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India, Women's Education

India: Solving hunger through women's education

Out of all the lies we're told growing up, the statement that there's an easy solution to everything has to be the second most detrimental one. Sometimes problems don't have an easy solution. Sometimes they cannot be fixed immediately. And sometimes they need to be addressed from multiple angles. World hunger is one such problem. An enormous issue with devastating impacts, it is easy to get lost in the grand scheme of things and forget its impact on the individual. However, an encounter I had years ago with a girl my age in India has ensured I'll never forget its individual impact and is the reason I'm applying to help solve world hunger today.

I'm the daughter of two Indian immigrants. Both my parents were born and raised in India, and as such, I go back there every year. I speak both Hindi and English and part of me belongs in India too. Every time I go, I see its beauty, diversity, and vivaciousness, but I also see the stark class division, corruption and entrenched gender structures. The divide between the rich and poor in India is almost unimaginable to comprehend, and its effects are twofold if you are a woman. A memory always stands out to me: my family and I picking up food from a restaurant when I was seven years old. On our way out, a girl about my age now (17) started following us on our long way back to the car. She was barefoot, in ragged clothes, and her hair was matted. She was tailing us with a desperation that was heartbreaking. She kept begging my Dad, on the brink of tears, "Uncle, please, I haven't eaten in days. Please give me something. Anything. I haven't had a bite of food in days." She repeated this for what felt like miles as we walked. My dad finally turned around and took out his wallet, pressing a handful of coins into her hand, saying, "Go my child, get yourself something to eat". She thanked him with reverence and turned back clutching the money in one hand, running to a street vendor. That interaction has stayed with me for years. I often wonder if she's hungry now, or if she's even alive. It's because of her that today I'll focus on a solution geared towards solving hunger in India.

India is a democracy with a rich culture--beliefs mingling with barriers depending on where you live. According to the world population review, India's population is 1,400,118,184. However, according to the Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, about 72.18% of the population lives in rural areas. The life of a family in a rural part of India compared to an urban part of India is as different as night and day. While the total fertility rate of India is 2.0 ("tfr: India's fertility rate has dipped below replacement level"), it's estimated that over 15 million women in rural parts of India have given birth to seven or more kids (Saha). Often, this is because access to healthcare, education, and a life outside marriage is limited due to patriarchal, joint family structures.

Even though only 51.09% of India's land is under cultivation ("Land use map of India: National Institute of Hydrology"), rural families' occupations tend to be agrarian ("Features of a Rural Family in India (3 Features)"). Even if nutritious food could be accessed in these parts, clean water to cook it with is unavailable. According to Global Citizen, over 63 million people in rural India don't have access to clean drinking water. And over 182.9 million people in India don't have access to food ("Hunger in India"). This is a problem of great magnitude but simply funneling in food won't create lasting change. One underrepresented structure that contributes to world hunger, particularly in rural India, is the lack of good education systems—particularly its accessibility for girls and women.

Every year in India, more than 23 million girls drop out of school (Vallon). This is often because of patriarchal structures that don't factor in the importance of education for girls. Girls usually end up dropping out and doing unpaid labor around the house and for their family. Then they get married (usually arranged and sometimes with dowry), have children, and the cycle starts again. Even though the custom of dowry has been illegal for decades, the practice stubbornly continues: a gendered structure where families have to save money for their daughter's marriage and are less likely to send her to school. In fact, as high as 47% of girls end up being married by the time they are eighteen—severely hampering their educational futures, especially if they have children early (Simon). Other barriers often include lack of access to schools, lack of sanitary facilities, and poverty. All of these barriers, combined with women's education being seen as unimportant, have prevented too many girls from obtaining an education.

Women's education is intricately linked to hunger and malnutrition. In fact, a UN Report--the Women's Education Key to Food Security report--identifies women's education as the "single most important determinant of food security". According to this report, women are more than 30% of the world's food producers but face structural barriers, whether that be lack of education, few property ownership rights, or limited access to finances. If more women were to gain an education, household spending on nutrition would increase, children's health would improve and, with education, social structures could be designed to include women ("UN Report: Women's Education Key to Food Security."). Without women's education, efforts to solve world hunger will be incomplete.

