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## Women in India

A common Indian proverb states, “Raising girls is like watering someone else’s lawn” (“India and Birth Control”). This proverb says what India’s attitude towards women is, and it is not positive. Women in India are seen as a burden to society, not an asset. In industrialized countries, women have proven their worth by standing alongside men and working jobs, earning money, helping to feed their children, and even making important scientific and mathematical discoveries. In India, though, this rarely happens, if at all, outside urban areas. Women in rural India are seen as property. When a girl marries into a family, she works for her husband’s family’s welfare, not her parent’s welfare. Although dowry has been illegal since 1960, parents of a female child usually have to pay dowry to the other family so they will allow her to marry one of their sons. This happens more in rural areas than in urban areas. Families in urban cities exchange gifts instead of demanding dowry. Almost 750 million people live in rural areas, and this is where caste systems, female discrimination, and female infanticides are at their strongest (“Demographics of India”). In rural India, the only wealth women can depend on is their offspring, which causes a strong desire for male children. Unfortunately, this is reflected in the alarming statistic that female infant mortality figures are 40 percent higher than male. Females are more likely to be aborted than males because of India’s strong preference for male children. India is being criticized for its low female to male ratio, which is 960 women for every 1,000 men. This statistic reflects the lower status of women. Since male preference is adamant in India, women are more likely to be bereft of medical attention, food, and education. When women lack education, they are more likely to have more children, as children are their future financial security. Every minute, 30 more babies are born in India (“India Rapped Over”). Today almost 1.1 billion people live in India, comprising one-sixth of the world’s population. So far, only China has a more populated country, but that is estimated to change within the next 45 years. China only allows one child per family, but in India, there is no such limitation, and families have many children, especially poor families. The average number of children per family in India is 2.73, but in extremely poor areas such as Bihar, there is an average of 4.3 children per family (Earne, et al.). Another cause for population growth is lack of use of birth control. Only half of the population uses some form of birth control (“India and Birth Control”). If women were more educated, they would be more willing to use birth control, but in rural areas, females are not given the opportunity to continue schooling after they are 10 years old. The hunger situation in India is poor at best, and it is even worse for women. In recent years, India has been able to reduce hunger to one-fifth of the population, but sadly, one-half of preschool children are malnourished, and most of them are girls (McGovern, 89). In India, rural, poor women are generally the most disadvantaged. There is blatant discrimination against women, and this proves to be a major barrier against creating a hunger-free India (Lal and Lal). In order to reduce poverty, hunger, and rapid population growth, women must gain equal rights, including more education opportunities, and the right to own property.

Throughout India, there is no particular lifestyle shared by all, or even most, but there are common traditions among Indian households. Households usually consist of extended families, though families with just parents and children are becoming more popular, especially in cities. After marriage, the bride goes to live with her husband’s family (Lal and Lal). The new bride has the lowest status in the family. About 5,000 estimated deaths occur each year in India from supposed “kitchen fires”, but the correct term is “bride burning”. These cruel incidences happen because the bride’s family cannot afford the dowry requested by the in-laws, which can be both excessive and subject to increase after marriage. Bride burning is a result of pure greed, and demonstrates women’s unequal status in Indian society. Among India’s poor population, domestic abuse is more common. Because of a high desire to breed males, women are subject to violence and torture by the in-laws if they do not produce males. For most

families, male children are the priority, because they will support the parents in their later years, when the parents cannot support themselves financially. A couple may have a large number of children in the pursuit of a male child (“Women in India”). If female children were considered as valuable as male children, then families would not need to produce a large number of children in hopes of producing a male. A smaller family means more food per person, and the children have a better chance at being properly nourished. If females were considered equal to males, dowry would no longer have any purpose, since in-laws demand dowry because the bride cannot work and earn money like the husband can. Without dowry, there would be no purpose for bride burning, and bridal abuse would eventually become nonexistent.

At least one third of the population of India, most of them female, does not get adequate nourishment. Traditionally, the men and children are served first, and what is left is eaten by the women and older girls. When families have little food, there might not be any food left for the women, which leads to severe undernourishment. When families do have food, they often consume grains, fresh fruits, and seeds of pod vegetables. Since most of India is vegetarian, they must find other ways to get nutrients other than eating meat (Lal and Lal). A study conducted in the city of Vadodara in Gujarat state showed that 75 percent of adolescent girls were suffering from anemia. Any physical activity would tire them quickly, even an activity as easy as walking a short distance. It was also hard for them to concentrate. UNICEF immediately established a program to deliver red tablets consisting of iron to the girls. The program was installed in 426 schools in Vadodara, affecting 69,000 girls. Within 18 months, anemia had gone down by 22 percent, and hemoglobin levels had gone up by 75 percent. The girls were able to study better, exercise without fatigue, and they no longer felt weak during menstruation. The program has since then been expanded to all 25 districts of Gujarat, covering 950,000 girls. Although this is an enormous success, it is overshadowed by the fact that Gujarat is one of the better off states in India, and it raises an alarming question as to how many other girls in India suffer from anemia, especially in poorer cities (Gulati).

