



Dining for Women

Food For Thought: November 2011

Theme: Education as a Bridge to an Independent and Sustainable Future

In this issue of Food for Thought:

- ♀ Monthly Theme
- ♀ Millennium Development Goals
- ♀ Discussion Questions
- ♀ Voices From the Women & Girls We Serve

Our thanks to Jennie Goldstone for researching and writing this issue of Food for Thought.

“Equipped with the proper resources, women have the power to help their own families and entire communities overcome poverty. Education is the route to this power.” --*CARE*

“Five- and six-year-old children are the inheritors of poverty’s curse and not its creators. Unless we act these children will pass it onto the next generation like a family birthmark.” --*U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965*

“I have learned one thing: if you are educated, there are many choices in front of you. You do not have to follow, you can create your own road – then others will follow you.” --*Tehseen, 24, India (from Because I am a Girl by Plan International)*



The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are eight objectives designed by the UN to improve social and economic conditions in developing countries by the end of 2015. **Each month we focus on the MDGs impacted by our theme and our monthly featured project.**

This month we highlight:



MDG #2 Achieve universal primary education

Target: Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.



MDG #3 Promote gender equality & empower women

Target: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015.

Challenges to achieving universal primary education

Even when countries officially guarantee free primary education to all children, a variety of circumstances can interfere with children's ability to access this right. For children in the [Sundargarh district of Orissa](#), where DFW's project this month, India Literacy Project, those circumstances include:

A lack of buy-in on the part of parents and the community to the value of education. An idea that many of us in the West tend to take for granted is that education is the key to a successful adulthood; and the more education, the better. In communities where completion of primary education--not to mention secondary or post-secondary--is not the norm, and no one in the community offers proof of the benefits of prolonging time in school (that is, there are no role models), the long-term pay off of schooling takes a back seat to the immediate returns of putting

"Girls say: Teach our families and communities how important education is and help them find ways to support our educational attainment."

- Girls Speak: A New Voice in Global Development

able children to work. Raising awareness of and building buy-in to the importance of completing *at least* a primary education is the first major obstacle in working to achieve MDG #2.

A lack of schools in remote areas. Not having a neighborhood school to attend can be a hugely prohibitive factor in the decision of whether to send a child to school.

Parents who still want their children to be able to help out with chores at home may be deterred by the extra hours traveling to and from school would require. For girls, a long-distance trek to school, taken without adult supervision, is often an extremely dangerous proposal. Moreover, children that do make the effort to travel a long way to school will likely find the classroom overcrowded and resource-scarce, as the school absorbs students beyond those it was intended to serve; negatively affecting the quality of education.

Language of instruction is important. In remote areas of developing countries, a child's first language is often not the dominant one in the region or country. If the child is not attending a neighborhood school, or if the school is forced to recruit teachers from outside the community, it is likely to mean that the child will be learning in a second or third language. The resulting struggle and failure to progress at the rate of her peers will discourage her and her parents from seeing education through to completion.

As a result of these challenges, 60 - 65% of children in the Sundargarh district drop out of school, and girls--illiterate, unskilled--become extremely vulnerable to trafficking and unsafe labor.

Challenges to promoting gender equality and empowering women

Girls are less likely than boys to be enrolled in school; rural children are less likely than urban children be enrolled, and the poorest are less likely than those more well-off.ⁱ Combining these indicators, we can see that girls living in the rural and impoverished district of Sundargarh are at a disproportionate risk for being denied an education. In the working world, women in developing countries are much more likely to be engaged in informal employment--that is, where wages, working conditions, employment status and benefits are not regulated or protected.ⁱⁱ MDG #3 aims to achieve gender parity in enrollment and completion of education (at all levels), as well as parity in employment opportunities and pay.

Education is a bridge to an independent and sustainable future for girls. Below the bridge swells a dark sea of powerlessness, crowded with the predators of child marriage, teenage pregnancy, maternal, and infant health risks, HIV and other preventable diseases, domestic violence, trafficking, and unsafe labor. Girls who waded into this sea may live adrift upon it forever, or they may drown; it's very difficult to get out. But education can carry them safely over this sea to an adulthood where they control their own destiny and make decisions that are best for themselves and their families. Most importantly, their children will be born already on the other side.

Questions for Discussion

Literacy and numeracy are the building blocks for a successful and independent adulthood. But what else can education provide that can be transformative for children--especially girls?

It has been shown that the more years of education a woman has, the healthier she is, and the healthier her children are. Why do you think this is?

For the Sundargarh district in India, as well as in many impoverished communities around the world, parents do not see the value of educating their children past the age when they can be helpful at home or earn money for the family. When cost is an issue, parents will choose to keep their sons in school over their daughters, because the son will continue to contribute to his family while the daughter will contribute to her husband's family. Imagine you had the task of building buy-in among parents in a community like this. What would you do?

Quick Facts

- In India, more than 1 in 4 women between the ages of 15 - 24 are illiterate; that rate is higher than average for developing countries as a whole.ⁱⁱⁱ
- 88% of Indian working women who do not work in agriculture are employed informally (i.e. without a contract or benefits).^{iv}
- "Data from India show that more than half of girls have little or no say in life-changing events, including when to marry, when to have children, or whether to pursue schooling."^v

India Literacy Project Photos from the Women We Serve



— Changing the world one dinner at a time

Sources:

Blagborough, Jonathan, and Nikki Van Der Gaag. *Because I Am a Girl: The State of the World's Girls 2009*. Rep. no. 978-0-9550479-8-5. Italy: Amadeus, 2009. *Because I Am a Girl: Girls in the Global Economy 2009*. Plan International. Web. <<http://plan-international.org/girls/resources/publications.php>>.

Cardinal, L., Greene, M. E., & Goldstein-Siegel, E. (2009). *Girls speak: a new voice in global development*. Washington, D.C.: International Center for Research on Women.

"Childinfo.org: Statistics by Area - Education - Literacy." *Childinfo.org*. UNICEF. Web. 21 Oct. 2011. <http://www.childinfo.org/education_literacy.php>.

The Millennium Development Goals Report 2010. Rep. United Nations. Web. <<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/reports.shtml>>

"Sundargarh, Orissa - Education and Women's Empowerment." *Ilpnet.org*. India Literacy Project. Web. <<http://www.ilpnet.org/projects/pragati>>.

"United Nations Millennium Development Goals." *Welcome to the United Nations: It's Your World*. Web. 21 Oct. 2011. <<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/education.shtml>>.

Endnotes:

ⁱ The Millennium Development Goals Report, United Nations, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.childinfo.org/education_literacy.php

^{iv} The Millennium Development Goals Report, United Nations, 2010.

^v Cardinal, L., Greene, M. E., & Goldstein-Siegel, E. (2009), 6.