

Book Reviews

Subarna L. Malla Singh. 2018. *Girls' School Education in Nepal: A Conundrum*. Kathmandu: Vajra Books.

In *Girls' School Education in Nepal: A Conundrum*, economist Subarna L. Malla Singh tries to provide a brief overview of the myriad factors that contribute to girls' poor educational experiences and outcomes in the country. Her aim is to "deflect the spotlight from the glitter-gloss emanating from the education data on gender parity" (p. 2) and point to how discrimination against girls impacts their learning in schools. The "conundrum" that Singh is talking about in the title is the discrepancy between the fact that education data shows girls enrolling and staying in schools at rates comparable to boys, and the fact that girls' educational outcomes still remain comparatively poor.

Singh provides no insights in the approximately 200-page book that are new or interesting with regards to thinking about gender inequality in education. Instead, relying heavily on UNESCO, UNICEF, USAID and World Bank reports, she regurgitates some well-worn arguments about how things like parent and teacher negligence, menstrual stigma, and violence in schools impact girls. If these arguments were backed by primary research, they would at least provide empirical support for what is already known and contribute to educational studies literature in that way, but Singh seems to have done little of her own data collection. Her arguments are derivative, impressionistic and lacking in rigor.

Singh devotes the beginning section of the book listing facts about Nepal's location, geography, and ethnic composition. She then proceeds to make the case for educating girls in a chapter titled "Why Educate Girls?" where she talks about how "increased participation in wage-economy, increased economic productivity, reduction in poverty, improvement in personal and public health, delayed age at marriage, lower fertility, reduced maternal and infant mortality, and healthier children" (p. 42) are amongst the benefits to society that stem from educating girls.

The chapter that follows, "The Girl Child in Nepal: The Lesser Child" is perhaps the weakest in the book, where Singh tries to summarize all the ways in which sexism manifests itself in Nepali society. Singh covers

gender discrimination in homes, right to parental/ancestral property, birth registration, citizenship, child marriage, Chaupadi, Deuki, Kamlari, Kumari, sex trafficking, and child labor in about 40 pages. Needless to say, no justice is done to any of these topics, and with the complete lack of nuance in discussion, it merely perpetuates stereotypes about “victim girls” with no agency. A particularly egregious example of this is the way Singh talks about the Badi community: “It is well-known in Nepal that in the Badi community in Sindhupalchowk in the central region of Nepal, girls and women are traditionally expected to go or are pushed into prostitution to earn money for the family. It is socially acceptable in their community, and parents do not consider this practice morally reprehensible” (p. 79). First of all, Singh is factually incorrect: the Badi community is native to western Nepal, not Sindhupalchowk, and second, Singh does not mention the socio-cultural and historical context in which prostitution among Badi women occurs. The cursory glance at the practice is instrumentalized to demonstrate that girls in Nepal are discriminated against. Singh’s intention is to illustrate how “girl children bear the brunt of multiple deprivations” (p. 86) but her analysis throughout the chapter is superficial.

The chapters “The School Education System: Where Do the Girls Stand” and “School Enrollment and Quality of Educational Outcome: A Gender Perspective” consolidate data from various Ministry of Education reports to demonstrate that poor quality of public schools has a disproportionate impact on girls since boys are more likely to be sent to private schools if their parents can afford it. Some of the statistics presented in these chapters may be useful for researchers working on education in Nepal, but Singh’s analysis of the data does not reveal anything new.

In the final couple of chapters of the book, Singh talks about the space of the school itself—infrastructure, sanitation, and interpersonal dynamics between teachers and students in classrooms that tend to disadvantage girls. Singh also spends a couple of pages discussing school related gender based violence and threats to physical and emotional safety as reasons why girls may choose to opt out of school. While many of the issues that Singh points to are important, they are not based on field-work but are summaries of the UNICEF and Action Aid reports she cites. Those interested in delving deeper into these issues may want to look at these reports themselves instead of relying on Singh’s summaries.

The book might be a somewhat useful primer about gender inequality in education for a reader who does not know anything about Nepal or about school education in Nepal. But for those well-versed in educational studies or practitioners in the field, the book is completely redundant.

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