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Early Education for Girls:
A Priority for Literacy

by

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Prepared For
The Office of Women in Development
of the
U.S. Agency for International Development
under
Contract No. AID/OTR-C-1808
October, 1980

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Women are the majority of the world's illiterates. Yet in their hands are placed society's next generation. As mothers, they socialize the young and train them in a world view which is often limited by the inability to read. Many survival activities are the responsibilities of mothers and women: subsistence agriculture and home industry as well as basic needs such as health and nutrition. But the connection between these activities and general education repeatedly has not been made by development efforts. Population programs, for example, are targeted at women but neglect the one consistent variable for lowering fertility: education.

If the intention of development is to institute change which will increase quality of life, then education, a key component of modernization, must be aligned with present realities and future goals. Women and girls compose at least half of a population group, and the contributions they actually make to the productivity and well-being of that group are at least equal to those of men. Yet why has literacy training for females been given such a low priority? We now know that many literacy programs expected too much of women who work so many hours. The cycle of poverty requires them to put in 80 hours a week from girlhood in order just to survive. Consequently, there is a new emphasis among development agencies to add literacy to training programs such as those related to income or population. As we shall see, this is expensive both for women and society. Furthermore, it is a less effective way

than other methods to ensure that upcoming generations will be prepared to assume the tasks which accompany successful development. We must have more programs for youth; girls must be educated early to break the cycle of illiteracy, poverty, and related health dilemmas. Without this foundation, skill training will produce wage earners whose quality of life will be altered but not necessarily improved.

Women: Majority of the World's Illiterates

There are more illiterates globally today than there were five years ago. UNESCO projections of illiteracy in the world show an increase from 700 million in 1965 to 820 million in 1980, with 73% of the expected illiteracy in 1980 to be in Africa, 63% in South Asia, and 23% in Latin America.^{1/} In the Middle East, it is estimated by UNESCO that literacy efforts must triple in order to keep ahead of population growth. A report to the Club of Rome estimates that one-fifth of the world's population is illiterate and the larger percentage of these people are women.^{2/} Illiteracy rates for adult women in developing countries are high and notably higher in rural areas. For example, the average rate is 84.96% for 45 African countries, 58.5% for 16 Asian countries, 80% for the Middle East, and 28% for 25 Latin American countries.^{3/}

Illiteracy is linked directly to poverty. The 20 poorest countries in the world are over 80% illiterate.^{4/} In many of these areas, rural families, particularly the young girls and women, are most seriously affected because of poverty and attitude. A girl born to a poor rural family in a less developed country may

never learn to read or write, nor to cope with written numbers. She is likely to spend most of her dawn-to-dusk hours from the age of five or six helping her mother at home and in the fields, carrying water and fuel, and taking care of siblings. She is apt to marry at a young age and to continue in the same rut of poverty as her mother. Her daughters are likely to repeat the cycle with little motivation for or hope of change. Uneducated mothers are less likely to send their daughters to school, less likely to understand the health and nutrition needs of their children.

Illiteracy excludes women from knowledge about health, sanitation, nutrition, reproduction and other aspects of living and work. As a result, knowledge is transmitted orally, often coming from those who are uneducated themselves. Furthermore, folklore and superstition undermine available knowledge from other accurate information sources. Typically, the illiterate woman, a principal cultivator, is unable to learn about new agricultural techniques and certainly to read maintenance manuals. As an essential partner in development, she is crippled by her illiteracy.

Literate Women: An Essential Component for Development

Developed countries have long given priority to education. Americans in the early colonial period established schools for their children, and the precedent continued as the nation expanded across the continent. Girls were included, although it took special efforts to allow them to continue beyond grade school, then beyond high school. The struggle for equal access to all branches of higher and professional education continues in the

U.S.A. and in other developed countries. While many Americans, for example, are critical of shortcomings in their educational system, they recognize that this system has been largely responsible for the outstanding men and women scholars, researchers, educators, technicians, professionals and managers who have contributed significantly to the high level of economic development in their country.

