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Educational Disparities Among Girls in India

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Summary

There are great educational disparities among girls in India. Low literacy rates and lack of education are some of the inequalities found in this demographic. Many of these girls are raised without the expectation that they will complete their education, and since they become the mothers of the next generation, educational disparities become a cyclical, intergenerational issue. Many other factors contribute to the lack of education, such as cultural values, child marriage, a scarcity of feminine hygiene products, and child labor. The continued shortage of formal education among young females leads to poverty, decreased child well-being, health issues, and increased domestic violence. Several organizations work to advocate for equal education for girls, distribute reusable feminine hygiene products, and prevent child marriage in order to close the gender gap in Indian education.

Context

Through education, individuals are enabled to acquire knowledge and skills that help them in all facets of their lives. Education empowers people to develop their capabilities in order to not only better their own lives, but also the lives of those around them. The educational opportunities that people have access to fluctuate based on many factors; in India, a range of disparities, such as economic or cultural factors, make access to education for girls difficult to acquire.

Education is measured through a variety of means throughout the world, including literacy rates, standardized test scores, enrollment rates, and graduation rates. By looking at some of these forms of measurement, we can get a general sense of education levels within a country, throughout a region, or among a demographic.¹ While education is measured in many different forms, literacy and enrollment rates are generally used by most researchers and will be the basis of measurement throughout this brief.

Literacy

The ability to read and write.¹⁰⁷

Globally, the average female literacy rate was 82.7% in 2016,² while India fell behind at 65.7% in 2018—while these stats are two years apart, the time frame is close enough to be comparable.³ In contrast, the global average literacy rate for men is 89.8%,⁴ but 82.3% for men in India.⁵ Regionally, India also falls behind its neighboring countries, such as China, where the female literacy rate is 94.4%.⁶ Although the national literacy rate in India falls behind the global literacy rate, literacy rates in the more rural parts of the country are significantly lower than the urban regions.⁷ In Rajasthan, the largest and most rural geographical state in India, the average literacy rate is 67%, but only 52.6% for females.⁸

While literacy rates for Indian girls remain comparably low, there has been an overall increase in literacy throughout India, with rates increasing from 40.7% in 1981 to 74.37% in 2018 (see figure 1).⁹ In 1981, literacy rates for women were at 25%, as compared to 55% for men.¹⁰ Due to significant steps taken by the Indian government to improve education, the gap has decreased significantly since the 80s. However, the literacy gap continues to exist.

Enrollment rates also indicate educational disparities among girls in India. In recent years, major reforms have allowed for an improvement in enrollment rates for girls. The Right to Education Act (RTE) was implemented by the Parliament of India in 2009, making education compulsory for children between the ages of 6 and 14.¹¹ In 2000, enrollment rates were just above 73% for girls in India;¹² as a result of the RTE, enrollment rates are now recorded at 93% for girls. Although enrollment rates have increased in primary school, dropout rates going into secondary education are still considerably high for girls. As of 2013, enrollment rates for girls were around 93% in primary schools¹³ but only just over 64% in secondary schools.¹⁴

Literacy Rates in India

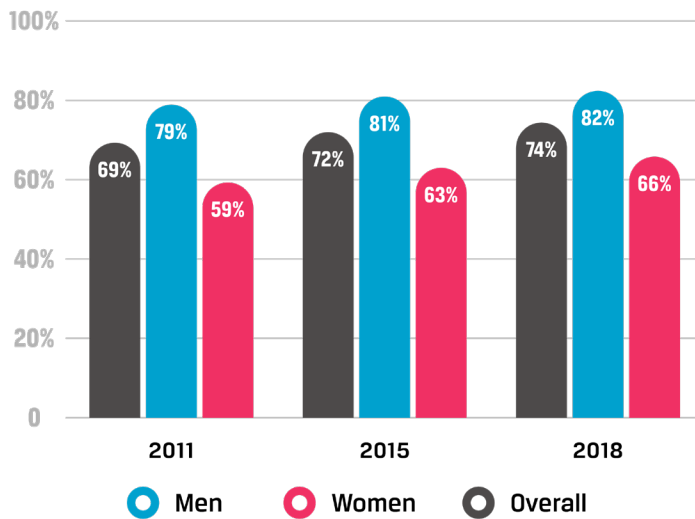


Figure 1

Comparatively, enrollment rates for boys were 91% in primary schools¹⁵ and 68% in secondary schools.¹⁶ This situation is even more severe in rural areas, where less than half of girls finish the tenth grade.¹⁷ Gender gaps widen with each progressive stage of schooling as it becomes more difficult for girls to stay in school.