According to the United Nations, 500 million Indians live on less than two dollars a day (Bray). Because of India’s sheer size, per capita income is a disappointing 3,300 dollars (“Economy of India”). Since women are discriminated against frequently, female workers in rural India earn 10 rupees less a day than males, even though they are working the same job (Bray). Not surprisingly, women turn to procreating to secure their future. Every year 18 million people are added to the country’s population. This produces a strain on the health and happiness of domestic families. Another result from the population boom is shrinking average farm sizes, which have decreased from 2.7 hectares to less than 1.6 hectares, as the land is divided among the children (Brown and Halweil). Farms in India produce rice, wheat, coarse grains, cereals, milk, tobacco, bananas, and pulses (“Agriculture in India”). The Green Revolution increased food production in India significantly, but educating women in India is the best way to keep increasing food production, and to restrain the increase in India’s population. Unfortunately for India, many companies miscalculated the market size and have huge capacities of idle products, which have turned India into a buyer’s market, instead of a seller’s market. This is a setback for India’s economy as they cannot make enough profit on their products (Kadiwala).

The education for women in India is a major problem. After turning ten, half of India’s children discontinue school. Because children receive little formal education, illiteracy is a major problem in India (Lal and Lal). Today the literacy rate is a measly 64.8 percent (“Demographics of India”). Female education is imperative to raising the income of Indian families. If mothers are educated, then child nutrition improves dramatically. A study in Peru revealed that seven or more years of schooling for women reduced infant deaths by 75 percent. An analysis completed in 2000 showed the connection between malnutrition in preschool children and uneducated mothers (Pardey, et al. 139). The best way to reduce hunger is to educate the mother. George McGovern, a former U.S. senator and the author of The Third Freedom: Ending Hunger In Our Time, believes “the most valuable investment that can be

made in the Third World is to improve the education of girls” (McGovern 83). Educated women have fewer children, leaving more money and resources to spend on each child. The mothers can earn money to provide more resources for the children.

The solution, then, begins with education. Education for women is the best way to improve family health and nutrition. If women have no opportunities for paid jobs, then they are dependent for their sole wealth and security on their offspring, especially the male children, and this consequently produces high birthrates and puts a strain on food supplies (McGovern 89). With education, women are prone to marry later and have fewer children (McGovern 84). This is a real benefit in a world crowded by people, and limited in resources. Education helps women’s self esteem and status in society. In Mexico, where a recent study was conducted, women said education had been their ticket into a higher social standing and security for them and their children if their marriage failed (McGovern 85). Education had dramatically improved their lives, and their happiness. If such an idea created so much success, why would it not produce the same effect across the ocean in India? How can this goal of more educated Indian women be accomplished? Since girls make up half of the youthful population, the “international community should resolve to invest its influence and resources in improving the educational, medical, economic, and political opportunities for girls” (McGovern 84). The World Food Program sees that 90 percent of food is produced by women, but women only own one percent of the farmland. The reason for this severe imbalance is that women cannot secure a loan from a bank to start a business or buy farmland. Banks need collateral and can only find it with land-owning men (McGovern 91). Other problems, such as rapid population growth, can be solved by educating women in India. If women are seen as equals, then they can work and be paid as equals, taking off the pressure to procreate several children that would take care of the mother in her old age.

Urbanization affects food production as well. The World Bank estimates that each year one million workers move out of agriculture (Bray). This is undoubtedly linked to India’s annual urbanization rate of 2.4 percent. As Indians move out of rural areas into urban cities, slums and shantytowns surrounding a mega city continue expanding and growing. Severe investments in urban infrastructure need to be implemented such as water, sanitation, food supplies, and transportation (Pardey, et al. 23). As India’s food production grows, more people should move to urban areas because fewer farmers are needed. As a result, food prices fall, and more people are persuaded to move to a city. Urbanization helps economic growth by creating more acres per farmer as other farmers move into urban areas. People are attracted to urban areas because of higher wages. Sparsely populated rural areas and densely populated urban areas make the most sense for increasing economic growth. Once the majority of the labor force is no longer engaged in food production, then it is natural that more people move into urban areas (Sachs 36). Urbanization can be a good thing for India, if urban infrastructure is improved for the people moving in from rural areas.

