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### The source of illiteracy



Illiteracy in younger children is particularly prevalent among females

By **Waleed Khalil Rasromani**

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CAIRO: Egypt ranks alongside Yemen, Morocco, Sudan, Mauritania and Iraq as one of the least literate countries in the Arab world. Over a third of the population in these countries cannot read or write, with the illiteracy rate in Egypt closer to one-half.

The economic impact of the absence of this fundamental skill amongst a large segment of the population is obvious. An inability to read not only limits an individual's intellectual potential, it makes basic engagement in society a challenge. A person who cannot read will have difficulty, for example, applying for an identity card and thus obtaining essential government services.

In light of such staggering statistics, UNESCO conducted a study of the cause of illiteracy in the six mentioned countries. Laila Iskandar Kamel, an education expert and managing director of CID, a Cairo-based consulting and communications firm, participated in the study and explains its findings to The Daily Star Egypt.

The factors contributing to illiteracy were found to be common in all six countries. The majority of illiteracy occurs in rural areas amongst underprivileged women between the ages of 15 and 45; however, a substantial number of children under 15 years old are also illiterate. This is especially prevalent amongst girls, who frequently do not attend school at all or enroll and drop out due to a discouraging environment.

The absence of separate toilets for girls in some schools is a simple example of an environment that excludes females from consideration. Other actions that discourage attendance include physical and verbal abuse, as well as more subtle methods.

It is a common practice in a crowded classroom, I've seen this in many villages in Egypt, where they have girls sitting in the back of the classroom, says Kamel. Or when the teacher calls on kids to answer questions, he never calls on the girls. And when there are sports activities, they never involve the girls.

Many parents themselves also choose not to send their female children to school. This is common in Yemen, where there is little cultural appreciation for the importance of educating women. Elsewhere, parents frequently deem that the time their children spend in school is not worthwhile. Parents felt that they were investing in a useless endeavor, explains Kamel, and since it costs poor parents money to send kids to school, if you're investing in something that's useless, you pull them out.

While education is tuition-free in Egypt, there are a number of other costs that parents will consider before sending their children to school; these include the direct costs of purchasing uniforms and books. Also, students generally require additional private tutorials due to overcrowded classrooms, which typically contain up to 70 children.

There is also an opportunity cost of educating children. Kids that are sent to school are pulled out of work, says Kamel. No child in a poor village has the luxury just to go to school. They have other things to do at home, or in the fields, or in the workshops in urban areas. Children are a source of income in this economy, so it's an opportunity cost. Parents that send their kids to school really sacrifice.

Egypt has some 2 million underage workers despite a law against child labor. Labor inspectors have historically tried to monitor employers to prevent working children, but enforcement has proven difficult.

They're very clever at hiding kids, says Kamel, and parents want to keep their kids working, so there is a complicity between the employer and parents. The state can't beat that complicity.

Meanwhile, working children need some form of education. The poverty cycle will be perpetuated if these kids don't get an education while working, explains Kamel, because research does indicate that illiterate parents will not educate their kids.



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This cycle can only be broken if parents, employers and the government work together to coordinate instruction for working children. Child labor is a transitional phase, says Kamel. We're hoping that it will be phased out in the next generation. But while these kids are working, rather than deny the reality, let's work with it and do something constructive to improve the situation of these working children.

Non-governmental organizations (NGO) are therefore collaborating with employers for the latter to release child workers for one hour each day to attend literacy classes. This also allows NGOs to inspect work conditions.

Politically, however, the issue of illiteracy remains low on government policy agendas. If you compare where the issue of literacy is versus economic development, says Kamel, you don't hear ministers and high political figures talk about literacy; it's not there. They're not yet linking the issue of literacy with economic development. It's as if our high-tech industries can zoom at a fast pace and leave the rest of the country behind. There's still not a full-blown recognition of how illiteracy drags a country down.



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