

NEPAL: New computer learning brings girls empowerment and education

PUNITA RIMAL / Asia Pacific correspondent - Women News Network - WNN



Nepal school in Chitwan 2006. Image: Peter Voerman

KATHMANDU: Nepal has always been classed as a developing country. In the U.S. it is often called a “third world” country. And it may well remain that way unless Nepal can break out of the vicious cycle of exploiting its people, particularly its women. One strategy that could break the cycle is a dynamic evolution in the role of Nepali women and the use of new technology.

Since 1980, almost 30 yrs ago, Nepalese women have been included in numerous plans, policies and programs inside the country. Paradoxically, though, the impact of broad inclusion has been very discouraging. But something new is coming. The innovations of computer learning in rural schools will definitely level the field for many girls who will now finally be able to climb the ladder.

For years, Nepal “enlightened policy” for girls education has provided incentives for increasing girls rights in school enrollment, with a push toward “basic education” completion, but efforts have fallen short. Why?

“Educational exclusion is most pronounced among the poorest children, and especially poor girls,” says Dr Máiréad Dunne in her 2009 report for the University of Sussex (UK), Centre for International Education.

Education with career, leadership and political opportunity is key to advancing the role of women’s educational rights in Nepal. It is crucial for Nepal to focus on efforts using increased awareness. But will Nepalese society make any real improvements? These and other questions are part of a revolutionary new approach with Nepal girls, and other global education programs. For the first time, rural and poor girls, have a chance to learn through “hands on” techniques in ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) with the use of laptops and desktop computers.

If we see the total picture of enrollment in school, it is nearly equal for both boys and girls in grade one, with the same dropout rate. After this, the dropout rate for girls begins to outnumber the boys. In high school, the rate of dropouts for teen girls rises remarkably over boys. It is due mainly to a girl’s household workload, which grows as she gets older. The obligation for teenage girls to manage household duties is twice as much as teen boys in Nepal.

“I do not send my daughter to school,” said Santi, a rural woman from the Tharu community in the Northwest region of Nepal. “She helps me in domestic work. She needs to know the household chores before marriage.”

The overall picture of education for girls in Nepal is often one of ongoing limitation. Many girls are sent to Nepali government schools which are poorly funded, are lacking facilities and often over crowded. Numerous boys, in great contrast, are often sent to private English-based schools.

One handicap for girls is that they are generally asked to leave school at the young age of 12, just after completing grade five, leaving them with only a rudimentary understanding of literacy.

“Investing in adolescent girls is precisely the catalyst poor countries need to break intergenerational poverty and to create a better distribution of income. Investing in them is not only fair, it is a smart economic move,” said Robert B. Zoellick, President of the World Bank in a 2009 report, “Because I am a Girl,” by the UN Girls Education Initiative.

Locked out of opportunities, girls from the lowest castes, known as “dalits,” are sometimes sold by desperate parents to middle-men who promise to find work, along with training and education, for their daughters. One girl selling as a domestic worker currently goes for 4,000 – 6,000 Nepali rupees (\$53.00-\$80.00 USD). These dalit domestic workers, called “Kamlaris” in Nepal, often live with dashed hopes, mounting limitation, degradation and complete educational exclusion. Although selling and hiring Kamlaris is considered illegal in Nepal, the practice is still in motion.

Most Kamlari girls start out happy with the promise of work and education when they leave home. As they begin to work, though, they soon realize with regret that all the promises made to them were lies.



Nepal schoolgirls in Kathmandu. Image: Wonderlane

Girls and women in Nepal are often steered toward gender identified occupations. The Nepal Ministry of Education statistics show only 15 percent of women in 2006 entered the field of engineering, and less than 20 percent began careers in agriculture, forestry, law, science and technology combined. Basic nursing education, on the other hand, welcomes the majority of Nepalese women. In 2007, only fifty people nationwide held a Ph.D. degree in Nepal. Of those fifty, only four were women who had doctorates in science.

“Although participation in their capacity as nurses is quite encouraging, the number of woman doctors is still very small,” said a 2007 report by Nepal advocacy group, Sancharika Samuha.

Nepal is a strip of land stretched between China to the north and India to the south. It is in the highest part of the Himalayas, crowned by Mount Everest, known as Sagarmatha, the head in the skies. The country is divided into five development regions, 14 zones and 75 districts. Nepal’s total population is 28,563,377 (July 2008 CIA World Factbook). Approx 32 percent or 8,812,675 of the population are women aged 15-64. The median age for women is 21.7. Life expectancy for women is 66.7 years.

About 76 percent of the active population is currently engaged in the agriculture sector, which contributes 32.5 percent of the country's GDP. The percentage of women engaged in agriculture, including crop and food production, is higher than that of men. A survey shows that rural women work about 11 hours a day while men work only seven hours a day (UNESCO 2006). Nepal's unemployment rate is very high. Currently, it stands at approx 46 percent unemployment (CIA World Factbook).

