

The Power of Language in Promoting Gender Equality

Some Ethnographic Approaches in the Advocacy for Gender Equality in Basic Education and Learning

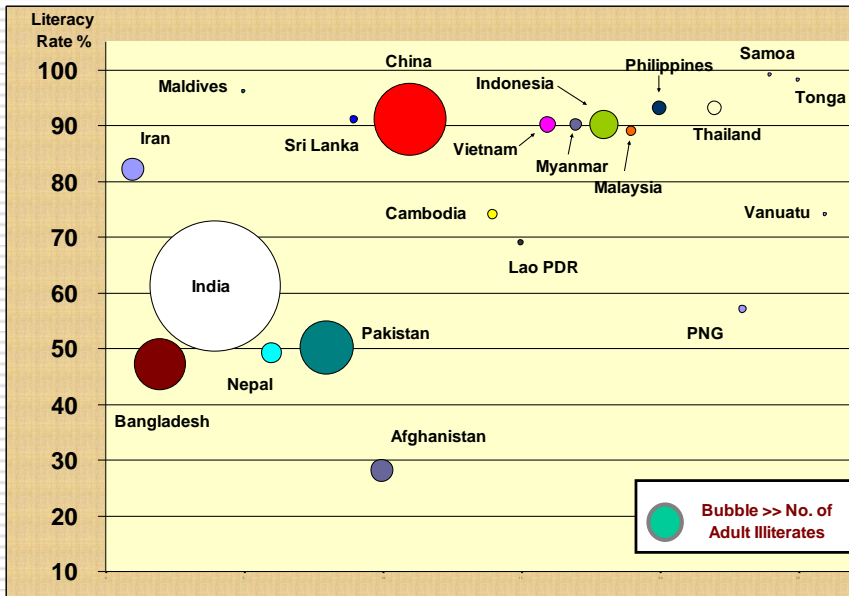
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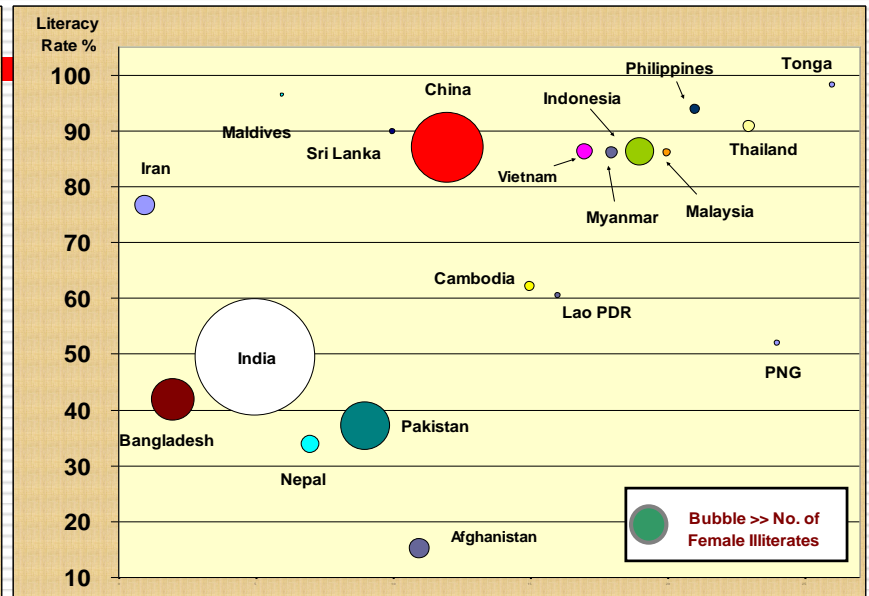


Comparing Magnitude and Level of Illiteracy

Adult Literacy



Adult Female Literacy



- Asia Pacific has highest gender disparities in adult literacy.
- Women have less access to formal education and have lower attainment levels.
- Girls more likely to be pulled out of school due to financial constraints and housekeeping chores.
- Two-thirds of Illiterate are women – Unchanged over last two decades; Will remain so till 2015 without proactive intervention

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- Civil society policy advocates often focus on **the 'supply'** side, challenging governments' commitments to Goal 5 of EFA on achieving gender equality in all levels of education by 2015, and therefore to provide quality basic education to all girls and women, at par with the boys and men.
 - But there is the other side to the equation, equally important, and this is **the 'demand'** side where girls and women, their families and communities empower themselves and claim the right to education.

