

# Women And Education

—Naseem Zaman

**T**HROUGHOUT history women have been subjected to exploitation and have been termed as 'the inferior sex'. They have been discriminated against in almost all spheres of life. In education men have always had the first choice. However women's lot is slowly improving with progress in industrial economical social worlds.

In almost all countries girls today stand a better chance of going to school than their mothers did. The generation differences is startling—so great is the change in some regions. In one Indonesian village studied by anthropologist Vele Hull, two out of three women in their thirties have never been to school. In Tunisia only one out of the women in their late thirties and early forties were educated in 1966. Now more than half the elementary school students tend to be female as the country tries to make up for women's past disadvantages. Before World War I out of ten women lacked education. Today, illiteracy has almost completely disappeared. In the wake of progress non-communicable diseases lie stagnation. World-wide fewer than two thirds of children of school age actually attend school. They are the ones who stay at home for girls. The greatest hindrance for school going girls made in 1950 progress slow since then for many countries like Egypt and India are unable to keep pace with the growing number of school children. Time has brought much change in the tendency to invest more in sons' than in their schooling. Rural Pakistan, the Philippines for example spend on a teen-aged girl 54% of what they spend on a boy for education. In many countries girls and boys are taught differently—according to the traditional roles they are supposed to play in society. The gains in women's education seem to be occurring at the primary and graduate schools unfortunately, only a small proportion of the world's women

benefit that schooling can improve a woman's standing in her family and community for education is viewed as a first step towards social and economic advancement. It carries particular weight in societies where traditional measures of female status are eroding. Education is levelling and the bright child of humankind achieving high standards powerful hopes are all over the world. In this role more and more girls and women are as much from

Not only more boys than girls attend school, girls are not taught the same way as the boys are. Although an increasing number of girls are enrolling themselves in different educational institutions, society's attitude to women's education has largely remained the same — world over.

observation of the real world as from prejudice. Yet the purpose of education surely is to enable people to function more effectively in their own surroundings rather than simply to provide an escape route. Hence parents particularly the mothers increasingly attach importance to their daughters' schooling as well as their sons'. Mothers know their daughters will face many of the problems they themselves have faced and hope that education will help the girls escape the same fate.

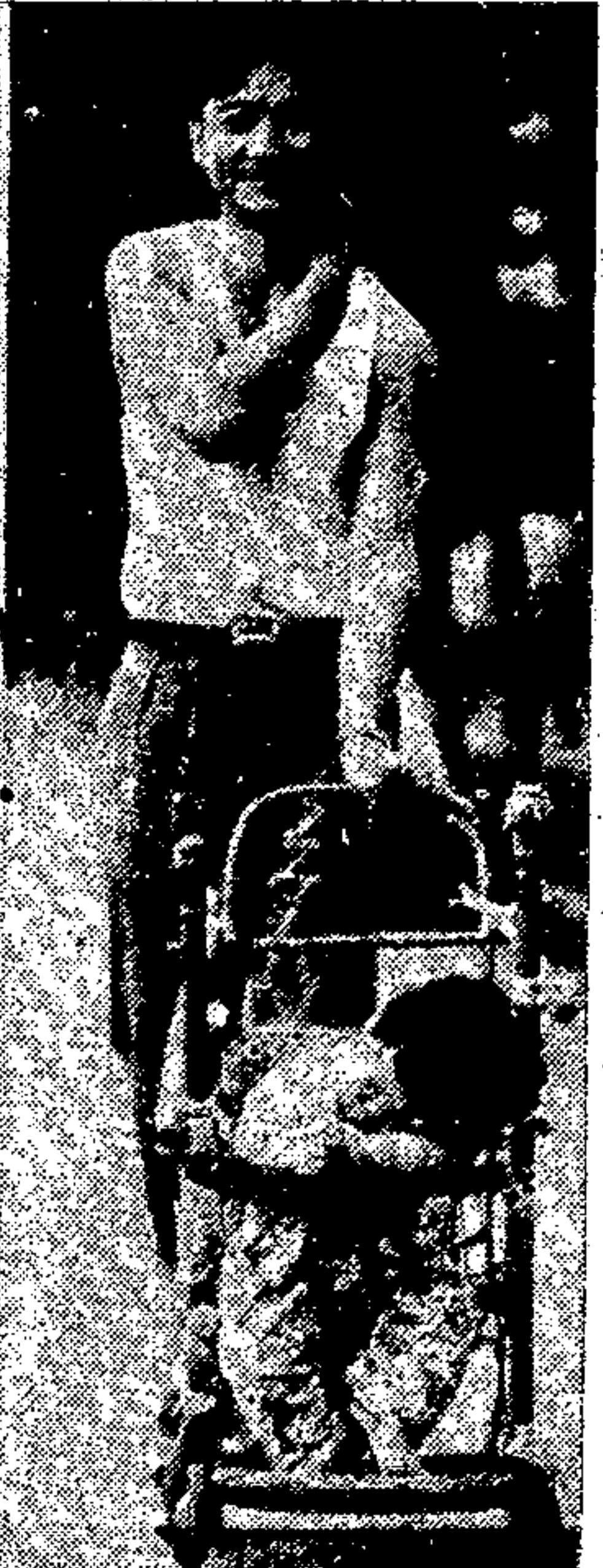
Both the modification of traditional restrictive attitude and the preparedness of women to take on new roles depend on education to a considerable extent. Its influence is felt in many ways. As students, women are exposed to new sources of information not available within their family settings. By drawing women outside their immediate families, schooling may bring about changes in self-image fostering the development of independent values and aspirations. An educated woman, better equipped with the skill to do so, is more likely to pursue activities outside the family.

