The Power of Language in Promoting Gender Equality in the Asia-Pacific Region

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The Asia-Pacific region has the 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 society's expectations of a domestic role.

Two-thirds of illiterate women are in the region and this statistic has remained prevalent over the last two decades and will remain until the EFA and MDGs 2015 deadline unless intervention makes dramatic progress.

At present, civil society policy advocates primarily 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 on a par with the male gender.

However, to meet the 2015 goals, the "demand" side, in which females, their families and communities empower themselves and claim the right to education should be made an equal part of the advocacy process.

Learning about the learners from the learners:

Advocates of EFA and inclusive and gender-just education should determine "entry points" in the daily lives of the communities they are working with, to convince these people of the value of gender equality in education. A second component is to build their capacity to seek it.

After advocating to the community, the next step is to advocate with the community. Feedback should provide information on the situation at the local level and what is needed, ahead of submitting policy requests to local and national government officials.

Language empowers. If a mother tongue uses more generic words, for instance, as common names for people, this can be used to build the initial foundations of gender equality in young children and even illiterate adults as they acquire literacy skills?

An example of a good practice from the Philippines:

 Tagalog is one of the country's 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 both Spanish and English.

Some original Spanish words that used feminine and masculine forms for common objects were lost as they were integrated into *Tagalog*. Therefore, advocates for gender can use this particular example to push for the 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.

It is important to determine what people already know, and ascertain what their existing literacy and numeracy practices are, so that this knowledge can be built upon. This bigger picture will enable exponents to identify strategies they can incorporate into their advocacy work.

An example of a good practice from India:

A programme instigated in Uttar Pradesh, India, in 2002 created a map of the literacy environment which identified gender issues. This allowed policy requests to be drawn up and submitted to decision-makers at the local and national levels. The programme works with nearly 500 females through activities such as village discussion sessions, and residential literacy camps. The programme focuses on the *Dalit* caste community, the most economically and socially deprived group in India.

Researchers used a method known as a village walk, plus individual interviews for their research. During the village walk, the people the researchers met were asked about any relevant text materials. During walks through the village, it was found that several walls had writing on them. These texts included government information, such as election signs and religious writing.

Official information written on a wall detailing an impending dam project in the state signified the differences in assimilating information between males and females.

The upper-caste *basti*s could all read the information, whereas men of the lower-class Dalit *basti* could not read the information as it required a high level of literacy, but they 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 the information said.

Most women said that their mobility was limited and restricted. They also said it would be culturally unacceptable to stop and read a signboard, so even literate women would never stop to read a public sign.

Research revealed that men wrote all these types of messages on walls. This was because most public places are out of bounds for women.

It was also significant that the government information was written in a formal style and therefore was directed at educated higher-caste people. This raised the need to carry out a gender audit of government information displayed in public places.

Key findings:

Literacy texts are related to power and status. This was evident in terms of gender and caste relations. Content, who writes it and who reads it are determined by these relationships.

Access is not equal. Even if the women could read the signs, cultural norms deem they are not supposed to loiter in public places and read public signs.

Conclusions:

It is imperative that learners are taught local text that is relevant and can be utilised in a real life situation. For example: a lesson on wall writing.

Further analysis in needed into negotiating power relationships, such as female mobility in the public domain.