While enrollment and literacy are important educational indicators, there are other factors of an individual's education that are not as easily measured. This includes the quality of education, the attendance rate and reliability of the teachers, the level of preparedness for employment, and the impact on the girls' self-efficacy, self-confidence, and feelings of empowerment.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments.¹⁰⁹

Contributing Factors

Child Marriage

Child marriage is one of the main reasons girls in India are more likely to have inadequate access to education. In the year 2016, India had the highest number of child brides in the world with 223 million child brides, 102 million of which were married before the age of 15.¹⁸ In comparison, only 4% of males in India were married by the age of 18.¹⁹ The Indian government first started regulating child marriage in 1929 when they incorporated the Child Marriage Restraint Act. This act discouraged marriage for girls under the age of 14 and boys under 18, but because it did not enact punishments, it failed to significantly decrease the number of underage marriages performed.²⁰ In order to comply with international guidelines on child

Dowry

A dowry refers to a type of payment made by a bride's family to the groom upon marriage.¹⁰⁸

marriage, the government in India updated the law in 2006 by implementing the Prohibition of the Child Marriage Act. This law completely restricted child marriage by banning marriage for girls under the age of 18 and boys under the age of 21, and by incorporating protections for girls involved in child marriage and updated methods for prosecuting offenders.²¹ This law caused the number of married girls under the age of 18 to decrease from 47% in 2006 to 27% currently.²² Even with these restrictions in place, however, the number of child marriages is still quite high.²³ This rate is even higher in rural areas where the regulation and enforcement of such laws is more difficult. A reported 56% of rural women between ages 20–24 were married before the age of 18.²⁴

Paraya Dhan

A term used for girl-children in India. The term means "others' wealth"¹¹⁰ or "someone else's property."¹¹¹

Due to cultural traditions, patriarchal values, and poverty, families often prioritize the marriage of their daughters over their education. Marriage is seen as a more urgent priority, causing many girls to be married off before they are able to finish their education.²⁵ The term Paraya dhan is often used to describe girls in India; the term refers to the view in society that girls are a liability. Paraya means "not one's own," while dhan translates to property and wealth, reflecting the cultural belief that girls are meant to be transferred from the ownership of their father to that of their husband when they marry.²⁶ Wives often need to drop out of school as the majority of the domestic responsibilities fall to them. Although they have the option of continuing with their education after marriage, this is a rare occurrence due to early pregnancies, strict gender roles, poverty, and the need for someone at home to do the domestic labor.²⁷

Inadequate Menstrual Hygiene Management

Mismanagement of menstrual hygiene is often a factor that prevents girls from attending school.²⁸ Due to both poverty and a lack of accessibility, some girls struggle to obtain adequate supplies needed during their period. Additionally, many girls lack the knowledge of what happens during their menstruation cycle, how to maintain health, and why they have a monthly period. Not only that, but due to the high chance of menstrual blood staining or leaking through their clothing, girls often report staying home in order to avoid embarrassment.²⁹ Every year more than 23 million girls in India drop out of school due to the lack of necessary products and hygiene education.³⁰ In a study of girls' school attendance in rural India, one out of five girls said that they missed school during their period. In addition, 45% of the girls that did attend school reported problems concentrating due to their period, and 36% said that they were scared of staining, smell, or losing the cloth or pad in school.³¹ Over 80% of the surveyed girls were using cloths and did not have access to sanitary pads or tampons.³²

