

Efforts to advance gender related advocacy and communication in the Asia-Pacific region

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Several agencies in the region support multi-lingual education because: mother tongue instruction is a means to improve overall educational quality by building upon the knowledge and experience of learners and teachers; bilingual and multilingual education advances social and gender equality; supporting language as an essential component of inter-cultural education promotes understanding between different ethnic and cultural groups and advances the respect for fundamental rights.

Before an approach can be formulated, it is necessary investigate the conditions in which marginalized populations live. Advocacy should utilize data on both MLE and gender issues. It is also important to keep in mind that a “one size fits-all” approach does not work.

The plan of action should take into consideration: Research and analysis; identification of inequalities; promotion of the benefits of gender-responsive MLE; and recommendations for change.

UNESCO’s “Advocacy Kit for Promoting Multilingual Education: Including the Excluded” tool kit is a valuable resource to help advance MLE and gender equality. The tool kit focuses on: language in education policy and practice in the Asia-Pacific region; policy makers; programme implementers; and community members.

Factors that need to be considered in order to further the cause of girls’ educational equity and MT teaching include: the connections between language and marginality; links between girls’ language and marginality; the barriers to girls’ participation and the solutions.

When utilizing the tool kit is crucial that the following procedure is followed: analyze; act; advocate and train.

Another procedure is to adopt a “gender lens”. This will enable an approach that focuses upon the participation, interests and realities of both males and females.

Conclusions:

The “one size fits all” approach does not work.

Research revealed boys can be highly disadvantaged, such as having to provide a family income that takes them out of the classroom.

Teachers from outside of a community have been known to take advantage of girls.

Advocacy should utilize sound data and information on both MLE and gender issues.

Students have been viewed as disadvantaged just because their mother tongue language was not recognised by the school. Caution is the order of the day. It is important to use this terminology in its correct context. It is important not to fall into the discourse of marginalization just because someone cannot read or write.

Collective session discussion:

A key issue that emerged from the advocacy presentation is the importance of understanding the political environment, identifying the target audience and developing a key message to advance change.

Conferences and workshops are not the only way to communicate. More creative approaches can be used to get key messages across such as music, performing arts, etc.

An area that needs caution is the illiteracy versus literacy issue. We need to be careful how we label people. Are we calling some people illiterate, without really looking at what they can do because of their background, etc?

The “one size doesn’t fit fall” that has been referred to in many presentations is also a key point. It is important to look at the context, look at the overall picture before framing an approach.

There is also too much emphasis on English as an elitist language in certain countries such as Pakistan. Exclusive language-in-education policies can contribute significantly to persistent high rates of early school non-attendance and failure among indigenous children, especially girls.

How do we address cultural aspects? For example, in South Asia, language is not the only factor that influences the low performance of girls in the classroom. Communities may consider girls to be a liability because they are aware that their daughter is going to marry someone else, and parents may not invest in their daughter’s education, especially as they will be forced to pay a dowry to a future husband.

The panel reiterated the need to pay attention to the larger, contextual problems, and pointed out that the rights vs. costs issue has always been at the heart of debates over gender equality. First of all, girls’ (and boys’) education is a right and this idea needs to be strongly advocated. Second, while the cost-benefit analysis can be used for advocacy purposes, the panel cautioned that such analyses alone will not carry advocacy forward and will need a full-fledged community level support to promote gender equality. Political will and commitment, as well as cross-sectoral, community level advocacy and education efforts are critical, particularly in ethnolinguistic communities.

A related question address the issue: “What to do with the perception of English as a desirable language in this region?” The panel unanimously responded that we need to balance empowerment through communicating in dominant languages, with a deep-rooted respect for indigenous communities, customs and languages. We have to address these somewhat “elitists” perception that somehow, communicating in English or in dominant language it h only way to achieve MDGs. Some strategies include multilingual education, focus on creating advocacy platforms where ethnolinguistic communicate re included, and including curricula, materials and resources in local languages.