

valuable human beings, a contrast to the messages they have received from their parents, husbands, and society at large. Discovering that they can learn to read and write is evidence of their self-worth. Action and application projects important to the learning process provide additional evidence.

ProLiteracy's partner in India uses literacy to create economic self-sufficiency initiatives for "temple widows." Unable to find work because of their gender and caste, and discriminated against because their husbands either abandoned them or died, these lower-caste widows migrate with their children to Mathure, the legendary birthplace of Krishna. There they live on meager handout meals provided by temple workers and often become victims of violence and sexual abuse. ProLiteracy's partner organization, Yuvaparivartan, is helping hundreds of temple widows find alternatives to this paltry subsistence through literacy and income-generating action programs.

#### Awareness Building

Literacy classes help women better understand their world and their problems. When given basic information about women's rights and opportunities, they can think critically about their roles and

consider options. To assist this process, instructors use literacy primers and other materials that include the women's daily life experiences. As they become literate, these women read and write their own reality.

The Coptic Organization for Services & Training (COST), one of ProLiteracy's partners in Egypt, works in the Beni-Souef region, teaching girls and their families about harmful practices and the available alternatives. Although the legal marriage age in Egypt is 16 years old, it is not uncommon in many villages for fathers to force their 12- and 13-year-old daughters into marriages. Young girls having children before they are physically ready can have lethal results. Practices such as female circumcision also compromise the health of young women. In an area where more than 40 percent of women and girls cannot read or write, COST promotes literacy while it educates young women about the dangers of female circumcision.

#### Leadership Development

Action projects make it possible for women to become initiators, planners, and implementers in male-dominated cultures and help them gain the leadership skills they need to create permanent change. Women who emerge as talented leaders are encouraged to assume responsibility

for conducting the literacy programs. Eventually, some women participants facilitate the literacy effort or other community development projects. Many times these women lead change beyond their neighborhood or village into regional and national arenas.

The Roqia Center is a women's literacy and empowerment program active in slum neighborhoods in and near Kabul, Afghanistan. The program offers "couples classes" where men and women attend literacy classes together for the first time. Here, teachers who once risked their lives under the Taliban by secretly teaching girls to read now openly teach literacy classes and advocate for gender equity. Using Afghan materials combined with ProLiteracy's manuals translated into Farsi and Dari, couples learn to read and write and to respect and communicate better with each other and other community groups. The Roqia Center also created a booklet of positive, stereotype-breaking references from the Koran regarding the role of women in the family and society. A "Women's Electoral Guide" was created to help women candidates access the election process in Afghanistan. These initiatives support women's efforts to become leaders in their communities and their country to create positive change.



# Literacy and Violence Against Women

## WOMEN IN LITERACY: CRITICAL ISSUES IN LITERACY



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Women in grassroots community programs and national and international forums around the globe are confronting the problem of gender-based violence.

They work toward changing the attitudes, cultural patterns, and legal restrictions that relegate women to second-class status.

Violence affects millions of the world's women. Female infanticide, domestic violence, sexual abuse, female circumcision, and trafficking in girls and women threaten half the human race. Domestic abuse and rape are issues common to women in both developed and developing nations. Around the world, at least one in three women has been beaten, forced into sex, or abused in some other way. Added to these are the more subtle forms of violence in the developing world where, in the face of scarcity, males receive more food, healthcare services, and education than females.

## Women who take part in ProLiteracy's grassroots partner programs

are reading, writing, discussing, and acting their way into new realities, often overcoming entrenched social and cultural obstacles.

In the process, these women make concrete inroads against the injustices that affect their lives. They become aware of alternatives to ingrained traditions, work with men to develop healthy family relationships, learn to avoid exploitation, and lobby for new legislation. They use their new attitudes and skills to improve how they provide for themselves and their families.

The spirit and enthusiasm of the program participants are indicative of a grassroots movement in progress. When women in nearby communities see other women in identical circumstances confront the roots of violence and oppression, they are encouraged to join.

ProLiteracy continues to invest in women-centered literacy programs throughout the 21st century. The Women in Literacy program is an investment in aiding half the world's population to realize its potential. It is an investment in women who will change our world.

### VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

In the developing world, violence towards and abuses of women are often, though not exclusively, linked to low educational levels, low status, and limited access to power. As a result, millions of women are subject to the following practices:

#### Trafficking

Economic need and a view of women as sexual commodities have created a growing trade in girls and young women. Female trafficking victims are sold into prostitution and forced labor in countries all over the world.

#### Sexual Abuse

Many countries do not recognize rape by a spouse as a crime; often, there are no laws to protect women from being beaten in their own homes. Studies by the World Health Organization indicate that 12–25 percent of women worldwide have had an intimate partner or ex-partner attempt or complete forced sex.

