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WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN INDIA – THE POWER OF A SECOND CHANCE

Dr. Daphne Pillai, Principal

*Pillai College of Arts, Commerce & Science, Dr. K.M. Vasudevan Pillai Campus
10, Sector 16, New Panvel, Navi Mumbai – 410206, India
daphnepillai@mes.ac.in*

DR. Celina Joy, Professor

*Pillai Institute of Management Studies & Research, Dr. K.M. Vasudevan Pillai Campus
10, Sector 16, New Panvel, Navi Mumbai – 410206, India
celina@mes.ac.in*

Abstract

Education plays a major role in the sustainable development of a nation. The global literacy rate for all people aged 15 and above is 86.3% with the global literacy rate for all males at 90.0% and the rate for all females at 82.7%. The rate varies throughout the world with developed nations having a rate of 99.2% (2013). In many developing countries, despite gains in educational attainment, learning levels are abysmally low, both when compared with developed countries and with national learning standards (Pritchett, 2013) ⁽⁵⁾. Over 75% of the world's 781 million illiterate adults are found in South Asia, West Asia and sub-Saharan Africa and women represent almost two-thirds of all illiterate adults globally. (Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2015). Although India has raised its literacy rate in 2011 to 74.04% from 12% at the time of Independence in 1947, it still lags behind the world average literacy rate of 86%. Besides this there is a wide gender disparity in the literacy rate in India: effective literacy

rates (age 7 and above) in 2011 were 82.14% for men and 65.46% for women (source: Census 2011). One of the main reasons for this is the alarming rate of school dropouts among girls due to culture, custom and poverty. Though women today have achieved many milestones, women's education has yet to reach its full potential. "The Power of a Second Chance" is an opportunity given to those women who missed out on the first chance in education during their childhood.

This research paper, through a study conducted of 145 women school dropouts, attempts to highlight some of the reasons for girls dropping out of school and the impact of lack of education on their social and financial status. It discusses the socio-economic barriers to their progress. It also makes recommendations on how these women can be empowered with a second chance through literacy programs and income generating skills.

Keywords

Women's Education, India, Poverty Custom, Culture, Family Circumstances, Second Chance, Adult Literacy Drives, Skill Development

1. Introduction

India, since its independence in 1947, has made noteworthy progress in the field of science, technology, tourism, medical tourism, infrastructure and even space programmes. However, there are many areas like literacy, health, sanitation and human rights, among others, where it lags behind. The recently released World Economic Forum (WEF) Report (2015) ranked India at 105th position out of 130 countries globally on the Human Capital Index. The countries that ranked at the top of this index have 100% literacy rates. The literacy rates in India in 2001 were 64.83% and rose to 74.04% in 2011 after a period of ten years. However, the male literacy rate in 2011 was 82.14% and the female literacy rate was 65.46% (source: Census 2011). One of the main reasons for the disparity in literacy rates between men and women is due to the difference in priority given to boys and girls education. This has directly resulted to the alarming rise in school dropouts among girls. There are many barriers that make girls miss out on school education. These are poverty, early marriage, child marriage, culture and family circumstances. As a result, women have poor self-worth, lack in self-esteem and are governed by superstition and dogmatic religious beliefs which are transferred from generation to generation.

The change in mindset can only come through education. This has been recognized by the government and several initiatives have been taken in the last few years to stem the increasing rate of school dropouts. The Right to Education Act 2009, Mid-Day Meal Scheme at schools, the Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls - SABLA 2011 and the recent Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Programme launched by the current Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi in January 2015 are a few examples. Even though these government's policies have been welfare driven, the implementation has not been very successful and failed to reach the grassroots level. The government has also mandated through the Companies Act, 2013 a compulsory spend of 2% of their net profits on social initiatives which would come under the purview of Corporate Social Responsibility. Corporates collaborate with Non-governmental agencies (NGO's) to implement the provisions of Corporate Social Responsibility. Education is one of the areas mentioned in the provisions of this Act.

Adult Literacy Drives and Skill Development Workshops for women school dropouts is one of the ways where women can get a second chance at an education. The power of the second chance gives them the opportunity to integrate into society, develop their self-confidence and help them in learning skills that has a high impact on income generation.

