

Free Schools India

Why girls' education

Introduction

Readers of this website might be wondering why we are catering for girls only in our school, and might be thinking that this is unfair, and wondering what will happen to the boys in the area. This section is designed to give you a fairly good picture of why we have decided to make our schools girls-only.

In just a few short words, the two broad, main reasons why we have made this decision is because people in the village told us that this is what they really need and want, and because girls in India, and Uttar Pradesh in particular, are far behind in development and have fewer opportunities than boys, so they simply need it more. It may seem surprising that people in the village actually told us that what is really needed in the area is a school for girls, as it in fact surprised many of us working on the project. It was extremely encouraging though, because it shows that these people, even though they live in a very backward and isolated rural community, are still coming to see that girls' education is important. The flood of parents who came during the admissions period to enrol their girls is a very good sign as the attitude of the parents is often a major obstacle. There are still parents in the village who are unconcerned about whether their children go to school, and who see their children as economic assets; however the reality that we have seen shows that these parents are in the minority. We have started our school with 140 students, and could have taken many more, had we been able to. At first we were worried that we might not get as many children as we had hoped (around 100-120), however a trickle of children soon turned into a flood!

Listening to the Community

We feel that it is extremely important to listen to the concerns and wishes of the people we are hoping to help through this project, and so it took very little discussion between us to decide to go with the wishes of the village on the matter of single sex education. There are of course areas of school policy and management that we will have to decide according to our own best judgment as people more knowledgeable in terms of education, but wherever possible we want to work according to the needs and wishes of the community, for example in our decision to close school during the harvest and plantation seasons. Some may criticise this decision and say that we are condoning child labour, however these critics will most likely not have much experience in rural Indian communities, and not realise that during these times of the year, all hands in all families are needed for the task at hand. We also feel that there is nothing wrong in a child helping at crucial times with the work of the family, and in the existing conditions, it is simply an economic necessity.

Listening and being responsive is something we plan to continue, and I think it should be stressed that this project is essentially part of the community and not some imposition from outside. We will never be leaving the community as some projects do at the end of a specified period, and we will always have Indian teachers in the locality who are either from the village or another part of the state. The management of the school itself will also be based in the community, only answerable to us, the board

members, to ensure the smooth, honest, and efficient running of the school. We will always have a bias in favour of female teachers, to inspire parents with even more confidence that their daughters are in a safe environment (we currently have a mixed staff and will actively seek more female teachers as we expand).

Why rural communities want single-sex education

Traditional rural families are highly segregated between the sexes, with married women often entirely covering their faces in the presence of male members of their own family. Roles within the family and the community are deeply ingrained, and it is generally thought that the girl's place is in the home, and as a result girls do not have the same freedom of movement as boys do. The eldest daughter in particular tends to suffer, because she is often seen as a third parent for her younger siblings or as a stand-in for the mother, taking over her household duties so that she is free to earn more money. The general attitude is that when children are very young it is fine that they should mix with boys, however as girls reach puberty, they are often withdrawn from school either simply because families want them to do more work in the home, or because there is no available girls-only school. At the ages at which our first classes of children have started, the mixing of boys and girls will be a less crucial issue, however as we continue to expand, the benefits will increase manifold.

There is a major problem with education infrastructure in rural India, which often requires children of both sexes to travel beyond their own village to attend secondary school. Clearly then this is a problem for girls as families do not like their daughters to leave the village. The fact in our chosen community is that there is no girls-only school for approximately 14 kilometres, and it is not free of cost. Therefore the impact of our project on girls in the community will be immense.

Why India, and Uttar Pradesh in particular, vitally requires special focus on girls' education

Worldwide, India has one of the highest male-female equality gaps in literacy, and is making slow progress, having been overtaken in terms of elementary education by many countries in arguably worse shape overall than India. When we talk about elementary education, we are talking about the goal of quality education to age 14. As mentioned above, when one starts to look at the issue of upper primary and secondary school the availability of schools, i.e. the infrastructure, becomes a major problem as around 43% of all rural Indians live over one kilometre and often much farther from the closest upper primary or secondary school. This is almost an insurmountable obstacle to girls getting to school, unless the parents are unusually dedicated to the goal of educating their daughters.

- Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) is among the Indian states with the lowest female rural literacy rates, having approximately 19% literacy among rural women. This fact is intimately linked with the problem of U.P.'s enormous population, as education of females leads to lower birth rates and lower infant mortality.
- High female illiteracy also leads to poor nutritional status, lower earning potential, and reduced 'say' within the household and community.
- The first people to be affected by uneducated women are their children, whose health, education, and general well being is negatively impacted.