There are two main things in the agenda for advocates of EFA and inclusive and gender-just education when they work with local communities:

- ❑ Advocating to the community → Finding out what in the day-to-day lives of the people can be used as 'entry points' for convincing them on the value of gender equality in education, and building their capacity to seek it;
- ❑ Advocating with the community → Articulating more accurately together with the community : what is the situation, what is needed based on specific community context, and how policy 'asks' to be put in front of local and national government officials should therefore be formulated to reflect these.

Knowing the community intimately is a requisite step:

- Learning about the learners from the learners: details about their lives, their methods of solving problems, their own systems of organisation, their literacy and numeracy practices — from how they measure grain to how they read a calendar – even to certain peculiarities of their mother tongue.

. . . An **'Ethnographic Approach to Advocacy'** !

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- Modern ethnography has come to be recognised as a form of study that is based on **a case-study approach** rather than the empirically-based account of a whole country . . .

[but which is no less important to civil society, as we see the great value, for example, of the Global Monitoring Report (GMR) on Education for All and the Human Development Report as effective tools in engaging governments and donors on education and development goals]

The Story of the Turtle and the Fish

There was once a turtle that lived in a lake with a group of fish. One day the turtle went for a walk on dry land. He was away from the lake for a few weeks. When he returned he met some of the fish. The fish asked him, "Mister turtle, hello! How are you? We have not seen you for a few weeks. Where have you been?" The turtle said, "I was spending some time on dry land."

The fish were a little puzzled and they said, "Up on dry land? What are you talking about? What is this dry land? Is it wet?" The turtle said, "No, it is not." "Is it cool and refreshing?" "No, it is not." "Does it have waves and ripples?" "No, it does not have waves and ripples." "Can you swim in it?" "No, you can't." The fish said, "It is not wet, it is not cool, there are no waves, you can't swim in it."

Don't tell us what it is not, tell us what it is." "I can't," said the turtle. **"I don't have any language to describe it."**

Fish for Thought

As have been told us many times, language embodies your life experience, your culture, your world view, your community concepts.

If a mother tongue uses more generic words, for instance, as common names for people, **could this not be used to build the initial foundations of gender equality in very young children and even illiterate adults as they acquire literacy and numeracy skills?**

In the Philippines, Tagalog is one of the major languages. After 350 years of Spanish colonization and 50 years of American rule, the original native tongue had been infused with many words from the Spanish and English.

But the original Tagalog had less of words specific only to females or to males.

Examples:

guro = teacher (whether female or male) whereas maestro/maestra from the Spanish refers specifically to male teacher and female teacher respectively

anak = child (and there is no one word equivalent to daughter or to son)

pamangkin = means either nephew or niece

□ And many more...

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- ❑ And even as we took into our daily conversational Tagalog some Spanish words that used the 'feminine' and 'masculine' forms for common objects like 'la mesa' for table and 'el lapiz (lapis in Tagalog).
 - ❑ But when they became part of Tagalog, they **'lost' their gender associations**, and the article equivalent to 'the' table is 'ang mesa' which does not connote any gender at all.
 - ❑ Of course, more scholarly and academic work needs to be put in this (or may have already be done) but the advocate for gender equality's role in this, is to use this particular observation to push for use of Tagalog to communities as the medium of first learning and to **capitalise on the language's gender inclusivity aspects** to promote gender equality in the community itself.
 - ❑ What about other mother tongues among minority groups and indigenous peoples?

An ethnographic perspective, also means...

