Food For Thought: January
Empowering Women through Literacy

In this issue of Food for Thought:
♀ Monthly Theme
♀ Millennium Development Goals
♀ Discussion Questions
♀ Voices: In Her Own Words

“Women’s literacy improves livelihoods, leads to better child and maternal health, and favors girls’ access to education. In short, newly literate women have a positive ripple effect on all development indicators.”—Irina Bokova, Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

“Literate women are more likely to send their children, especially their girls, to school. By acquiring literacy, women become more economically self-reliant and more actively engaged in their country’s social, political and cultural life.”—United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon

Monthly Theme: Literacy
In war-torn regions short of food and clean water, education hardly seems a priority. After all, what good is literacy to women whose lives are at stake? At the start of the international charity movement after World War I, aid organizations sought to meet basic needs, such as providing food, water, and clothing to those on the edge of life. But as soon as those aid organizations pulled out of the region, the people continued to starve. Now we know education, particularly literacy, provides a sustainable means of fighting poverty. Rather than offering a temporary fix, providing literacy to impoverished populations helps people to help themselves.

What is Literacy? The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization defines literacy as the "ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society."
United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon recently noted the transformative effect on both a family and the wider community when a woman is literate: “Every literate woman marks a victory over poverty.”

Global Literacy Rates
According to UN analysis there are close to four billion literate people world wide and 776 million people lack minimum literacy skills. One in five adults in the world are illiterate; 75 million children don’t attend school and many more attend irregularly. Almost 35 countries have a literacy rate of less than 50% and a population of more than 10 million people who are illiterate. 85% percent of the world’s illiterate population dwell in those 35 countries; two-thirds of the world’s illiterate are women.

[Map of global literacy rates]

Literacy and Human Trafficking
Education and literacy is an important step to both the prevention of sex trafficking and the rehabilitation of victims. As depicted in the documentary Born into Brothels, girls born into red light districts receive an opportunity to escape a future of prostitution when they are provided with an education. Literacy and skills training helps girls to find jobs elsewhere. NGOs which prevent human trafficking typically incorporate literacy into their programs: for example, one organization in Guatemala calls itself Leer es poder, meaning “reading is power.” DFW’s featured program in August, Somaly Mam, offers literacy as part of its rehabilitation process for victims of sex trafficking.
**Literacy and Infant Mortality**

Studies have confirmed the strong correlation between infant mortality and the illiteracy of women. On the other hand, literacy among women is associated with low infant mortality and better health of children. Infant mortality in affluent societies averages 8 per thousand live births; in the 50 poorest countries it averages 95 per thousand—nearly 12 times as high. Studies show higher female literacy has also been linked to decreased risk in the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS. These findings indicate that in less-developed countries such as India and Afghanistan, babies born to illiterate mothers have less of a chance of surviving.

**Literacy: The Key to Sustainable Livelihoods**

In India, there is the literacy rate for men is 73% and the literacy rate for women stands at 48%. While an estimated 35% of Indians are illiterate, Jharkhand is one of seven states in India with a very high illiteracy rate. The literacy rate for Jharkhand is 54.13%; female literacy rate is 39.38%. In other words, the majority of women—more than 60%—in Jharkhand are illiterate.

Matrichaya, our featured program, which serves women in Jharkhand, notes that in their baseline surveys women are in most need of basic education. Matrichaya provides literacy programs to women and girls in Jharkhand, along with health care, legal awareness, and skills training, including beauty parlor assistant, fashion-designing assistant, food processing, mushroom cultivation, and gardening and nursery raising. Basic literacy training precedes and amplifies other services.

As we have seen, literacy is correlated with infant mortality, and helps prevent human trafficking. Literacy is also linked to food security and improved health of women and their families. In fact, literacy touches on all “development indicators” as the United Nations states. The political, cultural, economical and social lives of women—and men—improve when more women are educated.
United Nations Millennium Development Goals

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 three MDGs:

**Goal 2: Achieve Universal Education**

This goal seeks to ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling. The UN recognizes that Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia are home to the vast majority of children out of school, and that inequality thwarts progress toward universal education.

**Goal 3: Promote Gender Equality & Empower Women**

The UN hopes to use education as a means for empowering women and has identified several ways in which a gender disparity in education has hindered women's success. The UN website points out that poverty is a major barrier to education, especially among older girls.

**Goal 5: Improve Maternal Health**

The UN recognizes that most maternal deaths could be avoided. Giving birth is especially risky in Southern Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, where skilled care is lacking. Poverty and a lack of education also lead to high adolescent birth risks, and use of contraception is lowest among the poorest women and those with no education.

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A Dozen Reasons Why Literacy, Basic Education and Effective Teaching are Essential and Just

*From the World Literacy Initiative, Inc.*

1. **Achieving Human Rights.** Education and Literacy are fundamental Human Rights (The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26 - Education)
2. **Promoting Equality.** Literacy and education promotes gender equality.
3. **Reducing Poverty.** Literacy and education are essential first steps of nearly all initiatives to reduce and eliminate global poverty.
4. **Reducing Preventable Deaths.** Female literacy and education – reduce child and maternal mortality.
5. **Promotes Good Governance and Individual Freedoms.** Literacy and education makes tyrannical forms of government less likely and good governance and the expression of individual freedoms more achievable.
6. **Fights the Oppression of Certain Peoples.** Literacy and education makes the oppression of certain peoples less possible and less enduring while promoting the expression of individual freedoms more robust and definitive.
7. **Promotes Childhood Health.** Female literacy and education – improve child nutrition and health.
8. **Fosters the Management of Parenthood.** Female literacy and education – lower fertility rates.
9. **Protects Girls from Abuse, Exploitation and Sexually Transmitted Disease.** Female literacy and education – protect girls from abuse, exploitation, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.
10. **Reduces Inhumane Injustices in School.** The greatest form of preventable injustice in education is the failure to prepare adequately a child for the subsequent grade and effective teaching technology removes this barrier to a young child's achieving their potential.
11. **Promotes the Achievement of Millennium Development Goals.** Universal Primary Education (UPE) is an MDG.
Questions for Discussion:
1. This issue of Food for Thought discusses how women’s literacy affects human trafficking and infant mortality. In what other circumstances could literacy help to fight poverty and gender inequality?

