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THA Report

TEACHING WOMEN & CHILDREN IN HIMACHAL PRADESH

Having studied the development of India as part of my economics degree last year, I was made increasingly aware the obstacle that gender inequality poses to social and economic development. However, being given the opportunity to spend a month teaching and living in northern India this summer showed me that I had grossly underestimated the extent of female oppression.

Since I had heard very little from the Indian organisation through which I had arranged my teaching placement, on arrival at Delhi airport I was slightly apprehensive. However, a 12-hour bus-ride (and very little sleep) later I was thrust into a classroom full of friendly, curious and over-excited children. This warm welcome was immediately reassuring and signaled the start of a very enjoyable month.

My original intention had been to volunteer with women on an empowerment programme. However, working in a tiny Himalayan village where teaching resources are scarce, my role was expanded to teach children (aged 2-14) as well as local women. I was allowed a lot of freedom in deciding how to organise my teaching. This was best demonstrated when I was given the only key to the school and the authority to change the timetable as I pleased. Whilst being a great opportunity to get actively involved, this is one example of the poor regulation of education in India. Despite having no teaching experience, I was put in charge of thirty or so children with only scant supervision from a woman who would turn up late, and often sit in the corner listening to music. As part of my economics course at Cambridge, I have read several studies detailing the poor quality of education in India, which specifically outline the role of teacher absenteeism. This was a depressing demonstration of a widespread problem.

Teaching computer skills to local women was a very rewarding part of the project. Most of the women were of similar age to me and despite leading very different lives we seemed to have a lot in common. The purpose of teaching IT was to give girls & women the necessary skills to write letters in English, use spreadsheets and create presentations. Being able to engage with modern technology is an important step towards expanding opportunities for women. However, the position of women as subordinate to men seems to be cemented in Indian society and there is still an enormous distance to cover in order to rectify this. Worryingly, it appears that many women feel that the inequalities are justified. Upon asking girls in my class whether they felt they were equal to men, their response was that the gender imbalance was meant to be. Closing the gap between the genders will not just require an improvement in female education or an extension of legal rights, but a more fundamental shift in attitudes.

At the weekends, there was no school and I was able to travel in the surrounding area. I was staying in the state of Himachal Pradesh which lies in the foothills of the Himalayas. Surrounded by mountains, the scenery is constantly breathtaking and there is lots of opportunity for hiking. Since the state is situated close to the Tibetan border, and is also home to the exiled Dalai Lama, there are interesting Buddhist influences which contribute to the rich and varied culture of North-West India.

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However, my travel experiences further reinforced the obstacles faced by women in India. Often, I would be the only female on the bus when traveling between places. Whilst visiting shops, I would be completely ignored by the owner. I became accustomed to the staring (and sometimes groping) men as I walked down the street. Women are discouraged from appearing in public, especially alone, and those that do are often regarded as wanton.

My brief spell teaching women and children in India has undoubtedly been the most eye-opening experience of my life so far. Having been given the opportunity to try to understand the difficulties faced by women and schoolchildren in India, I hope one day to use what I have learnt to make some contribution towards the advancement of women's rights internationally. Challenges aside, I will never forget the warm welcome and the hospitality of all those I met in the village of Bundla. I have great memories of a month that will never fade.

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