In many rural parts of India, women and girls are restricted during menstruation because of their "impurity," according to custom.³³ In these contexts, women are often restricted from going to the temple, cooking food, attending weddings, and going to school while on their period.³⁴ The lack of knowledge about periods often leads to a stigma that women are considered "unclean" during their period,³⁵ which can elicit feelings of shame and embarrassment that prevent girls from attending school when they are menstruating. Girls in India lack the menstrual hygiene education and supplies necessary to consistently attend school and be a productive student.³⁶

Child Labor

Child labor plays a major role in why girls are inadequately educated.^{37 38} Child labor deprives them of opportunities for success, and harms their emotional, social, or physical development.³⁹ Specifically, child labor interferes with a child's ability to enroll and fully participate in school. There are usually two kinds of child labor: labor that involves children in specific businesses for financial gain and domestic child labor which employs the child at home. India has one of the highest numbers of child laborers in the world,⁴⁰ with 10.1 million child laborers reported in India.⁴¹

While more boys than girls generally work in vocations outside the home requiring learned skills, most girls perform domestic labor, though it is not often seen as work. Domestic labor is widely accepted and legally permitted even when girls are paid low wages and work long hours.⁴² If they are not employed elsewhere, they often work long hours at home tending to younger siblings while parents are working. Families often feel they must turn to their daughters to make ends meet.

The Indian government established a Child Labor Act in 1986 which prohibited children under the age of 14 from working in certain locations or industries.⁴³ While this act made it illegal for children to labor in larger work areas, there are still millions of children, primarily girls, involved in domestic and or agricultural work that usually involves long hours and little pay. While the government can monitor factories and businesses, it is much more difficult for them to monitor households. This leads to large numbers of domestic laborers, who are mostly young girls. These girls may miss school or struggle to keep up with school work, sometimes forcing them to drop out. If they do manage to attend school and complete their work, they are often deprived of extracurricular and other beneficial opportunities.⁴⁴

Child Labor

Labor that is dangerous or harmful to children or interferes with children's schooling by depriving them of the opportunity to attend school, obliging them to leave school prematurely, or requiring them to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work.¹¹²

Consequences

Lack of Economic Opportunities

Many women who are unable to access quality educational opportunities struggle to receive the employment necessary to support themselves. Education is viewed as the most important factor in determining the quality of employment opportunities for women in India.⁴⁵ India has one of the lowest female labor force participation rates in the world; as of 2019, only a reported 21% of women in India over the age of 15 participated in the labor force.⁴⁶ Additionally, there is a large gap between the number of females in the workforce in comparison to the number of males. The female to male workforce participation rate ratio in India, which is calculated by dividing the female labor force participation rate by the male labor force participation rate and multiplying by 100, is 27.6; this is far lower than the world average, which is 63.5 (see figure 2).^{47 48}

Makeup of Workforce

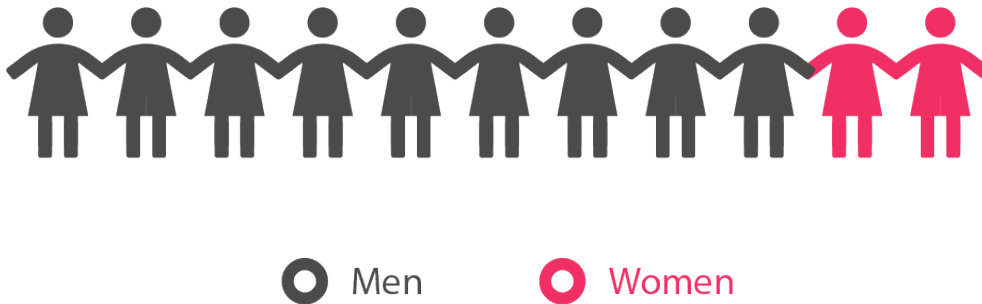


Figure 2

When women try to find work, generally due to divorce, death of a spouse, or financial need, they often do not know the first place to begin. Because dropping out of school at an early age is common in India, women may not have the rudimentary knowledge or networks available to help them find employment if they decide to enter the workforce.⁴⁹ Women who are unable to attend higher education or pursue technical school have a much harder time finding work, which ultimately means these women are rarely able to become financially independent.⁵⁰ This challenge perpetually diminishes their ability to escape poverty. Dr. Valerie Hudson, an expert on international development and women studies, states, "What is done to women, ultimately is done to the nation-state."⁵¹ As developing countries educate their women, the economic performance increases, and the overall

economy improves.⁵² Failing to remove barriers or provide support for the education of girls, on the other hand, prevents a nation from reaching its economic potential.