## PARADOX

There is a paradox in the state of women's literacy today; a greater proportion of the world's women can read and write now than in any time in history; yet the number of illiterate women is also greater than ever before. The explanation of course is that there are three-fourths of a billion more women living in the world today than there were in 1950. Their numbers have swollen the ranks of the literate and the illiterate as well. If comparing women today with women in the past give a mixed picture comparing women with men provides an unequivocal vivid contrast. Worldwide, half again as many women as men are illiterate. And the gap is widening: as the number of men unable to read or write rose by 8 million between 1960 and 1970 the corresponding number of women increased by 40 million. In every continent the majority of the illiterate are female. What holds true for continents holds true for countries as well. In Greece one of the cradles of literature a million people still cannot read, 80% of them are women. India has nearly 5 literate men

for every two illiterate women. In Ethiopia only 15% of the men can read and write but that is more than triple the proportion of women who can.

In modern society, illiteracy handicaps a person almost as much as blindness or deafness. The ability to read and write



Emancipation of women through education cannot be put off for long. If men and women share child-rearing responsibilities, women will find more time for self-improvement.

Photo courtesy: Population.

enables one to reach out beyond one's immediate circle of human contact to a world of new facts and ideas. The written word is the cheapest, most durable and most accessible medium of indirect communication. But societies that do not accord women a place in the world outside the sphere of home and family may see

little utility in teaching women to read and write. For that reason perhaps some of the most successful adult literacy projects for women have been those that linked the skill to be acquired with women's daily responsibilities viz, hygiene, midwifery etc and water-pumps grain mills become part of the apparatus of literacy training.

## PHILOSOPHY VS PRACTICE

For all their potential as catalysts for social changes educational institutions have traditionally been among the mechanisms by which particular societies sustain themselves and so they remain. The philosophical ideal of education is a little different: institutions of learning are supposed to cherish inquiry the pursuit of knowledge independent thought and the free exchange of ideas. Yet most are also committed to the status quo of which they are a part. Although education may lead people to question their assigned roles; the individuals and institutions that educate are not necessarily more free of sexual stereotyping than the society that produces and supports them.

Many look to education as a key to solving manifold problems in economic and social development. For many women however the actual experience of education has proved to be just another factor limiting their choice in life.

Teachers text-books course selection and course content together tend to reinforce traditional expectations about women's roles, and to encourage girls from acquiring the knowledge and skills they need to go beyond those bounds. Girls are encouraged to achieve in those areas thought to be consistent with feminine virtues: language, literature the arts domestic skills and the nurturing professions like teaching and health care. Mathematics and science along with technical skills remain predominantly masculine fields of study.

Schools teach social behaviour as well as academic disciplines—again training young people to conform to traditional expectations for their sex as well as for their station. For girls the overwhelming expectation has been that marriage and family will be their chief vocation. Some may regard education as largely irrelevant to women's place; others may value it for its contributions to the general level of culture—among them producing more effective wives and mothers. 'Educate a man and you educate an individual' goes the old saying, 'but educate a woman and you educate a family.' Subtly the saying subordinates a woman's identity to the needs of the group: she is meant to transmit her knowledge to others rather than use it herself.