

ACTION RESEARCH STUDY ON EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN

Summary Report

Nirantar defines education broadly as learning that enables people to take control over their lives. Education can be a medium through which women who are otherwise marginalised can access information, critically examine their situation, express themselves and communicate effectively and participate in decision-making at various levels. The opportunity to acquire literacy skills is a right, regardless of whether it is linked to a larger educational process; women's literacy also holds tremendous potential as a tool for empowerment.

Background

Women's Literacy and Governance in India

The importance of literacy in the first instance lies in the measure of confidence that it accords adult learners especially in a society which places a high premium on literacy. In the Indian context, there is typically an attitude of derision towards those who are non-literate, their non-literate status being equated with ignorance and backwardness. For women from marginalized sections of society, illiteracy becomes yet another facet of their disempowerment.

Literacy interventions that are located in an empowerment paradigm can play a critical role in enabling women to understand their rights as citizens and to engage with institutions of governance in order to exercise these rights. Literacy also enables women to participate more effectively within decentralised State and non-State institutions of governance. Enhanced access to information helps women to deepen their understanding of issues of and to perform leadership roles within these institutions and forums, especially through self-governance bodies in India which now have one-third seats reserved for women (the Panchayati Raj Institutions). Women in these bodies would clearly benefit from literacy as they enter new arenas of public engagement.

State Responses to Women's Literacy in India

Education policy in India is considered very progressive with regard to its focus on gender. A wide gap however exists between stated policy and actual implementation. The lack of commitment to women's education is reflected in grossly inadequate programmes, meagre budgetary allocations and under utilisation of the available meagre resources. Even Mahila Samakhya, the government's only programme dedicated to women's education, has not paid attention to women's literacy notwithstanding its other successes.

Despite the lack of effort to reach women, a striking feature of the Total Literacy Campaigns in India has been that the vast majority of adult participants were women. This belies the myth that women do not value literacy. However, little attention is being given to enable women to sustain and build upon the confidence and skills acquired through the campaigns.

The response of NGOs and the Women's Movement to women's literacy

The decline in both the extent and quality of interventions in the area of women's literacy on the part of NGOs belies the commitments to facilitate decentralization and sustainability. The low priority accorded to literacy assumes that dependence on the educated is not a problem. Furthermore, the failure of most NGOs to seriously work on women's literacy results in a lack of effective pressure on the State to be accountable on this front. For the women's movement too, women's education, and in particular literacy, are not priority areas compared to issues of health, violence and legal rights. The linkages between education and women's empowerment are not

part of the current discourse within the movement.

It is in this context that Nirantar initiated an action research study that would evoke and analyze women's perceptions related to education and empowerment, as well as perceptions of those in relevant institutions of governance.

Research Model

Objectives

The ultimate goal of the study was to establish women's education, with a focus on literacy, as an area of concern not only on the part of the State but also of civil society organizations. Its objectives were:

- 1 To analyze and understand educational opportunities for women from socio- economically marginalised sections of society in the context of the agendas of the State, NGOs and women's organizations.
- 2 To examine and highlight the linkages between education and women's empowerment and the role that education plays in enabling women to play a more effective role in decision making in various forums such as Panchayati Raj Institutions and Self-Help Groups.
- 3 To advocate for an expansion of empowering, quality educational opportunities for women with the government as well as NGOs and women's organizations.

Activities and Strategies

The two main elements of the project are:

1 Engaging with State Policies Relating To Gender and Education

- 1 Analysis of perspectives of policy makers and bureaucrats towards women's education. Examination of the donor agenda and international funding priorities, perspectives and approaches adopted for women's education.
 - Analysis of provisions and priorities in education in the context of the provisions of the International Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Education for All (EFA) commitments made by India, as key areas for a gender audit strategy for the education sector.
 - Consultations organized in collaboration with key networks and organizations, to highlight their concerns and to facilitate the emergence of lobbies to influence and address issues relating to women's education.

2 Study Tours of Educational Programmes for Women

Through a participatory action research process in partnership between six selected NGOs and Total Literacy Campaign district teams and Nirantar, an analysis of initiatives in the realm of women's education was undertaken to highlight the opportunities and strategies for women's education. The partner organizations were Sewa Mandir (Rajasthan), Himachal Gyan Vigyan Samiti (HP), Mahila Samakhya (Karnataka), Adithi (Bihar), Mallar/Tamil Nadu Science Forum (Tamil Nadu) and Swayam Shikshan Prayog (Maharashtra). These organizations represent a wide range of perspectives and priorities in their work towards empowerment and equitable governance. Virtually all the partner organizations facilitate women's participation in the Panchayats, Self Help Groups and the community-based institutions that the partner organizations have facilitated. The case studies examined policy and institutional frameworks, content of education programmes, and incorporation of gender training and curricula for programme staff and volunteers. They also sought the recipients' perceptions regarding the quality and relevance of educational interventions directed at them.

Findings and Outcomes

The following is a summary of the main findings and conclusions from Nirantar's analysis of the field visits:

1. Women's Perceptions of Literacy

In all our interactions with women in communities where partner organizations were working, we heard unequivocal expressions of the value that they saw in literacy. Even women who had not been part of literacy interventions spoke about the role of literacy in enhancing self-esteem. Literacy has meant for them an increase in mobility -- moving independently to greater distances, as well as socio-economic mobility to enter new spheres of work and new roles in public arenas.