It is important to note that, though a lack of access to education does factor into the inability to economically mobilize, the unequal labor distribution between males and females also influences a desire for education.⁵³ Studies reveal that women in India who actively seek work are unemployed for longer than men in India.⁵⁴ Educated women who do find employment still see a significant wage gap; in some southern regions of India, women reportedly receive less than 70% of the earnings their male counterparts receive.⁵⁵ Gender discrimination in the workforce perpetuates the idea that educating women may not be necessary, as even educated women are unable to attain jobs or earn the same wages as educated men.⁵⁶ This information implies that the relationship between education for women in India and employment is cyclical, and that both economic opportunities and education for women can influence the other.

Decreased Intergenerational Academic Performance

Lack of education may be perpetuated throughout generations, and research shows that children of mothers who lack a background of quality education demonstrate lower school enrollment rates and educational attainment than those whose mothers obtained higher levels of quality education.⁵⁷ A 2015 study found that approximately 28.2% of children whose mothers have no education have an educational level of primary or lower, while only less than 1% of children whose mothers completed high secondary education have an educational level of primary or lower.⁵⁸

There are many possible reasons behind this connection, such as the socioeconomic status of these families and their living situations. Additionally, the attitudes and beliefs about education held by mothers may be passed down to the children. When mothers have not had access to education, they struggle in helping to further promote the education of their children, including by not providing their children with enough time to do schoolwork.⁵⁹ On average, children with educated mothers were given 40 minutes more per day to work on homework in comparison to children with uneducated mothers.⁶⁰ Additionally, uneducated mothers often report struggling to set high expectations for their children in their academic achievement.⁶¹ Both the lack of feeling academically supported and the alternative priorities may lead children to struggle to fully engage in their schooling.⁶²

Health Issues

Educational disparities among women often lead to poorer health for them and their children. Literacy itself measures the ability for an individual to read and write; health literacy is a specified form of literacy that measures an individual's ability to obtain and understand basic information about health and subsequently make informed decisions regarding healthcare.⁶³ Health literacy plays a major role in women's overall health because it enables women to understand basic health concepts so they know how to find the health services they need.⁶⁴ Though health literacy is often not taught in school settings, there is still a positive correlation between educational attainment and health literacy.⁶⁵ Studies conducted in India about health literacy rates reveal that the number of years a woman received education was linked directly with their reported health literacy rates; approximately 58% women who had no education in the rural area of Uttar Pradesh reported low health literacy levels, while about 78% of women in the urban New Delhi with no education had low health literacy levels. In contrast, only about 7% and 5% of women with at least some secondary education had low literacy levels in Uttar Pradesh and New Delhi, respectively (see figure 3).⁶⁶