#### Violence Against Migrant Workers

Many women leave their native countries for jobs or better pay. Often they work as domestic servants or factory workers where they are without rights, and face being beaten and/or sexually assaulted.



### Violence Against Women in Times of War

In war, rape is increasingly used as a means to dominate, humiliate, and control. It is an assault on the individual, her family, and the community.

#### Female Circumcision

In some African and Middle Eastern countries, female circumcision stems from a belief that the procedure ensures virginity before marriage and fidelity during marriage. It often serves as a cultural initiation into womanhood typically performed on girls between ages 7 and 10. A highly dangerous practice often performed by untrained people, female circumcision is painful and can result in shock, hemorrhage, and death. Serious long-term problems include anemia, pregnancy complications, and fear of intimacy.

#### Son Preference

Most prevalent in Asia, son preference manifests itself in three ways: selective abortions of female fetuses, female infanticide, and neglect of female children. In India, son preference stems from the dowry system, which requires parents of girls to pay grooms and their families large sums of money before their daughters can marry.

#### Subtle Forms of Violence

Women in developing countries make up two-thirds of the agricultural workforce; however, they own less than two percent of the land. Women in many parts of the world are subjected to restrictions on employment, travel, voting, and obtaining custody of children. Though women are increasingly heads of households in all countries, they are paid less than men. Even when women perform the same work as their male counterparts, they are paid 30–40 percent less. Furthermore, women are vastly under-represented in government bodies. Only 14 percent of all political leaders are women.

### LITERACY AND EMPOWERMENT

Despite the many hardships that women

endure, it is women who most often provide the grassroots leadership for lasting social change. When women become educated, they gain new confidence in their abilities. For this reason, ProLiteracy Worldwide's international adult literacy programs always have had a special focus on women. ProLiteracy formalized the Women in Literacy initiative in 1991 to reach more women through literacy and community development initiatives. When they acquire basic literacy skills and the awareness, self-confidence, and solidarity that accompany that learning, women address the multiple forms of violence that confront them—isolation from other women facing the same problems, little or no control over their own lives, no understanding of their legal rights, low self-esteem, lack of leadership, and an inability to organize to create lasting change.

Through its partnerships with local literacy-based community programs, ProLiteracy supports women's access to basic reading and writing skills within the context of daily-life issues to help women:

- advance the education of their children, particularly girls
- become aware of laws, policies, practices, attitudes, and actions that advance or restrict human rights in their homes and communities
- become aware of key concerns tied to conflict and violence
- work together to protect themselves and their families and neighbors from abuse, violence, discrimination, and sexual assault
- take action to promote peaceful governance in their homes, communities, and nations

Today, women expose the violence that affects their lives in their campaign to create a safer world for themselves, their sisters, and their daughters. They also work to remove legal, social, and cultural barriers that deny women access to resources they need to protect themselves from violence and to care for themselves and their families.



### CHALLENGING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

ProLiteracy works with partner programs that serve thousands of women in local communities on four continents.

Most partners are grassroots organizations already working with very poor and marginalized women. ProLiteracy provides these groups with direct grants, training, and the technical assistance they need to integrate literacy programming with their existing services. Using locally adapted and translated manuals such as ProLiteracy's Human Rights in Daily Life and Building Peace in Your Community, women in these programs develop methods and materials that help alleviate violence in their lives and advance peace and security in their communities.

#### Solidarity and Determination

Women subjected to violence often become isolated; they lose their sense of control over their own bodies and destinies. Women who participate in ProLiteracy partner programs form learning communities and share information, knowledge, and skills. The learning community becomes a safe place where women raise questions about the fundamental realities of their lives. The literacy class facilitates learner-initiated change and gives women a voice.

Guadalupe Hernandez is a participant in ProLiteracy's partner Ayuda Mutua in Michoacán, Mexico, a grassroots organization dedicated to advancing the status of indigenous peoples. Describing the way indigenous P'urhépecha girls are raised, Guadalupe explains, "We women did not have a right to speak. I used to cry because I wanted to speak, but I couldn't." The story of the indigenous people of México, especially that of the indigenous women of Michoacán, is marked by mistreatment and humiliation. Many have lived with violence for years. This is particularly true for those living in poverty, where there are few services and jobs, many serious health problems, and little education. But now Guadalupe's voice can be heard defending the rights of indigenous women everywhere. She began as a student with Ayuda Mutua, and with Ayuda Mutua's help, Guadalupe gained the confidence to speak, read, and write in her native P'urhépecha language and in Spanish. Now she is the coordinator of her own nongovernmental organization that advances the rights of indigenous women through education in 18 Mexican communities.

#### Self-esteem

ProLiteracy programs help women understand that they are capable,