- ❑ finding out what people already know, determining what their existing literacy and numeracy practices are and building on that, rather than assuming that learners bring nothing to a class and must be 'given' everything.
- ❑ Moreover, drawing on their experiences, people are able to concretely identify strategies that they could incorporate in their advocacy work: Using a range of communication strategies instead of relying heavily on standard text alone, such as hybrid messages using texts and symbols, using textual literacy within an oral discourse.

A Mapping of the Literacy Environment that Unearthed Gender Issues and Pointed to Simple 'Asks' from Policy Makers*

- Nirantar, a resource centre for gender and education and member of ASPBAE in New Delhi, India, initiated a community-based literacy, education and empowerment programme for women and adolescent girls, in 20 villages in Lalitpur district (one of the 200 poorest districts in India) in the North Indian state of **Uttar Pradesh (UP)** in 2002. The programme is called *Sahjani Shiksha Kendra* (which roughly translates as 'Women's Education Centre').
- The programme works with nearly 500 women and girls through different activities such as village-level literacy camps and discussion sessions, residential literacy camps, village-level centres and production of local material. The programme focuses on the *Dalit* community, which is invariably the most economically and socially deprived community in the Indian rural context.

*Note: Presentation drawn from '*Exploring the Everyday: An Ethnographic Approach to Literacy & Numeracy*' by Nirantar & ASPBAE

A Mapping of the Literacy Environment that Unearthed Gender Issues and Pointed to Simple 'Asks' from Policy Makers

- Both the study villages, Gauna and Korwas, are large villages. Gauna has a population of 1,400 of many different castes. Korwas is also mixed-caste village with a population of 1,621, but is not as well endowed as Gauna.
- The research methods employed for this study were a village walk and individual interviews. The village walk covered both the Dalit and upper-caste *bastis* (neighbourhoods). On the village walk, people met were asked about any existing text materials. For the home environment, focus was on the *Dalit* community.

Written Texts in the External Environment

During walks through the village, it was found that several walls had writing on them and that the range of texts was quite vast :

- government information and slogans
- election signs
- religious writing
- good wishes
- wedding announcements
- even love messages

Government Information

- ❑ A significant amount of the wall-writing concerned government information and messages. A lot of this information was in the form of slogans —
eg. messages on the importance of hygiene or the value of education.
- ❑ These slogans were generally written on walls which were located more centrally in the villages or on public buildings, like the walls of schools, public health centres etc.
eg. slogans on the school walls read '*Ghar Ghar Vidya ka Deep Jaalao*' (Light the lamp of knowledge in every home) and '*Padho, Padhao... Desh ko Aage Badhaao*' (Study, teach... Take the nation forward).

Government Information

- Another set of wall-writings communicated information about government schemes.

For example, in the upper-caste *basti* in Korwas, there was a billboard carrying information on the construction of a small dam in the village. The information was factual, with details of coverage area of the dam, time frames for completion, etc.

The information had clearly been written by a professional painter, was in very small type and had a lot of information crammed in. All of this had been put up as a mandatory requirement of the government to provide information regarding public schemes.

But who reads this information?

- ❑ Upper-caste *bastis* could all read the information but hadn't actually read it before (though they knew what it was about).
- ❑ Men of the Dalit *basti* could not read the information as it required higher levels of literacy. But they too were aware of the content of the messages.
- ❑ Women, on the other hand, had neither read the information nor did they have any idea of what it said.

But who reads this information?

“All the government-related information was in formal language. One could surmise that the ‘target audience’ for such information and messages would be upper-caste men. It was clear that factors like education levels, exposure and mobility are very gendered, and that men have an upper hand in these.” – Nirantar

- ❑ Needed: A gender audit of language used by governments in official transactions?

But who reads this information?

- The women spoken to said their mobility was limited and restricted, they are mostly in purdah, and stopping to read a signboard would not be culturally acceptable. So even literate women would never stop to read a public sign.

