Social inclusion. Women's empowerment. Poverty reduction. Participatory government. Sustainable development. These are important goals in Nepal, but to achieve them, one must take a closer look at the root causes of obstacles standing in their way. One large, common obstacle is an overwhelming lack of basic literacy. According to UN data, just 49 percent of Nepal's population is literate. Only 35 percent of Nepal's women are literate in comparison to 63 percent of men. And only 24 percent of Dalits are literate as compared to 56 percent of upper castes.

This year's theme for International Literacy Day, celebrated last Friday, was "Literacy Sustains Development." This is especially relevant within the current context of Nepal as this slogan highlights that literacy not only impacts individual development, but it is a crucial element for achieving change at all levels of society -- in economic growth, poverty reduction, and democratic governance. First Lady Laura Bush, who serves as the Honorary Ambassador for the United Nations Literacy Decade, underscored the importance of this issue on Monday, when she hosted the White House Conference on Global Literacy. This conference builds on her own personal commitment and expertise as an educator, especially given her commitment to literacy for young girls and women in the developing world. The conference focused on important areas including Literacy for Health and Literacy for Economic Self-Sufficiency, visions that are complemented by USAID-supported programs in Nepal.

USAID/Nepal, part of the U.S. Mission to Nepal, has supported literacy programs in the country since 1954; through these programs, an estimated 1.2 million Nepalis have become literate. These programs work to strengthen the social roles of Nepali women and girls through USAID/Nepal-funded literacy education together with Health, Agriculture, Livelihood, Legal rights and Community Learning Centers.

For 15-year-old Sawara in Banke, literacy opened the door to getting her citizenship and enrolling in school. In her rural district, 58 percent of adolescent girls are illiterate. By participating in a USAID-funded program to gain basic literacy, Sawara realized the importance of gaining her citizenship as well as learning about health and family planning issues, including HIV/AIDS awareness, risks of illegal trafficking in persons, and the risks of early marriage. Further, the instructor facilitated a conversation with her father who then allowed her to get her birth registration, which gave his daughter basic citizenship rights, including the right to officially enrol in school.

One of USAID/Nepal's most successful programs links literacy and economic empowerment for women. Since 2003, more than 11,000 women in two conflict affected districts of Nepal have achieved basic literacy and the skills to form and successfully manage savings and credit groups. The program helps women identify appropriate and profitable work, and provides them loans. Through this program, for example, 31-year old Deepa borrowed about $100 from her local savings and credit group and combined it with a $50 loan from her family to start a tea and grocery shop. Her shop now earns profits worth some $50 per month, giving Deepa regular income while maintaining a valuable asset -- $500 worth of stock in her shop.

Deepa says that participating in the savings and credit group improved her skills in interacting with community members, and gave her confidence to deal with people. “The books and trainings give village women like us useful ideas and information that make us strong and confident,” she said.

Literate people such as Deepa know there is a way to make their voices heard. They can cogently express themselves to others, and make their opinions and feelings known in an effective manner. They are less afraid of being taken advantage of because they can understand the transactions they’re making. Such personal empowerment is the key that opens the door to achieving real development, for themselves and Nepal. The people and government of the United States are committed to helping Nepal achieve the goal of sustainable development and to fostering literacy skills among all genders and levels of society.

By Margaret Alexander
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