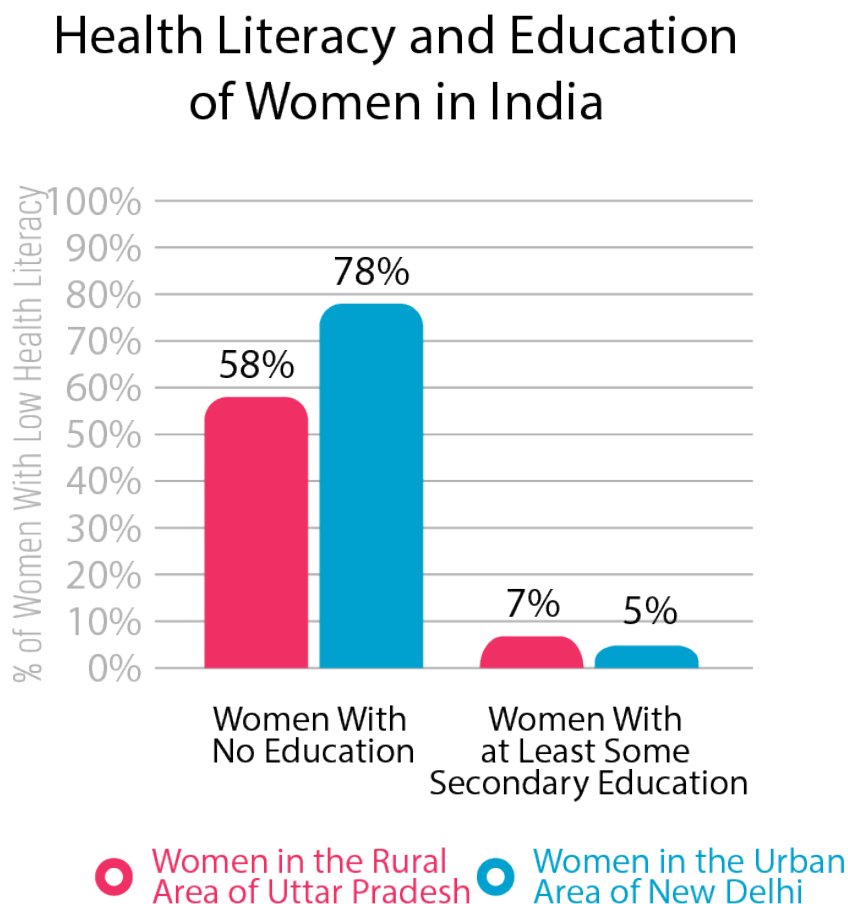


Figure 3

Without proper education and adequate health literacy, women are less able to understand the risks, treatments, and necessary preventative measures for common ailments.⁶⁷ Additionally, uneducated women are often less able to communicate their needs and preferences to health care professionals, something that leads to anxiety about visiting healthcare settings and a subsequent mistrust in healthcare due to insecurity.⁶⁸ Because of these personal insecurities, it is difficult for uneducated women to recognize the usefulness of the resources provided and be willing to trust that their diseased condition will improve.⁶⁹ In contrast, higher education leads to increased health literacy, which enables women to understand their health problems, and become more empowered in terms of health.⁷⁰

The level of education attained by mothers is also one of the most influential factors in determining health outcomes of a child and infant mortality rates.⁷¹ Studies show that throughout the world, uneducated mothers are less likely to seek prenatal and antenatal care, which increases the chances of complications during birth.⁷² A 2005 study in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh revealed that both infant and child mortality rates were higher for children of mothers with a lack of education; the infant mortality rate was approximately 61 deaths per 1000 births for mothers who had not received any education. In contrast, infant mortality was 31 deaths per 1000 births for women who had received 8–9 years of education.⁷³ Additionally, this same study revealed a negative correlational pattern between the percentage of women who are literate and infant mortality rates across states and urban territories.⁷⁴ This may be due to lower health literacy rates, lack of access to healthcare facilities, or poor maternal health that inevitably affects the infant's health as well.

Increase in Domestic Violence

Uneducated women are at higher risk to be victims of domestic and sexual violence.⁷⁵ Research reveals a direct correlation between the number of years a woman is educated and the percentage of women who are abused by their partner. Approximately 60% of women with no education experience intimate partner violence in India; this percentage dips down to 10% when a woman has secondary or higher education.⁷⁶ In urban India, 31% of ever-married women interviewed in a survey had experienced physical violence in the 12 months before the survey.⁷⁷ This percentage increased to 45% in one rural area of India, where education of women is less prevalent.⁷⁸

There are a few reasons the phenomenon of increased rates of intimate partner violence towards less educated women may occur. When women

are uneducated, they often struggle to recognize or put an end to violence in their families. Education leads to self-empowerment, and thus a lack of education may deprive women of the opportunity to recognize the violence as unacceptable and to act when violence occurs.⁷⁹