2. Education of women in Western countries, particularly in the U.S., has exploded in growth, and since 1980 women have increasingly outnumbered men on college campuses. Why do you think this is so? And what does this say about women and literacy in the developing world?

3. World illiteracy as a proportion of world population was halved between 1970 and 2005. In 1950, only 50% of the world could read and write, and by 2030 some optimistic estimates say up to 90% will have these abilities. How might a women’s literacy rate of 90% change the world?

4. Some studies suggest that women work longer hours and expend more energy than men. In addition, while women in many cultures get a disproportionately small share of household food, they may expend a larger proportion of household energy. How can availability of schooling and literacy address such traditional notions about the sexual division of labor? What traditions, customs and obstacles prevent or impede women’s literacy?

Voices

This is a picture of Chinta who has been involved with Matrichaya since its inception. She and her daughter Tina whose husband abandoned her, were trained in vocational skills by Matrichaya and are now economically independent. Tina’s child attends the Matrichaya school and is one of the smartest kids in class. This is what she had to say, translated from Hindi:

"Matrichaya with the support of DFW has helped three generations in my family live better today and hope for a future of our dreams. My daughter and I have acquired skills to support ourselves and my grandchild is getting the precious gift of literacy."

Chinta and daughter Tina with grandson

Chinta

Mindy Friddle Yesterday, 7:41 PM
Majwoon Nisha
Majwoon is the member of Self Help Group ‘Shabnam’ in Chandwey, Kanke Road, Ranchi. She is a very poor women who comes from a minority community and was struggling for livelihood of her family. Her husband is handicapped and fully depends on his wife Majwoon Nisha. She came to Chanchala Mishra, President of Matrichaya for some financial help. She was convinced on reasoning of Matrichaya’s President that giving her money would not solve her problems and that job-oriented vocational training is what she needed. A training of Bamboo handicraft was arranged by Matrichaya with the support of ‘DINING FOR WOMEN’ USA. Majwoon took the training and now she has become a role model for her community. She says:

“I never thought that I could stand on my feet. God gave me the strength and courage to join the work force and Matrichaya showed me the way. After getting vocational training in bamboo crafting now I am making bamboo products like-table lamps,bamboo-curtains,letter-box,wall-hanging etc. And selling it through a retail selling counter at AQUA WORLD-amusement place in Ranchi. Now I am in a position to earn to meet my day to day needs and don’t have to be dependent on charity. I have full faith on myself and also on the help of Matrichaya. I will continue to make various products of bamboo crafting and will be able to support my family.”

Zahida Khatoon
Zahida is a poor Muslim women with six children. Her husband is a Rickshaw puller and all family members depend on his earning. He hardly gets Rs. 70-80 per day. Zahida joined Self Help Group “Shabnam”under Matrichaya.

She states:

“I was simply doing house work and living on the earning of my husband. Our income was so low that it was difficult to arrange for food for my children every day. Then I joined the self help group and got training of bamboo crafting. Now I am making various kinds of bamboo items and selling through “Matrichaya”. The vocational training has become a boon for my family and now I am in position to provide basic need of my children. My husband is also helping me for finishing the crafts. Raw materials are provided by Matrichaya and I make the goods against order I am very much thankful to Matrichaya who has given me the light of path of self help group.

Ruby
Ruby is a poor woman who survives with her children and husband who is a auto driver. Ruby painfully narrates:

“I belongs to a poor family and with the earning of my husband we were hardly able to arrange for daily meals. On advice of Zahida I met the President of Matrichaya who advised me to attend a vocational training on food processing arranged by MATRICHAYA. I learned the skills of making sauces,jam,jelly, pickles etc. Now I am making all these items and selling it and earning enough to meet our daily need. My daughter Muskan is also getting free education in Matrichaya
Primary school. Our lives have changed and all our family members are thankful to matrichaya that showed us the way of survival and also gave the strength to be self dependent.”

Parwati Munda
Parwati Munda lives at Dekitola village of Kankeblock, Ranchi. It is 15 KM far away from capital of Jharkhand, Ranchi and there are no facilities like roads, electricity, drinking water and even items like salt, kerosene oil, cooking oil etc.

“The people of Dekitola had to go to 15 km to meet our basic requirements. I come to know that Matrichaya is a voluntary organization that is rendering services for upliftment of poor tribal women. I met President of Matrichaya. She showed her affection and listened to our problem peacefully and in no time she fixed up a date to visit my village. She come and met with villagers. On the same day on her guidance we formed a self help group and started weekly meeting and each member saved 40 Rs. On seeing our difficulty, Matrichaya opened a Grocery Shop for us. Shop was inaugurated by a Member of the Legislative Assembly of Kanke constituency. President of Matrichaya requested the M. L. A. who was the chief guest to provide water, electricity, road and he has agreed to fulfill our demands. We are very grateful to Matrichaya for helping us and doing such noble work”.

Parwati says that now they meet their daily needs through this Matrichaya grocery shop which was opened with help of funds provided by Dining for Women and there is also the light of hope to get water, road and electricity facilities in their community.

Sources:
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