand the scenario at this level a serious survey and study has to be attempted. This jarring note of distinction is also brought out in the final chapter when the editor includes the poem, which comments against wealthy, and convent going children. Has any one attempted to study these so-called convents? What is the trauma the children go through in these convents where in the name of discipline, children are tortured from morning to evening. I hope sometime such a study too is undertaken. Reading the book was an invigorating experience which I am sure every reader would undergo. In the light of this I hope that where thoughts are kindled action too may take place.

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