Women who participated in literacy programmes stated having acquired reading and writing skills, irrespective of whether they actually acquired these skills, indicating a confidence that stems from the perceived value of literacy. Virtually all the women said that literacy prevented them from being duped and gave them a reduced sense of dependency. The importance of literacy is manifested in women's willingness to take on heavy odds to participate in literacy programmes such as opposition from the family as well as the community.

2. Literacy and Governance Linkages

Literacy has enabled many women to stand for Panchayat elections. None of the organizations, however, offer literacy opportunities for women who have been elected. While the government expresses a commitment to enable women to enter into local self-governance, its information and communication material seems almost designed to exclude those who do not have sufficiently high levels of education. Large numbers of women leaders who emerged through community-based institutions generally have some level of formal education. In this context, literacy inputs to other women would be part of a strategy to allow the latter group to hold their leadership accountable.

3. Factors to be addressed for effective governance of literacy programmes

At times literacy and empowering learning processes are perceived as mutually exclusive, but the combination of structured learning processes and literacy has much greater potential for empowerment. Organizations that are involved in literacy work have also expressed an inability to give adequate attention to literacy because of other pressing priorities & constraints of resources.

One of the biggest challenges for organizations is how to facilitate the integration of literacy skills into the lived realities of learners. At the most basic level, where women members of savings and credit groups are not using their literacy to track their individual accounts, they need to start doing so. There is also a need for interesting and relevant material to be created keeping in mind the literacy levels of learners.

Literacy needs to be a long-term agenda for it to be meaningful and sustainable. In the absence of availability of resources for the required duration it is difficult for organizations to undertake literacy work. A significant majority of organizations involved in literacy work are experiencing problems relating to funding.

Lessons Learned

Collaborative Research

The partner organizations had no prior history of working together and the theme of the study was also not a significant priority. Hence it is not surprising that ownership of the study by them was limited. The nascent partnership was pegged on the interest of organizations in the opportunity provided for exposure and capacity building of the workers involved in the study. Had we dialogued with the heads of the organizations more in the planning stage of the study there could have been far more invested in the process and outcomes.

Lobbying and Advocacy

The Nirantar team had already been intervening and participating in forums critiquing the New National Curriculum framework formulated by the government, and attempting to highlight the lacunae in it from the point of view of gender, class and cultural perspectives. Having initiated work on the action research study, Nirantar was more proactive in seeking opportunities for advocacy. Given that the processes relating to the 10th Five Year Plan were underway in India, it was felt that it was important to target the plan being formulated. It was decided therefore that the National Consultation on Gender and Education Policy would focus on impacting the 10th Five Year Plan.

By opting to influence the national 10th Five Year Plan process to put the message across regarding gender and education, Nirantar was seizing the moment – a moment which was very critical since gender issues in education were being ‘mainstreamed’ in policy which in turn would secure the resources necessary for gender issues in education. The process of educating themselves required not only knowledge about the policy issues in education but also of the processes involved in devising the Five Year Plan. It required a deliberate choice of resource persons and people from government to be invited – people who could influence the process in the long run. It meant that even after the consultation participants would in their individual capacity continue to lobby with government to include the recommendations. Whether or not the recommendations are carried into the 10th Five Year Plan as they were devised, the fact is that the process has resulted in a loose coalition of concerned persons and organisations coming together in a forum, lobbying to get the process further, and making sure that at least key elements in the recommendations get included in the Five Year Plan.

The experience of the Consultation gave us valuable insights as to what works and what doesn't. The following aspects were critical for success:

- A clear, strategic focus - All decisions about who to involve, to what purpose and when were taken carefully in keeping with the goal of advocacy in mind.
- Organizing a high profile national event which gave visibility and energy to an issue that had for too long been marginalized.
- Involving the State in the process of sharing and reflection, apart from academics and practitioners.
- One to one interactions to secure participation, generate interest and lobby.

Another important lesson we learnt was that it is very difficult to lobby for a wide range of issues simultaneously; there needs to be focused targeting or specific concerns. A monitoring and lobbying agenda would further be facilitated by the application of a framework, possibly based on international commitments.

Networking

We realized during the course of our work that the emergence of an active forum on women's education was unlikely. The marginalization of women's literacy is so acute that the main advocacy required at this stage was with the partner organizations themselves. Partner organizations were very enthusiastic about was the mutual learning that took place in course of the study and saw the study as an opportunity to gain exposure and to build capacities of their

workers. Capacity building is probably the only organic way to generate interest and to get organizations working in the area of women's literacy to begin to associate, however loosely.

Generalized lessons for good practice

From our experience of attempting to draw a focus on women's literacy, we feel that networking, lobbying and advocacy efforts around a marginalized issue would be helped by:

- 1 Using strategically timed high-profile events to draw attention to the issue
- 2 Using capacity building as the generic blocks for building networks
- 3 Networking with organizations/forums that are active in the larger domain, who may not be directly involved in the issue.
- 4 Going beyond a simple demand and supply analysis. Often areas of concern that are marginalized need a deeper exploration of assumptions and perceptions. It is useful to evoke and highlight the perceptions of the group whose interest is being marginalized and to posit that against the perceptions/stated objectives of the institutions of governance.