Another way to combat overpopulating is to educate women in birth control. Only one-half of the population uses some form of birth control. Six out of ten women who choose voluntary sterilization wait to do so after they have at least two male children, with an average of four children in all (“India and Birth Control”). Indians do not have a problem with birth control because of religion. They are suspicious of birth control because they are poor, illiterate, and uninformed (“WCS in India”). In 1976, forced sterilization was implemented in poor areas to combat overcrowding. The people were told that their chance at receiving money or a job from the government increased with a certificate of sterilization. The government was essentially dangling a string consisting of food and money in front of these people, and the people could have it as long as they went through a difficult and life threatening procedure. A 1993 study showed that 67 percent of contraceptive use was female sterilization with only nine percent male sterilization. This fact simply does not make any sense. Why would the government force women to be sterilized instead of men, when the procedure was infinitely more dangerous,

difficult, and deadly for women? If a procedure can entail death, and the procedure is the only option for birth control, then it is no wonder why Indians would opt to not use contraceptives at all. Fortunately, since then, Indians have become more aware of the system and are fighting to change it. Couples in India need to be educated on birth control, all forms of it, and be given options other than female sterilization (Hansen).

Adult women must be given opportunities to become entrepreneurs. Already in Mumbai, India, this concept is starting to take place. A man named Abraham George, bought 50 acres of barren land in one of the poorest areas of India, not to make a profit, but to fight the problem of poverty and hunger. In this part of the country, 75 percent live below the poverty line. There is also a strict caste system in place, a high number of female infant deaths, and little rainfall. Abraham says, "It is the perfect place to start" (Bray). After four years and another 150 acres, the farm has become the second-largest banana farm in South India, with 200 families employed, and its land value has tripled. Abraham's major goal in India is to empower rural women. Chetan Ahya, an Indian economist at Morgan Stanley, says, to significantly change the poverty stricken Indians, the "government and productive public sector (need) to help rural Indians earn money and be schooled" (Bray). Meanwhile, Abraham George continues to help poor single mothers earn money and own land. An Indian woman named Rajamma borrowed 4,000 rupees from a landlord and had to enslave herself and her children until the debt was repaid. Social workers from George's farm came looking for poor women to work at the farm, and Rajamma was one of them. They paid Rajamma 40 rupees a day and set aside money to help her buy her own farmland (Bray). This is one of the many ways people are making a difference for women in India.

Attitudes toward women must change. Throughout history, because women bear and raise the children, they have not been expected to need an education or to obtain a job. They were considered to be the property of the men in their family, whether father or husband. As people become educated in the developing world, they begin to realize that women can do more. If there is birth control, the woman is not forced to produce so many children. If there is education, she can raise the family's standard of living. If the laws allow her to own property, she can provide more resources for her children. The world has been reluctant to treat women as equal human beings. After all, it has been less than a century since women in the United States have won the right to vote. Encouraging women to become educated, to limit their family size, and to seek economic freedom, will contribute to India's rise out of poverty and hunger.

On the path to creating a hunger free India, it is imperative that women be considered equals, receive more education, and achieve the right to own property. This will not happen if the world does not focus its energies on this problem. Funds need to be provided for schools allowing females to continue on past primary school. Women should not be discriminated against when receiving medical care. The international community should work together with India to solve anemia in adolescent girls. Iron tablets should be distributed since they significantly increase the girls' ability to concentrate and exercise, and the tablets make them feel stronger. Urban infrastructure needs major improvement as more people move out of rural areas and into urban centers. As food production increases, the number of farmers per citizens should decrease, creating more land and resources per farmer. Food relief should be distributed to the mother, instead of to the father, because the mother is more likely to use it to feed the children. Child malnutrition goes hand in hand with uneducated mothers. Education for females significantly improves a child's nutrition. Good nutrition is the basis for a good future. Family planning should be taught to every family. All forms of contraceptives should be available to Indian couples. Couples should be able to choose whether or not to use birth control and what forms of it to use, once they are educated about it. The couples should never have unwanted and dangerous operations forced upon them. For India to impede population growth, people must be educated about birth control and be offered options. To combat poverty, women should be given the opportunity to work for money and own businesses. If women were offered the same salary and job opportunities as men, then they could

be a source of income for the family. India has a huge population problem, and educating women would be the deciding factor in reducing the population in coming years, since women are less likely to have many children if they are educated and have the ability to compete in a job market with men. The international community must help women in every way, so women can someday soon be considered equal to men. Ultimately though, it is up to India whether or not she will let women become equal partners in the global solution for world hunger.

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