The total adult literacy rate in Nepal is 56.5 percent (2007 UNDP). Of this total, only 26 percent of Nepali women are literate (World Bank Country Overview 2009).

“When I came to America (US) I was 18. That’s when I started knowing what career and work is,” said Angela Shrestha, a 23 year old Nepali biology and business major living near Denver, Colorado (U.S.).

Shrestha had a unique experience. She received strong support from her parents and a (male) principal at school in Kathmandu to press forward with her education. She was encouraged to reach her dream. Because of this, she has managed to study in the U.S. She has jumped ahead as she now returns to Nepal to finish a higher education in medicine and administration.

“My dad graduated from college in Nepal, but my mom had more limited schooling,” continued Shrestha. “It completely depends on a family how they want to treat their daughter. I was very blessed with my mom and dad because they never differentiated between me and my brother,” she admitted. “In Nepal, I was captain of my class and later school captain. There are families in Nepal who will not let their daughters go to school, though.”

As in neighboring India, many girls are expected to leave their home upon marriage and join the home of their husband. Because of this, some women are valued in marriage only, or worse as domestic laborers only. A surprising 40 percent of rural Nepali women still marry as young as 15, even though 18 is the legally approved age. Pre-arranged marriages, at the age of ten to twelve years of age for girls, are also, especially in rural areas, not uncommon.

“If Nepal treated boys and girls equally it would be beautiful,” said Anjela Shrestha.

In 1999, U.S. American philanthropist, John Wood, returned to Nepal from a previous eye-opening trip where he realized that 70 percent of all women and 35 percent men in the country were illiterate. He came with eight donkeys loaded to the top with books ready to deliver to schools in rural villages. This was the beginning of an educational initiative called “Room to Read.” Room to Read does not contact villages to build its libraries and schools; villages contact Room to Read.

The work is not easy. Those who are part of the program must be highly motivated. Hundreds of villages have become involved in Room to Read projects by donating labor, land, materials and their own funds. To date, Room to Read has built over 2127 libraries, with an additional 439 projected for 2009. 388 schools have also been built, with 278 scheduled set as additional school building projects for 2009.



Nepali girls learn ICT computer skills during a One Laptop Per Child training program July 2009. Image: OLE Nepal

Girl participants in Room to Read's programs have included 1,250 (2008) girls with a plan to add 350 more girl students before the end of 2009.

“Access to online resources and educational materials can have a life-changing impact on students,” said Room to Read program partner Paul Jacobs, chairman and CEO of Qualcomm. “Not only will they have connectivity that enables access to learning materials and communities for the first time, they will also have the opportunity to gain specialized skills and training.”

Very recently, in October 2009, Room to Read launched a pilot computer lab program at the Amar Jyoti Gaunpharka Secondary School in Pokhara (Kaski district). The school in Pokhara is creating a way for students to instantly reach the world via internet through Skype and Google. This comes with a great opportunity for 350 students, many coming from poor families, to study via the program's 23 computers.

The program in Pokhara is also partnering with OLPC (One Laptop Per Child) Nepal. One Laptop Per Child is the 1995 brainchild of Nicholas Negroponte, who presented the idea with celebration at a January 2005 conference for the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

In May 2007, amid some major design bumps, software debates and discussions about teens and web-surfing fears, Negroponte's vision became a reality, with the help of designers at MIT – Massachusetts Institute of Technology, as children in Uruguay began to learn via laptops.

It was quickly discovered that girls and boys do seek out information on the internet from a gender perspective. Girls looked online for doll's clothes as boys looked for images relating to sex. These and other issues have been discussed and are now being dealt with by teachers and staff alike. Six months ago, OLPC Nepal launched Phase II of an April 2009 pilot initiative (through [OLE Nepal](#)) to bring comprehensive computer learning to 26 secondary schools in over six separate districts in Nepal.

Room to Read and its participating school in Pokhara, along with OLPC Nepal share a commitment that girls and boys will be included in all programs equally.

“I am happy that in this age young kids are getting equipped with new technology. These schools piloting the project have set an example for the rest of the country,” said Nepal’s Ministry of Education and Sports Secretary General, Dipendra Bikram Thapa, recently in an IANS – Indo-Asian News Service interview.

Outside of the computer based learning projects for girls, in Nepal’s political arena, women have been showing clear advances.

Women have been gaining steadily in legislative leadership. In May 2008, out of 575 newly elected representatives, Nepal voted 33.21 percent of the constituent assembly seats to women. Many women hope to reach a 50 percent presence of women in the constituent assembly in the coming years.

“There was a time when only women from a high caste could be MPs. This election has changed that. Now it is up to the 191 women of various castes, groups and ethnicities in the constituent assembly to ensure that the rights of 12.5 million diverse Nepali women are protected,” said Jaypuri Gharti Magar, an elected Maoist woman representative from Rolpa who won by a 22,000 majority vote.