Women's disproportionate lack of education in LDCs results in low economic productivity and ignorance in coping with their own nutritional and health requirements as well as those of their families. These inadequacies all have effects on the economy at large.

The justification for educating women can be made on the basis of future generations alone. World Bank research confirms the inverse relationship between education and birth rates. The educated woman is more apt to follow family planning to have fewer children and to have fewer children die in infancy.^{5/} Population control, a primary development goal, relates specifically to the education of women. Also confirmed is the importance of keeping girls in school to delay the beginning of childbearing; currently many children do not begin school until approximately the age of 10. The World Bank report advocates population education for youth in school and stresses the value of reaching boys and girls before they marry with information and motivation for reducing family size.

Numerous studies have documented various ways the education of women has influenced traditional behavior patterns. Changes

due to education include:

- delayed age of marriage;
- increased opportunities for employment, thus lessened social and economic dependence on children;
- increased capacity for effective use of family planning methods;
- introduction of non-traditional ideas and aspirations;
- increase in confidence in ability to control their own lives.

A recent UNESCO survey showed certain regional variations.^{6/} Lower fertility is associated with fairly advance (secondary) educational attainment in Asia. Five or six years of schooling for girls seems to be an important threshold in Latin America. In the Middle East and Africa, even one or two years of schooling or basic literacy appear to have a powerful influence on fertility norms.

Three developing countries which have made universal primary education a goal--Sri Lanka, Taiwan and Korea--have achieved considerable progress toward equitable distribution of income and economic growth.^{7/} Almost a third of India's economic growth in the 1960s has been attributed to its previous investments in education. The recognition of women's input into the economies of developing countries, such as in agriculture, services, commerce and industry, demands that they be provided equal opportunity for education. With literacy and education, they can contribute more effectively as active participants in the social, cultural, political, and economic life of their countries.

Illiteracy Issues

Although national literacy campaigns have been undertaken in a number of countries, there is little follow-up data documenting success or tracking maintenance of reading skills years after completion of the program. Available evidence paints a fairly dismal picture of such programs as both costly and ineffective. Some have been reportedly successful, but often they have not reached a significant number of women. It is questionable as to whether levels achieved are more than that of minimum functional skill--a skill insufficient for reading with comprehension. Even minimal skills need reinforcement with reading materials designed for new literates. These are frequently lacking.

Literacy programs for the female who has not had primary education may be viewed as remedial--if such programs are available to her. Although it is often assumed that these non-formal education approaches are less costly than formal education, there is nothing inherent in non-formal programs which makes them more cost effective. Effective non-formal programs require the same careful planning and staffing as effective formal schooling. Non-formal programs exclusively for teaching literacy have been found to be expensive, a facet which needs consideration when planning for education development. The World Literacy Programme's cost per new literate substantially exceeds the cost per completer of primary education.^{8/}

An increasing number of development projects include a literacy component; AID's Cassamanca rice production project in Senegal, and the World Bank population project in Bangladesh incorporate functional literacy projects for women. It is possible that literacy components related to substantive training programs will prove more effective than those dealing exclusively with literacy training. This may be because motivation is there to learn the words that go with the seeds and fertilizer used in the agricultural training program and with family concerns of the population project.

A key tool for living, earning, and participating in society, is comprehensive literacy. Girls who do not go to school or who attend only for a short time are unlikely to establish this essential skill. It should be noted, however, that literacy skill retention is also a problem for some who have had formal schooling. This is true in the developed world as well as in the less developed countries. UNESCO reports illiteracy, as conventionally defined, at 1% in the U.S.A., but that a "staggering 13% of American 17-year-olds in school (up to 30% among Hispanics and Black students) cannot read well enough to participate in the everyday work of society."^{9/}

There is considerable variation among developing countries in the enrollment of girls in primary schools. In Latin America, 78% of boys and girls (6-11 years) are enrolled. In Asia, 50% of girls and 71% of boys aged six to eleven are in school, and in