2. Review of Related Literature

In the present study research reviews are classified in two categories:

2. 1. Studies conducted abroad

The study entitled "Factors contributing to school dropout among the girls: A review of literature", carried out by Shahidul and Karim(2015)⁽⁶⁾ reveals that though several interrelated social, economic, school and cultural factors affect school dropout outcomes regardless of the gender of the students, among these are some particular factors which increase the dropout rate particularly for girls and these particular factors produce lower educational outcomes for girls in general. Parents with lower socioeconomic status face difficulties to bear the expenses of their daughters' education. In addition, parents sometimes use the gender of their children to decide who gets more education so that children can become providers in future; in these circumstances male children eventually get more priority compared to female children. Besides these, girls also

experience disadvantage for the unequal labour force participation in the world. Females usually experience less opportunities especially in productivity in the labour market and earn less compared to males which discourage parents from continuing the education of their daughters.

2.2. Studies conducted in India

The study conducted by Ahir(2015)⁽¹⁾ on “Dropouts in School Education in India: Magnitude and Reasons” reveals that lack of financial resources to pursue education was the most dominating reason for dropouts across various studies. Amongst other reasons lack of interest in education, conducive and closely located infrastructural amenities, various perceptions of the parents related to the access of education and its repercussions / expectations, were also identified. Reasons specific to boys and girls were also identified separately. For girls, female conducive infrastructure and environment, perceptions of the parents regarding the association between marriage and education attainment, household chores and taking care of siblings were identified as major reasons for dropouts.

3. Conceptual Framework

3.1 Women’s Education in India

Women’s education in India must be understood in the light of its socio-economic, cultural and historical context. It has primarily been driven by a patriarchal culture where women are treated as the weaker and inferior sex. There is a wide disparity in opportunities given to the girl child in terms of education due to the prevailing mindset of the family and the community. The man is considered to be the breadwinner and hence given more opportunities to study. On the other hand, the woman is expected to do the household chores and not be financially independent. The male child therefore is considered an investment while the girl child is considered to be an expense and a liability. The girl child is therefore not encouraged to pursue an education. If she is already in school, there is no encouragement for her to complete her education. Women’s fight for equal rights, equal pay and equal education continues to be a struggle even after seventy years of India’s independence. As quoted in EduNation, Pillai(2015)⁽⁴⁾, Education is true empowerment, for only the educated are truly free. They are free to build their own capital and to contribute to society in any way they deem fit.

3.2 Barriers to Women's Education in India

Poverty is a major barrier in ensuring that the girl child gets an equal opportunity to study. Other barriers are custom, culture, geographical locations of schools and family circumstances. The girl child is often married off early (in some cases as a child) and sent to her husband's home to avoid any further spending by the parents. The custom of dowry, as a monetary gift given to the girl at the time of her marriage puts a further burden on parents of the girl child. In case of any crisis in the family or family exigencies, it is the girl child who is plucked out of school to attend to a sick member of the family, look after younger siblings, and help in farming activity or to attend to the domestic chores. The societal indifference and years of subjugation causes a deep psychological insecurity and pigeon holes them into traditional roles making it extremely difficult for them to cast off the molds. Furthermore, there is an inherent diffidence and lack of self-esteem women face because of language barriers, especially lack of knowledge of Spoken English which they feel will inhibit their entry into a social environment.

3.3 The Power of the Second Chance

The differences between the positions of men and women in the society will not lessen or disappear as long as there are differences between the education levels of men and women, Alia (2014)⁽²⁾. The second chance at education is for those who missed out on the first chance of formal schooling. In India, the second chance at education does not mean obtaining a University Degree. It could be in the form of learning skills that can help in generating income for the family and lead to financial independence. These skills include taking courses on tailoring, making handicrafts, beauty and cosmetology among others. Women can then monetize these skills to supplement the family earning. In addition to these skill development programs, learning to speak in English helps them gain confidence, dignity and social adaptability. In India, governmental and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) strive to deliver the second chance in education.

3.4 Barriers to availing the Second Chance at education

One of the formidable barriers is the lack of awareness that a second chance opportunity is available. The government offers formal structures through distance education and open schooling and NGO's undertake literacy and skill development programmes; but this information does not reach the masses due to lack of proper communication systems. Even if awareness is

there, very often, the opposition comes from within the family itself. A majority of married women found resistance from their husbands who did not wish them to be financially independent. Indian society dictates that the husband is the bread winner of a family and it is a social stigma if a woman has to leave the role of the home maker to contribute to the household revenue. In many cases, women find it very difficult to reconcile their work and domestic responsibilities. Women who hail from the disadvantaged segment of society must do their household chores before going to work and even after returning from work. The work is exhausting as they have to do the cooking, cleaning, scrubbing, washing the utensils and doing the laundry manually. In tribal areas, the women have to carry their load to the well, draw the water and wash the clothes. So, by the end of the day they either do not have the time or they are too exhausted to educate themselves.