Wall-writing on Houses

- Walls of individual houses also had a number of things written on them. These included pulse polio immunisation messages, religious texts, names of family members, names of newly-wed couples, poetry, some drawings like flowers, earthen lamps etc. Most houses had religious symbols and messages painted on the walls. A common message was '*Shubh Laabh, Lakshmiji Sada Sahay Kare*' (May Goddess Lakshmi always bless this home). Also a number of houses where marriages had taken place had messages blessing the newly-weds written on the walls.

Wall-writing on houses

- Observations and discussions clearly showed that it is the men in the community who are generally engaged in writing and reading information in the public places. This was because public spaces are largely out of bounds for women.
- In contrast, **women who had at least been to the literacy centre** had written and drawn on walls within the home.

Text in homes

- ❑ Examples of text in homes are calendars, marriage gift notebook, financial records and legal documents (eg land titles).
- ❑ In all the households, documents, papers and other records are used, read and managed by the male members in the family. This seemed to follow from the fact that men are in charge of the finances.
- ❑ Women handle small amounts of money and make small purchases but men take decisions regarding larger purchases and sales. But even in situations where women handled money, as in cases where they managed small home-based shops, it was the men of the family who maintained the written accounts.

Text in homes

- ❑ Small scraps of paper with numbers written on them were in many homes. Non-literate women and men ask for these receipts from shopkeepers when they go to the market to sell small amounts of grain or ghee. They do so to ensure that they are not cheated.
- ❑ Women usually get the receipts read by other literate people in the bazaar itself and also bring them home to be checked by their husbands or sons. It is difficult to decipher what is written on these papers, and women kept referring to it as 'Urdu' to emphasise that it was in an unknown language (when in fact they were written in Hindi).

Probably the most important observation emerging from the study is that . . .

- Literacy texts are embedded in relations of power. In this study we saw this in terms of gender and caste relations. What is written, who writes it and who reads it are determined by these relationships.
- The study shows that access is not neutral. There is written material available but women do not have the opportunities and are, in fact, not permitted to read it.

Thus programmes trying to enrich the literate environment or working to get marginalised communities to enter the world of letters must also understand these dynamics.

Following from this is the need to recognise that...

"...simply including local texts in teaching-learning material is **not enough**, unless we also **equip learners to engage with these in real-life contexts**.

For instance, if our programme decides to include reading wall-writing as one of the activities, this would mean negotiating a variety of power relationships, such as dealing with issues of women's mobility in the public domain, **even before we could get to the actual act of coding and decoding what is written.**"

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Tank yu tru

Maraming
Salamat

Thank you
Kob-kun ka

Thank you !

Cam on

Terima kasih

Maraming salamat

Kop chai

Shukriya

Chizu tinbartei

Obrigado

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Raquel de Guzman-Castillo has been working with NGOs for the past two decades. From policy advocacy and lobby work to tri-media engagement, policy research writing and publications, and to learning sessions in development dilemmas, what she considers as her primary contribution to the social movement is articulation of people's agenda and enabling of these groups to find common ground and take coordinated action.

The past ten years were devoted to policy research and policy advocacy, part of which included her role as National Coordinator for the Civil Society Network for Education Reforms or E-Net Philippines, a national lobbying and campaigning network that aims to carry forward civil society's recommendations for equitable access to good quality Education for All. As National Coordinator of E-Net Philippines, she sat in various technical working groups of the Department of Education to put together a National Action Plan for EFA 2005-2015 as well as a legislative agenda for the education sector.

Ms. Castillo is currently Asia Advocacy and Campaigns Coordinator of the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE), working with Asian national education coalitions on a shared capacity building for policy advocacy, research in EFA deficits, budget tracking and ODA for education, and coordinated campaigning through the Real World Strategies Project of the Global Campaign for Education. Her work involves mobilizing commitment around the broad EFA agenda, but with focus on neglected EFA goals and neglected groups. She represents ASPBAE in the Thematic Working Group for EFA and the TWG on Multilingual Education, both coordinated by the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Regional Office in Bangkok, and the UN Girls Education Initiative (UNGEI) Working Group in East Asia and Pacific.