Africa and the Middle East, only a third or less are girls.^{10/}
The drop-out rate for females exceeds that for males in many developing countries. This is one of the problems affecting educational opportunities for girls, and widening the already existing disparities in enrollment and in access to further education. For example, of 1,000 entrants in primary schools:

- 475 boys and 407 girls remain after four years in India;
- 226 girls and 439 boys after six years in Cambodia;
- 68 girls and 80 boys after six years in Syria.^{11/}

In Algeria, 19% more boys than girls graduated from primary schools in rural areas. In Ghana, where entry to primary school is late, pregnancy was cited as the reason for dropping out by 37.8% of girls who left school. Although completion of primary schooling cannot guarantee that a girl will be literate, particularly if she does not continue reading, the experience of Korea is encouraging. There the literacy rate rose from 30% to 80% with universal primary education, becoming the norm in rural as well as urban areas.^{12/}

UNESCO's Experimental World Literacy Program revealed valuable non-qualitative information about the success of the campaign; less than one-third of their participants achieved literacy. It was clear that "without pervasive political will to change, literacy programs will remain ineffective."^{13/}

"Pervasive political will" is obviously essential. It can mean that a larger percentage of a country's budget will go for basic and non-formal education geared to the needs of the poor, particularly women and girls. But, unless there is understanding on the part of leaders for the needs and a commitment to developing implementation, it is questionable whether previously held priorities will be changed. Without this understanding and commitment, funding for university and secondary education will continue at the expense of free schools, teachers, books, and school meals for the poor.

The global objectives of the World Plan of Action for the U.N. Decade of Women (1975- 85) are to break the cycle of ignorance and poverty with equal access to all levels of education and access to the same curriculum as boys. Yet "access" may not be the accurate term in some cases. While shortages of schools, teachers and instructional materials limit access in many areas, Anderson and Bowman point out that participation is the important factor.^{14/} A girl may live next door to a primary school and not attend. Or if she does attend, she may drop in and out of school, and in the end contribute to the educational wastage of her country. If she is in school, she may not participate to the same extent as boys in such classes as science and mathematics, nor in vocational training courses because of traditional sex-based roles of boys and girls.

An illiterate adult woman may have "access" to a non-formal training program and elect not to participate. Or she may par-

ticipate briefly and drop out for lack of ability to comprehend, or for feeling "out of place" or because of home and farm duties.

Girls and women who do not participate in or have access to education are "selected out" for a number of reasons:

- the lack of value put on education for females by their parents and the community, and often by themselves;
- the higher value put on their labor in the fields, in the home and caring for siblings;
- early marriage and pregnancy;
- the lack of funds for clothing, books and other expenses connected with going to school;
- the lack of schools, teachers, books.

Other factors contributing to the "selection-out" of girls are the schools themselves whose teachers may not value the education of females, who are insensitive to the effects of sex-role stereotyping and who do not inspire motivation for learning. The curriculum may be dull and irrelevant, and the teaching materials ineffective or totally lacking.

Toward Literacy

Global efforts to increase the participation of girls in primary school, to keep them enrolled in secondary school, to involve them and also the illiterate women who have missed early education in non-formal education, require innovative measures addressed to those factors which limit the girls' participation in school. Considerable work has been done in a number of countries

in teacher education, curriculum development and the use of media for formal and non-formal education. Successful models need evaluation for potential transfer to other countries.

Improving and expanding a country's education program may not alone gain girls as participants. Changing the values that select out the girls and women is often more important-- and more difficult to achieve. It is encouraging to note that multilateral and bilateral donors are shifting to a greater emphasis on basic education such as primary schools, and to non-formal education in their assistance to less developed countries. These emphases are particularly relevant to the educational needs of women and girls in poor rural areas of the less developed countries. The help of these donors in providing expertise in dealing with the special needs of girls and women and with the factors that result in their selection out of education, can be critical to improving access and participation.