4. Significance of the study

Our study shows that women who have missed out on the first chance at education were keen to avail of a second chance at education. This study will also help many more social organizations to work on delivering the second chance at education by conducting Adult Literacy Drives and Skill Development Programs for women school dropouts. This study will also help facilitators, delivering the second chance, to understand the various challenges of working with adult women learners and find alternate solutions to these challenges.

5. Objectives of the study

1. To find out the reasons for women dropping out of school.
2. To find out the impact of lack of education on the earning capacity of women school dropouts.
3. To find out what skills women school dropouts would like to learn if given a second chance opportunity at education.
4. To find out the impact on women school dropouts who have availed the opportunity of the second chance at education.

6. Methodology

Exploratory Research Method ⁽³⁾ was used for the present study.

6.1. Target Population

The target population consisted of women from Mumbai and Navi Mumbai, Maharashtra, who had not completed their education (school dropouts) and are currently earning a livelihood by doing menial or domestic work.

6.2. Sample

154 women were approached for the interview out of which 9 were rejected and the final sample consists of 145 respondents.

6.3. Tool

An open-ended questionnaire was framed by the researchers with 14 questions. The questionnaire was content validated and their suggestions were incorporated. A personal data sheet covering the respondent's age, education, occupation, parents' education, age of marriage, number of children and the schooling details of their children were also covered in the questionnaire.

7. Analysis and Findings

- The main reasons for dropping out of school were due to poverty in the family (36.55%), family circumstances resulting in the girl child being plucked out of school (28.28%), followed by culture and customs (13.10%), early marriage (11.72%) and other reasons (10.34%).
- There was no government intervention to insist upon the parents of the school dropouts to be sent back to school.
- The majority of the respondents' parents were illiterate and school dropouts except for two respondents' whose fathers had completed graduation.
- Around 74.48% of the respondents spent their childhood in the village or rural areas.
- Almost half of the respondents (51.72%) were married off before they reached the age of 18 years (child marriage).
- A great majority of the respondents (93.79%) felt that they had missed out on something due to lack of education and 88.11% of them felt that the lack of education was a barrier to their advancement in life.
- A majority of the respondents (42.07%) realized this barrier when they saw educated people around them have a better life while they had to resort to low paying menial jobs to make a living. A significant percentage (22.07%) of them realized this barrier when their spouses

failed to be providers or were alcoholics and the family was dependent on them for a living. Twenty percent of them realized this barrier when they had to depend on others to do daily transactions or help children with their studies. Around 16% of the respondents felt this barrier when they realized that they are caught in this cycle of poverty and unable to get out of it due to lack of education.

- While responding to the impact of the lack of education on the financial status, 61.38% of the respondents felt that they could not get better paying office jobs and had to do menial jobs to make a living resulting in limited means of earning income. Twenty percent of them felt that they could not afford a better standard of living and 13.79% felt that lack of education will keep them in the cycle of poverty. A low but a significant percent (4.83%) of the respondents had an added strain of earning as their spouses did not contribute to the family income besides being alcoholics and draining the family income.
- Around 68% of the respondents were making all efforts to ensure that their children don't miss out on school.
- A majority (78.62%) of the respondents felt that they would love to have a second chance at education.
- While 17.93% of the respondents wanted to learn income generating skills and 15.17% of the respondents wanted to learn English speaking skills, a majority of the respondents (45.52%) wanted to learn both skills if given an opportunity of a second chance at education.
- Almost 64% of the respondents said that their family would support them in their decision of learning should they choose to opt for a second chance at education.
- Self-confidence, Self-esteem, Ability to help children with their studies, Transact without any dependency on others and an ability to earn better were some of the benefits of availing the second chance at education mentioned by 17 respondents who had availed a second chance at education and participated in Adult Literacy Drives in the recent past.
- The model followed by Soroptimist International Bombay Chembur (SIBC), Mumbai, India is given below. A model of ALDSD program is as shown in Fig 1.

