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An education in gender equity

Some Muslim countries are well on track towards gender equity in education and have managed to get girls properly educated

Published on Oct 14, 2014



Pakistan - where this year's co-winner of the Nobel Peace Prize Malala Yousafzai (above), 17, comes from - is one of seven Muslim countries (together with Nigeria) that fare the worst in the world for child school attendance rates. -- PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

By M Niaz Asadullah

MUSLIM countries worldwide have problems with gender equality. They dominate the bottom 10 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report, and none of the 10 most successful countries offering equal opportunities for men and women is Muslim.

Girls lag behind boys in school attendance, making up 54 per cent of the out-of-school child population in the Arab states, a figure that has not changed since 2000.

Of the 10 countries that fare the worst for child school attendance rates, seven are Muslim. These are Nigeria, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Cote d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Niger and Yemen - countries that are often considered hot spots for acts of violence against women and schoolgirls.

The near-fatal attack on Malala Yousafzai by a Taleban gunman in Pakistan two years ago reminds us of the challenging circumstances under which girls attend school in many Muslim countries. The teenager's subsequent fight for education for girls and children worldwide won her - together with India's veteran campaigner to end child labour Kailash Satyarthi - this year's Nobel Peace Prize.

BACKGROUND STORY

The success stories of Indonesia and Malaysia highlight the importance of sustained public investment. And Bangladesh proves that if gender equity is prioritised, rapid progress is possible despite limited economic capacity.

These three countries show that neither poverty nor patriarchy can stand in the way of women's development in Muslim societies.

- See more at: <http://www.straitstimes.com/the-big-story/asia-report/pakistan/story/education-gender-equity-20141014#sthash.CjgAYSZ.dpuf>

An education in gender equity

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The Straits Times

Publication Date : 14-10-2014

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The near-fatal attack on Malala Yousafzai by a Taliban gunman in Pakistan two years ago reminds us of the challenging circumstances under which girls attend school in many Muslim countries.

The teenager's subsequent fight for education for girls and children worldwide won her - together with India's veteran campaigner to end child labour Kailash Satyarthi - this year's Nobel Peace Prize.

Earlier this year, as many as 276 schoolgirls were abducted for similar reasons in the Borno state of Nigeria.

Their captors from the extremist Boko Haram group consider secular education a grave threat to Islam.

Frequent attacks on schools in Nigeria have forced many parents to withdraw their daughters from education.

In some states, schools have even closed down for fear of insurgent attacks.

More recently, a Boko Haram-style armed group warned schools in Pakistan against co-education.

It's little wonder Nigeria and Pakistan together account for a quarter of the world's out-of-school children.

Why this inequity?

In many Muslim countries, women are subjected to patriarchal norms and varying degrees of restriction on economic participation. This reduces the value of girls' education in society.

Some scholars blame culture and religion for this problem. Others say the economic structure of some Muslim countries is not conducive to women's development.

They argue patriarchal norms persist because oil-rich economies limit the role of women in the paid workforce and restrict their participation in politics.

Not all Muslim nations suffer gender inequity in education.

Within the Middle East, a region widely considered to lack progress in girls' education, Turkey is very close to eliminating the gender gap in schooling.

In Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Libya, more girls are in secondary school than boys and there is gender parity in primary enrolment.

Much clearer success stories are emerging outside the Arab world.

In Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority country, equal numbers of girls and boys are in school. In Malaysia, boys lag behind girls at almost all levels of education.

In the Borno state of Nigeria, half of 10-year-old girls remain out of school, a situation Malaysia overcame nearly three decades ago.

A similar pattern is visible in Bangladesh, where girls outnumber boys at primary and secondary levels.

Neither religious orthodoxy nor income poverty could keep girls away from schools in this Muslim-majority nation.

Contrasting achievements

What explains these contrasts within the Muslim world?

The answer lies partly in different policy choices.

Even though public spending on education hasn't increased significantly, the Bangladeshi government prioritised women's development through gender-responsive budgeting, and partnered non-state providers to make up for gaps in public investment.

The government introduced nation-wide scholarship schemes for school-age girls.

NGOs were also encouraged to run development programmes targeting girls and women in rural communities.

The coordinated push for greater educational opportunities for girls was matched by large-scale deployment of rural women as providers of social services as well as micro-entrepreneurs.

This helped to quickly shift the cultural norm in girls' social participation.

The absence of such a "big push" in Pakistan probably explains why it has fallen behind Bangladesh in terms of girls' education.

The Global Gender Gap index ranks Bangladesh (75) much higher than other Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia (127), Iran (130) and Pakistan (135).

Malaysia's approach to girls' education was more conventional.

Inspired by the success of high-performing East Asian economies such as South Korea, Malaysia prioritised education for all.

Long before experiencing double-digit growth rates, Malaysian education spending was much higher than that of other developing countries.

According to the World Bank's World Development Indicators, by 1970, gross female primary school enrolment in Malaysia was nearly three times higher than that of Nigeria.

In Malaysia, democracy, development and equitable growth in the early years reduced the demand for extreme views.

This may explain why female schooling has never been undermined in Malaysia by religious extremism or violence caused by "Islamic" radical groups like Boko Haram.

What is happening in Nigeria is a reflection of long-term deprivation of basic health and education services.

Despite plentiful natural resources, human development was never a priority.

The country's oil money was not used productively to build schools and boost literacy rates.

The absence of a functional democracy, poor governance and widespread corruption may have fuelled demand for a puritanical Islamic regime and allowed extremist groups like Boko Haram to thrive.

Boko Haram has emerged in the poorest part of Nigeria where nearly three-quarters of the population live in abject

poverty.

Nigeria remains one of the few developing countries where more than 20 per cent of primary school-age children will remain out of school by 2015.

The success stories of Indonesia and Malaysia highlight the importance of sustained public investment.

And Bangladesh proves that if gender equity is prioritised, rapid progress is possible despite limited economic capacity.

These three countries show that neither poverty nor patriarchy can stand in the way of women's development in Muslim societies.

The lesson for the rest of the Muslim world is that schooling gender gaps can be narrowed, as long as there is a political consensus on achieving education for all.

A lack of consensus can encourage religious extremism and opposition to inclusive development.

This will further limit the prospect of women's empowerment through education.

- See more at: <http://www.stasiareport.com/the-big-story/asia-report/pakistan/story/education-gender-equity-20141014#sthash.D1CpF6Xr.dpuf>

<http://www.asianewsnet.net/An-education-in-gender-equity-65823.html>