The period of primary education would seem a good time to introduce girls to vocational programs, health and nutrition education, and other components related to living and earning, because girls are less likely to continue beyond the early years of primary school. However, many experts who have studied schools in less developed countries point out that more important than the course content is the way in which this content is taught. Nevertheless, effective ways of enriching the curriculum might be found, such as utilizing visiting resource persons, non-formal

units, radio, cassettes and other visual and audio devices. Career guidance and counseling at an early age could be provided by visiting women professionals if the teacher is not equipped to handle this. New approaches relating the curriculum to today's world and the country's culture, economy and projected employment opportunities could help the girl student to become more aware of herself as a person, a citizen, and a contributor to the development of her country.

Flexible hours and scheduling school for periods of the year when her services can be more easily dispensed with at home and in the fields (avoiding planting and harvesting times) could help prevent the drop-out rates of the girl pupil. Girls are often less well fed than boys in developing countries. School meals could help improve the nutrition level and serve as a focus for nutrition education as well as an incentive to go to school. Mobilization of local resources for pre-school programs could provide child care helpful to mothers and their daughters, who often stay out of school to care for siblings.

Legislation to make school attendance compulsory and co-educational (where cultures permit) is a step many countries have taken or contemplate taking. Yet, with insufficient numbers of teachers, teaching materials and schools, legislation can be meaningless. In favor of taking such action is that a goal is set. Publicizing the rationale for the goal through radio and word of mouth can help prepare parents in poor rural areas for

the advantages in releasing their daughters as well as their sons to go to school. Papua, New Guinea, plans to use the radio "to promote positive attitudes toward female education." Legislation for compulsory education for girls as well as for boys demonstrates a country's commitment to education.

Financial obstacles are cited by the U.N. as the most serious impediment to providing education for women. In 1976, the world spent 60 times as much money to equip each soldier as it spent educating each child. If the world's men and women of the next century are to perform as educated and contributing citizens, some reallocation of the world's resources is needed to pay for their education.

Less developed countries will continue to need assistance for development from those countries which command 80% of the world's wealth, 85% of the world resources spent on education, over 90% of the industry and services, and nearly 100% of the institutions of research. Less developed countries spend an average of \$19 per pupil compared with developed countries, which average \$268. Approximately 20 to 30% of the developing countries' budgets go to education--a substantial burden. Absolute amounts are quite low as indicated in the table below taken from the recent World Bank Sector Policy paper on education.^{15/}

Expenditures for Education per Pupil (\$US 1975)

	<u>Primary</u>	<u>Secondary</u>	<u>Higher</u>
Group I Countries (Per capita income less than \$265)	\$ 26	\$ 70	\$ 534 ²⁰
Group II Countries (Per capita income \$265-520)	57	219	675 ⁷⁰
Group III Countries (Per capita income \$521-1,075)	88	247	1,757 ¹⁷⁰
Group IV Countries (Per capita income \$1,076-2,500)	182	329	1,290 ⁶⁰⁰
Group V Countries (OECD countries)	859	1,116	2,963 ¹⁰⁰⁰
Group V as a multiple of Group I	33	16	6

The table shows a greater disparity between expenditures for lower level education than for higher education when the less developed countries are compared with developed countries. This disparity is particularly significant for the education of girls in poverty who are less likely to benefit from higher education. It argues strongly for decreasing the disparities between amounts spent on higher and lower level education to meet the needs of the large masses of illiterates and potential illiterates.

Education has long been realized as an integral building block of development, one which has important long-term benefits. Yet controversy persists regarding the best method to break the

cycle of poverty, illiteracy, and underdevelopment. Difficulties with the problem, however, must not be allowed to halt efforts to achieve education goals, especially with illiteracy on the rise and illiterate women still in higher proportion to illiterate men. We must recognize the tremendous value of tackling illiteracy early, among the youth. As the role of women in development is acknowledged as a vital economic strength, and as women are integrated into development projects, the importance of educating young girls becomes self-evident. To ignore illiteracy and that of women and young girls is tantamount to planning for the ultimate failure of development efforts.

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