Introduction to Key Indicators of Gender Equality in the Asia-Pacific

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SUMMARY:

When people address the issue of gender, language and development, there are at least three internationally agreed development goals - of which two are specific to education - that should be addressed: MDG 3; EFA goal 4; and EFA goal 5.

MDG 3: achieve gender parity in primary and secondary education by 2015; EFA Goal 4: achieve a 50 per cent reduction in female illiteracy by 2015; EFA Goal 5: achieve gender parity in primary and secondary education by 2005 and gender equality in education at all level by 2015.

While gender, language and development issues are not necessarily limited to education, unfortunately, we do not find any other relevant development goals that specifically address these three themes together.

However, having these three goals is better than not having anything at all that may allow us to bring the three themes together. The important issue is how we make good use of the existing tools to promote our cause.

Evidence exists that not being able to communicate effectively is a barrier to gender equality in education. The three groups that are most affected by injustices in language policy and planning in education are women and girls; the poor; and groups with languages not recognised in formal education systems.

Data indicate that the girls and women are disadvantaged because they are less likely than males to be exposed to the prestige language because they are restricted to the domestic environments where the local language is spoken.

Another significant issue is that differences in language competence often go unnoticed in school because girls are given fewer opportunities to speak and are expected to perform less successfully than boys.

What we know:

Since the EFA movement was started in 1990, a lot has been achieved in terms of educational access for both genders. However ahead of the impending 2015 deadline for the MDGs and EFA, 65 per cent of countries have not yet reached gender parity in primary and secondary education, and two-thirds of the adult illiterate population are still female

This statistic has not changed over the last 20 years!

These data point to the fact that current education and literacy programmes are not responding to the needs of young boys and girls in ethnolinguistic communities.

A survey carried out in Laos in 2001 revealed that females from the Hmong ethnic group had the lowest literacy rate and the largest gender gap in the same ethnic group, and also among other ethnic groups.

A similar study in Viet Nam revealed that literacy rates were the lowest for ethnic minority girls in a northern region of the country, where girls were significantly disadvantaged in secondary education. Although this finding cannot be attributed to language alone, it does indicate the need for more in-depth research to isolate the reasons behind the disparities in these communities.

Another survey revealed disparities between Lao speaking households and speakers of other languages. This was attributed to the fact that Hmong households in the country are significantly excluded from primary and secondary education.

Research in Thailand revealed that language is a significant factor on the literacy rate in a country that has one of the highest literacy rates in the region.

The 2008 census in Cambodia revealed a highly significant two per cent literacy rate in two provinces which are home to indigenous communities. These two provinces have one of the lowest attendance rates in the entire country.

A key issue is that the national aggregate can hide sub-national realities. This highlights the need for disaggregated data, taking into the equation factors such as location, ethnicity and language so that an explanation for the disparities can be achieved.

Conclusions:

Language can play a critical role in promoting gender equality in education and society.

Efforts to address gender inequality can also help reveal exclusion and discriminatory practices.

There are clear linkages between gender equality in education/language and female empowerment. However the evidence base is still weak due to a lack of relevant data.

Disaggregated data on language must be systematically collected to move the whole process forward.

Sound indicators are needed to form a strong basis for mainstreaming gender in the promotion of mother tongue and multilingual education in order to ensure gender-sensitive and responsive language policies are put into place.