

Rekha Wazir. *The Gender Gap in Basic Education: NGOs as Change Agents.* New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000. Indian Rs 225.00 (Paper), Rs 395.00 (Cloth) 286 pages.

In the Constitution of India in 1951 it was set out that... “the State shall endeavour to provide within a period of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years”. But at the turn of the century nearly 424 million are still illiterate while it is estimated that nearly 35 million children in the age of 6–10 years age group are still out of school. The statistics for female education make even more dismal reading. Although the field of education is considered to be the prime responsibility of the State yet there is mushrooming growth of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The impact of these NGOs is rarely reflected in overall educational performance and their approach is seldom transferred to the mainstream.

Wazir’s book is an attempt to map the Indian education scene from two perspectives: gender disadvantages in access to basic education, and the responses of the NGO sector for overcoming them. The elaboration of both issues—gender disadvantage and NGO strategies—has been placed within the context of a wider debate on education access and NGOs function. Gender bias constitutes a powerful additional factor in the exclusion of girls and women and needs to be identified and recognised as such.

The eight chapters included in this volume cover a broad range of topics focusing on supply, demand and institutional dimensions. The introduction profiles the problem. The author understood the gender gap in education only in the wider context, that is female disadvantage in India. Gender bias pervades all spheres of life and society and informs political decision-making as well as intra familial attitudes and values. This cycle of disadvantage starts before birth and continues from neglect of female children through to widowhood. How can the cycle of gender discrimination be broken. It is argued that the status of women, including their educational status, will improve as a consequence of their increasing participation in the labour market. Broadly speaking, this implies that education must play a central role in breaking the cycle of female disadvantage.

Chapters 2,3,4 map gender disadvantage in Indian education from the perspective of girls and women. In addition to statistical data, a historical record of the evolving policy and programmes is also provided. The responses of the NGO sector to poor educational performance and gender gap have been examined in some detail. It is emphasised that efforts to universalise schooling are doomed if attention is confined only to the education sector. Supportive policies in other areas are needed to ensure that children go to school. For example, a ban on child labour, better system of childcare and better environmental management are necessary complements. Similarly, literacy campaigns cannot succeed on their own unless supported by general educational activities and educational resource groups at the grass root level. So sustaining life-long learning requires painstaking work over a long period. Education is a powerful tool to

enhance the capacities of ordinary citizens to negotiate this unequal world from a position of strength.

Chapter 5 and 6 investigate child labour and the educational status of tribal communities in the context of economic and identity-based educational exclusion. In Chapter 5 the relationship between child labour and education is explored and an uncompromising view is taken on the definition and causes of child labour. The distinction made between child labour and child work is rejected, as certain forms of work are inevitable and can even be beneficial for the child. In the author's view every child out of school comes under the definition of child labour. Consequently, full-time formal school is accepted to achieve the interlinked goals of universalisation of elementary education and elimination of child labour. The next chapter focuses on the education of tribal children in the context of exclusion experienced by them and the need to ensure equity in their education. The author is of the view that the identity of tribal groups, as well as their cultural and economic marginalisation, are the factors responsible for the poor spread of education. Present day initiatives of NGOs in tribal education are limited in scale and are restricted to specific pockets in the country.

The focus shifts to a discussion of NGO strategies for reducing educational disadvantage in Chapter 7. The author concentrates on collaborative efforts to involve all stakeholders—the private sector as well as civil society institutions.

Lastly, Chapter 8 takes a fresh look at the so-called 'successful' NGO strategies with a view to re-evaluating their potential. There are examples of good practices available at micro level but these tend to cater to supply-side constraints. It is evaluated that if Indian NGOs are to contribute to the improvement of overall education performance, they would have to pay more attention to creating a demand for education.

Finally, political indifference, bureaucratic inertia and public apathy, rather than poverty and discriminatory cultural practices, are seen to share the blame for India's poor performance in reducing gender gaps in education.

This book provides a multi-faceted discussion on a subject of considerable importance. It will be of interest to professionals in the fields of education, gender studies, sociology, policy and planning, aid and development agencies, the voluntary sector and teacher training institutes.

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