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Literacy has empowering effect on women, UN officials say



Saptagram, women's education movement in Bangladesh

8 September 2010 – Top United Nations officials called today for more funding and advocacy to improve literacy rates among the world's women, who comprise two out of every three adults who cannot read or write.

In a [message](#) marking International Literacy Day, which is observed today, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stressed the transformative effect on both a family and the wider community when a woman is literate.

"Literate women are more likely to send their children, especially their girls, to school," he said. "By acquiring literacy, women become more economically self-reliant and more actively engaged in their country's social, political and cultural life. All evidence shows that investment in literacy for women yields high development dividends."

Mr. Ban urged governments, donors, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other groups to do more to make literacy accessible to women everywhere, particularly those living in vulnerable or isolated communities.

"Every literate woman marks a victory over poverty," he noted, calling for "increasing funding and sustained advocacy for quality literacy programmes that empower women and ensure that girls and boys at primary and secondary level do not become a new generation of young illiterates."

While global illiteracy rates are falling, it is estimated that about one in every six adults still cannot read or write.

Irina Bokova, the Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)), said in her message that investing in women's literacy carries very high returns.

"It improves livelihoods, leads to better child and maternal health, and favours girls' access to education," she stated. "In short, newly literate women have a positive ripple effect on all development indicators."

Ms. Bokova will give the keynote address at an international conference at UN Headquarters in New York today that will be opened by former United States First Lady Laura Bush, who is Honorary Ambassador for the UN Literacy Decade ([UNLD](#)).

Today UNESCO is launching a new Knowledge and Innovations Network for Literacy. Created with support from Verizon Foundation and Microsoft, the network is a virtual workplace where literacy researchers and practitioners can link up, share knowledge and debate literacy topics on line.

The agency is also handing out its annual International Literacy Prizes, awarding laurels to grass-roots projects in Cape Verde, Colombia, Egypt, Germany, Malawi and Nepal that are focused on women's empowerment through literacy.

Among the winners is the Non-Formal Education Centre in Nepal, which plays a vital role in a country where some 6.4 million men and women still cannot read and write, with women making up close to three quarters of this figure.

"In Nepal, many women live in deep poverty due to a lack of access to basic reading and writing skills," noted UNESCO Representative Axel Plathe. The agency is helping the Government and other partners to promote literacy, including by strengthening capacities to provide literacy programmes.

Meanwhile, UNESCO and the UN Human Settlements Programme ([UN-HABITAT](#)) are working together to assist the Afghan Government reach its goal of reducing illiteracy by 50 per cent by 2015.

In a joint statement, the two agencies noted that improving Afghanistan's literacy is vital for the country, which has a 26 per cent literacy rate among people over the age of 15, and only 12 per cent among girls and women over 15.

UNESCO's Enhancement of Literacy in Afghanistan Programme aims at providing quality literacy education to 600,000 beneficiaries, 60 per cent of them women, in 18 of the country's 34 provinces by 2013, while UN-HABITAT is implementing the Learning for Community Empowerment Programme, which combines literacy, community banking and productive skills training for more than 250,000 people, 60 per cent of them women, in 20 provinces.

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