There is a very large inequality of emphasis on educating boys and girls, with those parents who responded to the Public Report on Basic Education in India (PROBE) survey showing much greater interest in educating their boys. This fact is intimately linked with the system of arranged marriages prevalent in India today, and must be explained to those unfamiliar with marriage arrangements in India.

When a girl gets married (in rural India all marriages are arranged by the parents), her father pays a dowry to the groom's family, and the girl goes to live with the groom at his family home, usually in another village or district. It is often the case that on the day of her marriage, a girl's contact with her own family is almost entirely broken, due to difficulty in communication and travel. Therefore, girls are often seen as a burden, and an investment with almost no return, to use crude economic language, because any advantage of her education will be going eventually to her husband's family, rather than to her own.

These are essentially the reasons why sons are favoured over girls, because any 'investment' in boys accrues to their parents (as married sons stay at home rather than starting their own households with their wives), and helps to attract better and richer families who want to marry their daughters off, meaning larger dowries. It is for these bare economic reasons that people see it as more logical and profitable to educate boys. Also, employment opportunities for women in rural communities are much fewer than for men, so this incentive that leads to the education of boys simply is not seen to exist for girls.

When mothers and fathers were asked about the importance of education for boys and girls, 10% said that it was not important to educate girls, while this figure was 7% in the case of boys. The social environment is also a major deterrent in some cases, with some respondents to the PROBE survey stating that their daughters were not in school because it simply 'is not done' in their communities, but that they would educate their girls if other families did likewise. It is clear then that once some change starts to take place, this has the potential to 'snowball', if aided to do so. Also, having stated the above reasons for not educating girls, there are also strong reasons given by rural parents why girls should be educated. In many cases families want a bride who is educated because they have come to believe that an educated woman can run her own house better. She can keep accounts and conduct correspondence with her own family and others. She will be a better mother and have healthier children. One more reason why educated women are an asset to a community and the country is that they tend to have fewer children, and their children's mortality is lower.

Education is a crucial factor because attitudes can even become more ingrained through school attendance. On examination of Indian textbooks, folk tales and school subject matter, one sees that these often propound stereotypes and gender roles. Women are portrayed as weak, un-trustworthy, and less important than men, being shown in traditional roles and as possessing inferior minds. For example, the moral of one 'folk tale' which I read recently in a children's book was that it is better to 'tell a secret to the wind, than to a woman'. The story was about how a man comes to understand that his wife, and women in general, are all gossips, and are too weak of mind to exercise any judgment or discretion.

To break this cycle it is important then to nurture the self-worth and esteem of girl children. It is visible in all spheres of Indian life that women, even educated women, are eternally one step behind their men, always in the background. Women lack confidence in themselves, and it seems are resigned, and perhaps even unaware that the outside observer views their role in this way. In rural society this lack of confidence and freedom is highly visible, and one way to change this is to educate girls on their own, without their male counterparts present. The overabundance of confidence in boys and lack thereof in girls starts from a young age, and school attendance can either reinforce or counter the trend. With boys present, it is demonstrably more difficult for girls to exert themselves and make themselves heard. Therefore, in a girls-only environment it is much easier for girls to grow, learn, receive attention from teachers, and for their confidence to develop. They can then go out and be more active and engaging members of their families and societies.

In order to combat these stereotypes and to help empower the girls who attend our school, we will be carefully selecting our text books, and hope in the next 1-2 years to be able to write our own textbooks, and get them printed specially for our school. It is a common feeling of our board that most textbooks are substandard, and so we want to come up with something better. Those with niggling doubts, thinking that we might not be acting in a culturally sensitive manner, and might be trying to impose 'modern' or 'western' thinking, need not worry. Educating women and girls and making them confident enough to speak out and to exert their opinions, and engage more fully with the currently male-dominated world around them, will not destroy their culture or hurt their society in any way. In fact, a community where the majority of people are educated and capable, while continuing their way of life, is arguably going to be a healthier, more productive version of their old society.

Conclusion

The above is in no way meant to be a scholarly or scientific explanation of the situation in India today, only an impressionistic picture to help the reader and supporters of this project understand why it is that we have chosen to focus on the girl child. We believe in full integration in society, and so it is by no means aimed at keeping a separation of the sexes. It is in fact aimed at giving girls every opportunity to develop personally, which we feel can best be done in an all-female environment. The hope is that the reader will have learned something about Indian society through this document, and will take away a better understanding of what we are trying to achieve and why.