

### 3 THE LEGACY OF FEMALE ILLITERACY

**W**hy are so many women illiterate? Whatever the potential advantages literacy may hold for women in developing countries it continues to be an abstract notion.

IN SITUATIONS OF EXTREME POVERTY it may well be necessary to resolve such problems as food shortages, poor health care, housing, employment and agricultural production before any successful literacy action can be undertaken.<sup>1</sup> In addition, many women living in semi-literate cultures do not feel any social pressure to acquire literacy and numeracy skills, unlike in industrialized countries where the social pressure is strong.<sup>2</sup>

**O**BSTACLES TO LITERACY  Even when the motivation is there, formidable obstacles remain. Foremost among them is probably lack of time. The traditional or new roles that women fill rarely leave them enough free time to devote to full-time or even part-time educational activities. Fatigue, frequent or early pregnancies, caring for children and families, agricultural and cultural activities, and formal or informal employment, are among the many reasons for lack of time. This heavy workload is reflected in the high rate of absenteeism and drop-out of women from literacy activities. The same reasons apply to girls' schooling.

Organizational problems – male instructors, mixed gender classes, considerable distances between home and the education

centre, lack of transport, evening courses and cultural clashes between instructors and participants – are also constraints to women's full participation in educational activities.

Then again, there is the problem of cultural patterns and customs. Many parents believe that it is not worthwhile to invest in girls' education; instead they invest time and money to educate their sons, who will provide support for them when adult. Daughters are seen as additional sources of household labour who, once married, will become part of the (re)productive labour force of another household. Discrimination against women in the labour market, and in salaries, reinforces parents' negative attitudes towards educating girls.

Husbands, fathers and men in general have such attitudes towards women's education, especially when it results in the possibility of learning new skills which give women a new role in the family. Better earning prospects tend to give women more independence and change their economic status in the family, and this may give rise to family tensions, particularly if women's earnings are controlled by the husband.<sup>3</sup>

Some religious traditions may restrict women's activities to domestic tasks, stressing their role as mothers, which limits their access to education. Lack of self-confidence, timidity, submissiveness to male authority, as well as isolation and age differences between participants, are also limiting factors for women's participation in education. The main reason, however, is the poverty of most illiterate women, which oppresses them in their everyday lives and prevents them from taking an active part in educational activities.

**B**ECOMING LITERATE: THE QUESTION OF MOTIVATION  Whenever literacy programmes or projects are carried out in

PHOTO: UNESCO/WHO/T.FARKAS



High-density population concentration in Hongkong