

Women's Education : Studies And Concerns

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ACCESS to education and training is a fundamental right of the individual. The extent to which women are able to effectively enjoy and exercise these rights serves as significant indication of the socio-economic and legal status of women in the society. The contribution of research and studies can help in understanding the situation, pointing to new directions, and can be of paramount importance.

The Foundation for Research on Educational Planning and Development (FREPD) stands in an unique situation with publications focusing on women's education and related issues. Each one of the women-related studies, though primarily based on secondary sources is pioneering and is expected to carry potentials for considerations in policy changes, programme planning and stimulating further research.

There is no denying the fact that majority of women remain outside the realm of the formal education system. Recent studies on Women's Education reflect that: a) negligible number of women has yet attained literacy which is retainable over years; b) illiteracy rates are much higher among females; c) women constitute the majority of illiterates and school dropouts and their number is increasing; d) regional imbalances not only exist among women, improvement is minimum in the geographic areas where it has already

been low; e) there is acute rural-urban imbalances; f) male-female ratios of enrolment are 63:37 in the primary stage, 75:25 in the secondary stage, and 81:19 in the universities in 1982 (FREPD 1983); g) only 9 per cent primary school teachers (1982) and 2 per cent (1980) teachers in secondary schools were women; h) nearly 60 per cent of primary age-group girls numbering 5.15 million are outside the formal education system; i) women don't participate in vocational educational programmes which are formal male-dominated and urban-centred; j) women's education, in most stages suffers because of the serious lack of residential facilities; k) over half of the organizations offering non-formal training programmes for women are located in three districts of the country; and l) only 4 per cent of non-formal programmes for women offered training in agriculture and livestock.

Beyond the dark walls of facts and statistics one can discover concerted action, devised policies and strategies which have followed the recent emerging concerns effecting limited progress. Female enrolment has undoubtedly increased in different stages in education (especially in Primary Training Institutes which reflects massive increase) but falls far below the desired level.

Each one of the above findings related to women's education

warrant discussion. Is the educational scene only the deviation from the other phases of women's life? Health is another aspect which indirectly reflects women's inadequate education. Existing data-base does not reflect adequately that maternity-related deaths are the prime cause of women's deaths: a) 27 per cent of women in 15-54 age-group die due to child bearing reason; b) Approximately 20,000 women annually die due to child bearing act; c) 85 per cent of adult women suffer due to maternity related mal-nutrition; d) Approximately 10,000 women die every year due to indigenous abortion; e) Death rates among female child under 5 years old is 35-50 per cent higher compared to male children, and so on.

The severity of data-gaps reflect the dark side of the society where women are expected to play their roles against severe adverse circumstances. Among the many phases and faces of adversity the prime hindering factor is the mass poverty which, although affect both the sexes severely, it is the women who become doubly affected; first, because of their poverty and second because of their expected role and status which affect their health, nutrition and education. Poverty-stricken females have lesser chances of getting access to modern formal education.

CONCERNS: The limited

programmes as reflected in recent women's studies lead us to consider certain realities: a) The vast majority of women who live in rural areas are born in poverty brought up in poverty and die in poverty. If poverty is the biggest hindrance in realising the goals of education, are the current educational efforts adequate enough to cope with our increasing pauperisation which is expected to deteriorate women's fate even further? Recent studies (Westergaard 1983) already point to a devolution of women due to changing marriage pattern resulting from increasing pauperisation. b) Although vast majority of women stay outside the formal school system this does not mean that they remain without education. Elaborate informal education procedures take care of their socialization which dictate their behaviour. Rural women don't stand in vacuum. They are the vast reservoir of knowledge and skill which they utilize in their day-to-day existence. Their informal learning teaches them how to behave in the crucial aspects of their life for instance in child birth in post-partum etc. This informal learning at home provides women strength to resist utilisation of many interventions like formal education programmes.

All the recent studies demonstrate vast needs for appreciation of the role of non-formal education, which in the years

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to come has to encompass a vast share in educational scene. If this form of education has to be of much success it must be directed where need exists.

