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Women's Education in Mountainous Regions

Nearly a billion people will enter the 21st century unable to read a book or sign their names. Two thirds of them are women (Millennium). Education, or lack of, is a rising problem in the 21st century, especially for women in mountainous regions of the world. Many women cannot get an education due to their cultural circumstances, increasing poverty, unsafe environments, and the rural terrain.

In many cultures, an education is not seen as beneficial for women because their primary role is to be a mother. "(They) believe that there is little point in paying for a girl's education, as they are destined only for a life as a mother, and not a career where they could make money" (Faisal). In the Islamic religion at age four, girls start to assume household tasks and take care of their siblings. By age ten, most could replace their own mothers (Brazier). While they are learning the trade of a homemaker, their brothers go off to school. At age fourteen, most girls are married and starting their own homes (Colclough). An education has now passed them by, and with forty-nine percent of adults in third-world countries illiterate ("SIL International"), many will never know what they are missing.

As an education is not seen as beneficial, it is not wanted either. Greg Mortenson, an American trying to build schools in rural Afghanistan and Pakistan, ran into this "mind-set" frequently. When he asked city and tribal leaders if he could build schools in

their areas, they thought he was a “bad spirit” trying to invade their land. They would issue *fatwas*, an Islamic “restraining order”, against him and tell him never to come back. Women in their culture were not seen as needing an education and had not received one for hundreds of years, so why would they need a school? Culture is such a ruling guide in mountainous regions that new ideas are often never excepted (Mortenson).

In some cultures, women learn traditional skills, instead of a regular education. Due to the different environments, many receive an education that fits their culture and lifestyle. For example, in the rural back country of central Africa, women are taught how to make natural medicines and herd animals. A large part of their studies is spent learning indigenous dances and folktales. They are not taught by certified teachers, but by tribal leaders or the elderly. Most will never learn Calculus or take a computer class. Although they do not receive an education like ours, they are learning the ways of their culture. They may not be our “book” smart, but they have the “street” smarts to survive (Marah 015-20).

Poverty in their nation, town, and family is a common reason why girls do not get an education in mountainous regions. These area’s governments do not have the funds to provide a wholesome education. “Since the mid-eighties, factors like falling prices on the world market, marketing difficulties, high debts, but also growing military Expenditures...have forced many countries to drastically reduce state expenditure in the...educational system. On an average, 'Third World' countries spent less than U.S.\$1 in the beginning of the nineties per pupil and per year on learning material (in industrialized countries: U.S.\$100-200)” (Nestvogal).

The parents of girls cannot even come close to paying for the deficit left by the national government. In Africa, 20% of men and 25% of women are unemployed ("World and Regional Unemployment Rates"). Money is spent on survival instead of education. If there is money, it is often spent on educating sons instead of daughters. David Bloom claims, "Girls are seen as relatively transitory assets — not worthy of long-term investment — as they leave their parents' household upon marriage...which means that boys' schooling is inevitably seen as a better investment." These countries do not always follow the rule "ladies first".

An example of poverty's affect on education is found in, *The Diary of Ma Yan: the Struggles and Hopes of a Chinese Schoolgirl*. In this book, Ma Yan's mother tells her that she cannot continue going to school. Her father is out of work and they cannot pay the tuition for her and her brothers. They can barely afford to put food on the table. Yan stops going to school, but her brothers continue. They need to be able to support their future families, but she does not. Ma Yan later returned to school, but only because her mother obtained a third job. By this time, she was behind in her studies and was in a lower class than other girls her age. Without sufficient funds, education for all women will never become a reality (Yan).

Due to lack of safety because of wars, verbal comments, and physical abuse many girls in mountainous regions are deterred from getting an education. Wars have a major effect because "civil wars are likely to destroy a state's system of education through the loss of infrastructure and personnel" (Thyne). The already few schoolhouses are destroyed. Teachers go off to war, leaving students to gain their own knowledge. The money that used to be spent on education is channeled into paying for the war (Thyne).

With already barely any money set aside for education, there is nothing left. Chris Brazier claims that “less than one percent of what the world spent every year on weapons was needed to put every child into school by the year 2000 and yet it didn’t happen”.

Greg Mortenson, author and star of the book *Three Cups of Tea*, is one of many people trying to provide an education to girls in war-torn countries. Instead of spending much needed money on school houses and supplies, he ends up providing food and shelter to refugees of war. He stated, “If we truly want a legacy of peace for our children, we need to understand (wars) will ultimately be won with books, not with bombs”, about the conflicts in Pakistan and Afghanistan (Mortenson). When people are consumed by their lack of physical necessities, education is not pursued. Not only do wars tear apart the present, they massacre the future.

Because it is not customary for women to receive an education, many are verbally abused through mocking and teasing. Boys in their classes will throw rocks at them on their way to school. Some will tell them to get back to their homes where they belong. Teachers often ridicule girls, telling them they are trying to become equal with men. Because of verbal abuse, many parents choose not to send their daughters to school (Bloom).

Physical abuse is also a major deterrent on education. Just recently, in November of 2009, it was discovered that 12, 260 girls were physically abused by teachers in the country of Kenya. Due to the fear of being punished for speaking up about the abuse, many girls and their families did not report it. And if the abuse was reported, many teachers were never prosecuted. Even with the extensive attention these abusive situations are receiving today, there are not the court systems in place to do justice to the

problem (Siring). Lack of safety is a major concern for women in third world countries and many will never have the opportunity to get an education because of it.

If mountainous regions are culturally excepting to education, have sufficient funds, and are not abusive, they still have one major roadblock standing in the way of women receiving an education-the location the women live in. Mountainous regions are dominated by rural and often treacherous landscapes. Many cities cannot be entered without climbing steep, brutal mountain passes by car, animal, or foot. The weather is often versatile and you can only travel there during the space of a few months. When schools are built, they can often be obliterated by snow, rain, wind, or sandstorms. It is hard to find needed supplies, which if shipped in can take months. The effort of bringing supplies up to these rural areas is almost impossible, not to mention tedious, back-breaking work.

For example, in trying to build his first school in north-eastern Pakistan in the city of Korphe, American Greg Mortenson was faced first-hand with both the bruttle terrain and weather. He first had to buy supplies in Skardu, a town one hundred miles away from Korphe. He then slowly carted the building materials by truck eighty-eight miles, but the trucks were stopped by mud slides brought on by the soon-approaching winter months. Mortenson was stopped just short of his destination. But the people of Korphe wanted a school bad enough that all able-bodied men were sent down to carry the supplies. With the beams upon their backs, they carried these and all the other building material up eighteen miles of steep slopes to their village. The winter weather took control before the school could be completed and was not finished until the following spring (Mortenson).

If schools are to be built in mountainous terrains, better methods will be needed to supply and build schools so that they will be able to withstand the harsh climates.

Nelson Mandela proclaimed: “Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world.” We cannot change the world until all women are educated. There are many roadblocks in the way: cultural differences, lack of funds and safety, and harsh environments. These obstacles can be overcome and by educating all women, many women’s lives in the present and future will be blessed.

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