When women receive adequate education, it empowers them to say no to a partner or leave dangerous situations.⁸⁰ Education often provides opportunities for women to feel empowered by teaching them important skills such as critical thinking and interpersonal communication skills.⁸¹ These women can recognize that abuse does not have to be a part of their situation. Additionally, as previously discussed, women lacking education are often not able to earn an income.⁸² This regularly leads to situations where women are not able to leave an abusive environment because they are financially dependent on the abuser.⁸³

Practices

Advocate for Education

While India strives to provide quality education for their entire population, there is still a large percentage of Indian girls that fail to attend any school because communities are simply unaware of the ways in which education can benefit these girls and society as a whole. Advocacy for education is important in helping communities understand how education for girls is helpful. Many organizations find ways to train and educate parents and communities, so that they not only know about the benefits of education for girls, but they in turn want to advocate for their daughters, nieces, and neighbors. As parents are trained and educated on the positive effects of girls' education, they can change their mindset and empower their daughters to participate more fully in classes.

Educate Girls is one of many organizations that advocates for the primary education of girls in India. Their intervention is unique in the way they employ local girls currently enrolled in primary or secondary education to go door to door and provide information to families in rural parts of India about the benefits of girls attending school. They work with local governments and existing schools to train teachers to keep girls in school and provide them with a higher quality education. Additionally, they hold seminars in different parts of India, educating entire communities about the rewards of education for their daughters. They even hold lectures that include families without girls at home to ensure that the community as a whole supports these girls in their educational pursuits. Educate Girls reports that one of their main focuses is raising school attendance, as well as improving

learning outcomes.⁸⁴ They strive to give access to quality education to girls all over India.⁸⁵

Impact

Educate Girls reports that as of 2020, they have successfully aided over 550,000 girls in rural areas to receive primary education throughout India.⁸⁶ They also involve over 4,500 local volunteers,⁸⁷ who are usually women from the local villages. Because this organization uses female volunteers, the volunteers are able to learn more about their own education and it becomes much more important to them.⁸⁸ The Educate Girls model claims to improve government schools by giving the ownership to communities, and the organization reports helping to raise primary enrollment to 90%.⁸⁹ Educate Girls has worked in over 8,500 schools in over 4,500 rural villages all over India, focusing on some of the most rural areas.⁹⁰ They have succeeded in employing teachers, engaging students, and informing communities, schools, and the government about these issues.⁹¹

Gaps

Educate Girls is one of many organizations advocating for girls' education. However, their particular success in their intervention is progressing much slower than they originally hoped. A previous goal made stated that they wanted to involve and enroll more than four million girls in school by 2018,⁹² and they report achieving 116% of their goal.⁹³ While enrollment of the girls participating in the program has increased significantly, the impact of the organization is still unclear. Additionally, their last annual report was released 3 years ago, making it difficult to find up-to-date data and see where the majority of their funding is going.⁹⁴

Reusable Feminine Hygiene Kits

Many girls are forced to stay home from school during their menstruation periods because they do not have adequate supplies. In order to combat the lack of access to feminine hygiene products in these areas, organizations distribute reusable kits to girls that are not able to afford tampons or pads. Distribution includes sewing and assembling kits, then sending them to girls who are in need throughout India.

Days for Girls is one of these organizations that sews reusable kits for girls in need.⁹⁵ The kits include two pads with reusable inserts, a carrying case, and soap to wash the pads afterwards. The kits are donated to the girls and last up to two years. This allows the girls to go to school and not miss the education they need. Because all of the kits are assembled by

volunteers and the fabric is donated by major companies, the materials are very affordable and easily distributed.⁹⁶ In addition, Days for Girls provides education and training about menstruation, travelling to small villages and holding seminars for girls in schools. This open and public discussion allows for the taboos concerning menstruation to be reduced and possibly dispelled, allowing girls to continue to attend school during their periods. They also discuss sex education with girls when appropriate.⁹⁷

