

# AGENTS OF CHANGE: ON INVESTING IN WOMEN'S EDUCATION

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

If the evidence is clear and present, then not acting on it would be a chilling demonstration of inability and inefficiency, and the lack of will to bring about change. There should be no doubt that educating a woman serves a larger ameliorative purpose. The recently released Health Ministry survey that showed a direct correlation between the nutritional status of children and their mothers' education is a further stroke for the case of women's education. The Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey, which studied 1.2 lakh children between 2016-18, measured diet diversity, meal frequency and minimum acceptable diet as the three core indicators of nutritional deficiency among infants and young children. It demonstrated that with higher levels of schooling for a mother, her children received better diets. On two counts, meal diversity and minimum acceptable diet, and in terms of bolstering food with micro nutrients, the children of mothers with better education did well. The data is revelatory: Only 11.4% of children of mothers with no schooling received adequately diverse meals, while 31.8% whose mothers finished Class XII received diverse meals. While 9.6% of children whose mothers had finished schooling got minimum acceptable diets, only 3.9% of children whose mothers had zero schooling got such a diet.

Development economists have long studied the role that education of girls plays in enabling them to emerge as agents of change. Empirical work in recent years, Nobel laureate Amartya Sen reasons, has clearly shown how the relative aspect and regard for women's well being is strongly influenced by women's literacy and educated participation in decisions within and outside the family. In the late 1990s, Tamil Nadu along with the Danish International Development Agency, launched a mass rural literacy project in Dharmapuri, then considered backward, riding largely on local leaders, most of them women. Evaluation showed overall salubrious effects on the community within a short while. Implemented largely through the employ of the local arts, one measure of success, as recorded then, was an increased outpatient attendance in primary health centres. There is a body of compelling evidence for the government to focus on improving female literacy. In Census 2011, the female literacy rate was 65.46%, much lower than for males, at 82.14%. States such as Kerala with a high literacy rate (male and female) also sit at the top of the table on development indicators. As former American First Lady Michelle Obama said, "Because we know that when girls are educated, their countries become stronger and more prosperous." No other task can assume greater urgency for a nation striving to improve its performance on all fronts.

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