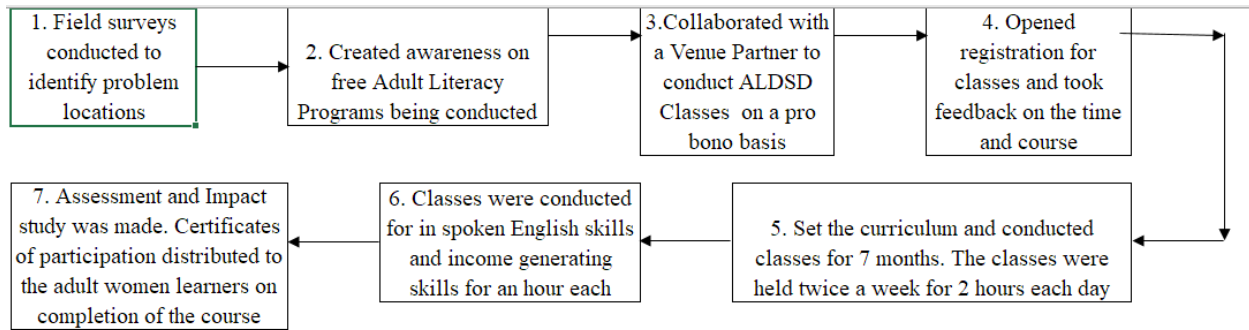


Figure 1: Model of ALDSD

8. Analysis

The study showed that women school dropouts realized that lack of a formal education impeded their progress. It restricted them to taking up menial and domestic jobs to make a living. These jobs, besides being low paying affected their health due to the physical work involved in them. Poverty and family circumstances were the main reasons for their dropping out of school. Even though, most of the respondents' parents were illiterate and did not consider education to be important, the women respondents felt the need to educate their children to ensure a better life for future generations. A majority of respondents were enthusiastic about availing a second chance at education. They wanted to learn income generation skills and English speaking skills and they were willing to make time for the same. The impact on women respondents who attended these programs were very encouraging for the facilitators. After attending the programs they were able to speak with confidence. There was a visible positive change in their body language and there was as no trace of diffidence. The program also gave them the confidence to monetize the skills learnt and improve their earnings.

9. Suggestions and Recommendations

Education has to take a proactive approach. It must work to some single-minded goals.

- A vast majority of the respondents mentioned that there was no government intervention when they dropped out of school. There must be a concerted and sustained effort by the government and NGO's to ensure that girls attend school and the school dropout ratios are reduced. Some work in this direction has been initiated by the Beti Bachao Beti Padao Programme.

- Respect for the girl-child must be promoted through the curriculum. Indian history and folklore is rich with stories about women heroes – these must be revived and glorified to build gender respect.
- Schools must focus on developing skills from an early age based on their aptitudes. These will serve to motivate women and give them a natural edge in their careers.
- Schools must be set up in every village so that girls do not have to travel far for studies. Schools should have a girl-friendly, safe and secure environment which is conducive for girls to study. Separate toilets for girls are essential.
- Every school must have a counseling facility and parents should be encouraged to draw on these to ensure gender equality and fair play.
- Every village and urban slum area should have special skill development centers, where women can be encouraged to make products that bring them a sustainable income.
- Corporates through their Corporate Social responsibility (CSR) initiatives can take up women specific projects as education is one of the areas for spending under the purview of the Companies Act, 2013.
- NGOs can conduct Adult Literacy Drives and Skill Development programs (ALDSD) as per the model mentioned in Fig. 1 and can pace the learning based on the time available for the learners.

10. Conclusion

The research indicates imparting income generating skills and English speaking skills can empower women school dropouts in India to rise to the next level even though they do not have a formal education. Equipped with these skills they become confident and self sufficient. With self-sufficiency comes financial empowerment and with financial empowerment comes change. The fruits of the second chance will be visible in subsequent generations. These women who have benefitted from the second chance will fight for their girls' right to have an education to follow their dreams and fulfill their goals. A whole support system must be provided to women school dropouts to enable them to make better life choices, the benefits of which they can enjoy lifelong. This can be achieved through Adult Literacy Drives and Skill Development Programs. On the part of the enablers, delivering the “Power of a Second Chance” is a modest goal to pull

out women, who have missed out on the first chance at education, to achieve a dignified and self-sustaining life.

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