Impact

Days for Girls strives to support girls throughout their entire lives. They work to provide kits, as well as teach health and sex education to girls. Days for Girls has provided kits to 1.7 million girls to over 140 countries. They have also provided training and education to each of those girls.⁹⁸ Because the kits are reusable, girls have access to necessary hygiene supplies for up to two years, without worrying about leaking in public. This allows girls to go to school without stressing about leaking through their clothes. Because of the education on their menstrual health cycle, girls feel more confident in themselves and have higher levels of self-efficacy. In India alone, over 230,000 kits have been distributed, allowing these girls the privilege of continuing with their regular routines.⁹⁹



230,000
KITS IN
INDIA

Gaps

Days for Girls is a company that has received much praise for their work in creating reusable, economically-friendly products that have been distributed worldwide. However, though this is a well-known practice, there are significant gaps in the effectiveness of the organization. Days for Girls

is unable to meet the high demand that exists for these products; they can only produce the number of kits they have the materials for. Many girls are able to use the kits for the prescribed two years, but there is no follow up or additional supplies given after the products are disposed of. Additionally, as of 2020 their last annual report was given at the end of 2018, making a portion of the data out of date.¹⁰⁰ While this practice treats a contributing factor to educational disparities in India, there is no way of knowing its exact impact on lessening the gender education gap.

Preventing Child Marriage

Due to the fact that child marriage is one of the largest contributing factors in restricting education for girls, one of the best ways to end educational disparities is to prevent child marriage. As previously mentioned, child marriage often requires girls to drop out of school to focus on their domestic responsibilities. Because child marriage is still so widely accepted, many people are ignorant of the problems associated with child marriage.

Girls Not Brides has partnered with civil society organizations all over the world in order to end child marriage.¹⁰¹ Girls Not Brides strives to enable girls to reach their potential and receive access to quality education. This organization's members bring the issues of child marriage to public attention worldwide, as well as provide possible solutions and greater understanding of what needs to be done in order to end child marriage. The most effective way to make a difference with these issues is to change the laws and policies throughout India, while also implementing programs that will change the perspective of the people in India. Girls Not Brides finds ways to empower girls in the community to understand the impact that an education will have on their lives. In addition to preventing child marriages, Girls Not Brides also offers support to girls who are married, encouraging them to finish their education, and empowering them to do more than they, or their families, thought possible.¹⁰²

Impact

Girls Not Brides has successfully partnered with over 1,300 civil society organizations from over 100 countries who are all equally committed to ending child marriage.¹⁰³ Their impact is measured by how well they are able to help other organizations effectively create their own interventions. Girls Not Brides has been successfully implemented in over 100 countries including India.¹⁰⁴ In December 2018, Girls Not Brides partnered with Rajasthan, a state in northern India. They have brought together 40 organizations in India, locally and internationally, to advocate for policies to protect the girls in India. In the last year, Girls Not Brides Rajasthan has

reached over 50,000 youth, community members, and faith leaders to work toward ending child marriage.¹⁰⁵

Gaps

Girls Not Brides does not have a way to measure the impact that their members are having on child marriage. Their last and only "annual" report was posted three years ago and gives conflicting numbers of the teams they are working with. They claim to be putting an end to child marriage, however they have yet to compare the numbers from several years ago to make a claim that their efforts have been making a difference. Additionally, when reporting numbers they use vague terms such as "reaching" people, leaving readers wondering what it means to "reach" someone.¹⁰⁶ While the information they provide members is beneficial, there are no reports or even indicators that this is having an effect on ending child marriage.

Key Takeaways

- The average female literacy rate throughout the world is 79.9%, while for men it is 89.2%. India lingers behind at 62.3% for women as compared to 80% for men.
- Many girls in India are married at a young age and drop out of school after they complete their primary education due to societal pressures or early pregnancies.
- Child labor and lack of feminine hygiene products keep girls from coming to school, and contribute to the literacy rates and continuous lack of education.
- As girls remain uneducated, it is more difficult to enter the workforce, and consequently women find themselves in difficult financial situations.
- As mothers in India remain uneducated, they negatively impact the education of their children thus the educational disparities become a cyclical, intergenerational issue.
- Educate Girls is one organization that successfully promotes primary and secondary education for Indian girls.

Endnotes

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