Thus, we must focus on increasing access to education for women. In India, in particular, access to education is increasing, but there is still much progress to be made. Of course it is important to note that access to education differs across the country. In the Indian state of Kerala, women's literacy rates are 92% (Prasad), which is higher than some literacy rates in U.S. states. Access to education is most limited in the states of North and West India, particularly Rajasthan. The Indian Federal government started the project Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao which translates to "save the girl, educate the girl". This project not only aims to improve access to education for women but also address the issue of female feticide. It has increased construction of girls' toilets in schools, and increased female enrollment in secondary schools from 77.45% to 81.32% ("Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao"). In the Indian state of Jharkhand, school uniforms, textbooks and notebooks are aiming to be distributed freely for girls in grades age 9-12 (Roy). Other initiatives that are specific to individual states are occurring too. However, gaps continue to exist that must

be addressed. One solution would be to provide monetary incentives for girls to continue their education. This would take into account the financial constraints that exist and be an incentive for families to send their girls to school, instead of prioritizing their sons. The Indian State of Uttar Pradesh aims to do this by awarding 30,000 rupees to female students who have outstanding state exam scores (Roy, Shweta), but I would aim to have all Indian states implement a policy like this, funded by state governments. The downside of this solution though is that students who tend to do the best on exams are also the students who usually have the most resources, which means they don't face financial barriers. Nevertheless, money is always an important, motivating factor.

Money is another reason why everyone should support women's education. Educating women helps a country's economy. An educated woman has a greater probability of participating in the formal economy, which would logically increase her household income. Alison Gutterman, a Forbes contributor, cites a UNESCO report explaining that each year a country's schooling average (years of school) increases, economic growth in the long term increases by 3.7%. She also cites the World Bank, saying that even one year of secondary school can equal an increase in a girl's salary by 25% when she is older. If a woman earns more, her children will have the capacity to earn more, which increases their standard of living and in turn, makes the economy better. After all, citizens with more money consistently can pour that money into the market, a key tenant in a thriving economy. The idea that women's education can improve the economy should be a great motivator in finding more solutions.

Another solution is to build more schools in rural areas so education can be easily accessible. Right now, 1 in 40 schools in India take place in inadequate facilities such as open air tents because insufficient funds are allocated to rural areas in India (Njoroge). Building more schools in rural areas could be attached to the Beti Bachao, Beti padhao education campaign which is already funded by the Indian government. Schools in rural areas would likely need to be adjusted to have favorable conditions (such as half days, etc.) so kids could come more easily and not neglect whatever duties they may have in an agrarian lifestyle. Virtual learning could also increase access to education since oftentimes it is hard to get teachers out to rural areas. In addition, the building of more toilets and sanitation facilities in rural schools, which is already being done by this campaign, would remove health barriers for girls in receiving an education.

Finally, solutions regarding the social climate of rural India must be addressed as well. Schools can exist, but families and societies must want the education of girls. Girls cannot be trapped in a system of early marriage and motherhood; instead they need to have the feasible option of education. The first aspect that can be addressed here is to more effectively eliminate the practice of dowry. Though dowry is illegal, it's a practice that still occurs and requires families to save money for their daughter's marriage instead of her education. If dowry were more effectively policed, families could potentially save that money to invest in their daughters' education. This solution would be implemented in part by the Indian government and by the Indian police. Further, one of the most effective measures to decrease dowry practices would be to increase women's education. This would equip women with a life outside marriage and financial means if they so choose, which in turn decreases the "burden" of a daughter, so it would be a positive feedback mechanism. This unique, empowering feature of education makes it critical to

effectively eliminating dowry as a practice. Second, increasing access to contraception and sexual education would also increase women's education. According to the Women's Institute for Policy Research, access to birth control pills increased both primary and secondary education rates for women. They also pointed out that delaying the birth of children meant that women instead focused on their education. Being able to more effectively control bearing children would also mean that women could choose to have fewer children, especially in rural India. It's also been shown that having fewer children is linked to decreasing world hunger, especially in developing countries. Providing access to contraception could be done by NGOs. In fact, The Bill and Melinda Gates foundation is already involved in India and has done work regarding contraceptives and family planning. In conjunction with the Indian government, they have bolstered maternal health infrastructure and widened the range of available contraceptives ("Progress in health and development in Uttar Pradesh"). However, using the government is necessary too and government led family planning initiatives have been done before. The government of Bangladesh has implemented family planning programs with great success, the average Bangladeshi woman only bearing 2.3 children (Mohammed). Given that Bangladesh and India are neighbors, they share similar cultural environments and barriers, so a similar program would likely have success in India too. Family planning, access to contraceptives, and minimizing dowry practices would all let girls and women focus on getting an education.

While the second biggest lie we're told is that there is a simple solution to all problems, the biggest lie we're told is that young people just can't make a difference. We're told that we aren't old enough to know or care about problems facing the real world until we're older. This is obviously false, but so many young people fall into this trap of believing that they don't have the power to make a difference. The truth is that we can. Every young girl in India who's working hard to get an education is making a difference. Every youth non-profit organization that's dedicated to improving the lives of women around the world is making a difference. And the youth participating in the Iowa Youth Institute are making a difference too. Even though this paper might not translate to concrete policies implemented, the awareness that can be raised will still make a difference. The more people who are aware of how widespread world hunger is, the more people there are to solve it. And while there's no easy way to do so, examining all the different angles, such as women's education, is a way to start investing in a holistic solution.

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