If non-formal education has to take care of millions of unschooled children, it would be wise to remember that a female child is not merely a child like her child brother, she steps into the reality of womanhood being a child bride, child wife and a child mother.

Recent studies indicate that girls' chances for attending formal primary education deteriorate because of their mothers' multiple pregnancies, because the girl is constantly needed at home to take care of children. As more women are encouraged to take employment outside the household, the girls' scope for education is expected to be further minimised unless some extra attention is paid to the situation. This situation is expected to arise because, in the current circumstances the type of OFF-BARI employment available to poor women is drudgery for a very low pay, and there certainly is nothing liberating for the women in this. This is especially the case in rural works programmes. The few studies undertaken yet (Marum 1982) show that it is no longer only the destitute women who are forced to seek employment outside, married women from functionally landless households with meagre male income are increasingly participating in off-BARI employment.

Recent studies raise issues of socio-cultural determinants of participation of girls where women's role deserves attention. The fact that women are: a) submerged in roles; b) integrally involved in our agricultural economy but; c) this multiplicity of roles fail to enter the statistical system, carry immense potentials for programme building in the field of education. Some of these are:

FIRST, it is imperative to develop recognition to women's economic and social contributions in the society for the longrun effect. Let us try to consider what will happen to our village HAAT if women in the adjacent villages decide to go on strike for a substantial period of time? Our required essential food items like rice, DAL, GUR, chicken, egg, MURI, CHIRA, vegetables and most of our road-side prepared food items will simply vanish from the market. The text-books and educational media programmes both of which currently suffer from severe lack of positive image about women's role (Krippendorf S. 1977) will enrich themselves and go a long way to enhance women's status if they attempt at developing messages about positive contributions of women's role in the society.

SECOND, in considering the

factor of women's role alone, we come to realise that with the introduction of mechanisation, the principal sources of income for rural women is threatened. Salahuddin (1983) estimates that approximately 900 parttime employed women and 64 full time employed women may be displaced by one automatic rice mill. This message may lead to consideration of development of vocational education programmes for women which will train them to learn the skills needed for being incorporated in the modern labour process. Rice husking is a case in point where experiments are being made successfully with women-run women managed small rice mills by Grameen Bank Project and Asia Foundation jointly.

THIRD, each of the economic roles that village women perform carry potentials for development of nonformal education programmes. Grameen Bank experience suggests that given the minimum financial support and working know-how village women are able to earn income utilising their existing skill and knowledge which they have learnt through informal education, needed for performing their daily roles.

FOURTH whatever the form and magnitude, the new direction must focus on the programme support for development of appropriate technology in order to reduce the burden and drudgery that poverty-stricken women face in their daily chores. Programme support is needed to identify and develop the much-needed time-saving techniques which will release women's time and energy for participation in varied formal and non-formal education programmes aimed at them.

ROLE OF RESEARCH: If research is for the benefit of women it must respond to the new needs of society and bring out the truth for better planning and policy appraisal. Official statistics and research data are only the things the country decides to collect for specific purposes.

Mere existence of research institutions won't guarantee substantial and meaningful research on women unless there is clearcut perceptions about the whole range of problems and issues. Recent thrust for quantitative data at the virtual exclusion of qualitative information may pose a serious threat to the usefulness of women's studies for policy planning purposes. While the balance has to be drawn between different methods used for procuring information to fit specific needs of research, data collection procedure itself may be a point of serious concern. If research on women's education has to be of much value in the years to come, indepth studies should occupy a central role in future.

Research and studies on women's education can only show the gaps and magnitude of task involved and can point to some directions. Women's education needs much more than mere target-setting. The implementation aspect needs the role of an independent agency to oversee the whole status of women's education and there lies our biggest gap. Currently, there is no mechanism within the structure which way are we going? Or, how well are we doing? Until and unless we can integrate this task, the pious hope of accelerating women's education will not materialise to a significant extent.