

Sociocultural-Related Equity

Institutional and sociocultural issues have major implications for project success and/or failure. School attendance and life chances for the disadvantaged are strongly affected by sociocultural perceptions. For example, the school attendance of females may be hindered by sociocultural perceptions that, should a choice have to be made, boys should receive priority in going to school. This is most clear in tertiary enrollments since education at this level demands more private financial contributions, and in rural enrollments where girls are seen as ready laborers. The disadvantage of rural residents is also affected by the relevance of education to their living, particularly when investment in education has significant opportunity costs.

This section looks at education opportunities for a disadvantaged group not covered in the last three sections on gender-related, income-related, and region-related equity. They are the minorities within various societies. Their disadvantages can be closely related to, or even a combination of, the above three types of inequity; but distinctively, their disadvantages come from their sociocultural identities as minority groups.

There can be many types of minorities within a society, including those defined in economic terms (the income poor); political terms (dissidents); religious terms (those not affiliating to the state religion could be another kind of dissidents); cultural terms (subcultural groups, dissidents from the dominant culture, sometimes being termed deviants/delinquents); language (those not speaking the national language); and ethnicity (the ethnic minorities). Sometimes the minorities can be the “majority” in terms of number (e.g., the income poor). In this sense, there can be a disadvantaged majority as well as an advantaged minority (e.g., the Chinese outside the PRC).

Data on minorities are difficult to collect, as very few societies officially collect data according to the above definitions, especially in relation to access and equity in education. It is also difficult for individual researchers to mount large-scale surveys that represent the various types of minorities. This booklet will focus on one of the more easily identified groups, that is, ethnic minorities. In addition, the end of this section will link back to gender issues, especially in the context of examining how sociocultural perceptions of women have hindered their life chances.

Access and Equity in Education for Ethnic Minorities

Ethnic equity is a declared national policy for most countries. For example, the official aims of education in Singapore are expressed in terms of a tripartite

policy of equality, unity, and relevance. By equality is meant equal treatment for the four major ethnic groups and their languages in society (Lee 1991, 58). Recent reform in Taipei, China particularly mentions an emphasis on vernacular education, acknowledging the significance of education for minorities, and granting recognition to the vernacular as a medium of instruction. However, study of ethnic minorities in DMCs on the one hand is limited by access to data, and on the other is complicated by the nature of minority issues. The major task of this part of the booklet is to report the situations of the ethnic minorities in various DMCs, based on the limited data available.

One complication in minority issues concerns the Chinese who are economically well-off but ethnically a small proportion in some countries. For example, in Malaysia, while the richest tenth of the population (most with Chinese background) increased their share of national income by 18 percent between 1957 and 1970, the poorest half (mostly Malays) saw their share fall by almost one third. By 1970 the per capita income of the Malays (54 percent of the population) was about half that of the non-Malays, and they accounted for only 25 percent of industrial employment. Economic and human development disparities between ethnic groups were seen as the root cause of the racial tensions which culminated in riots in 1969. After the riots, the Government took a two-pronged approach to translate rapid economic growth into human development for all. It adopted a 20-year perspective plan for promoting growth and human development, reducing poverty, and increasing equity. The Government has also made efforts to end racial discrimination in employment (UNDP 1996, 60).

In education, the Malays accounted for 72 percent of higher education enrollments in 1985/86. However, the non-Malays were also well represented in the major universities, e.g., 46 percent in the University of Malaya, 45 percent in the University of Science, and 28 percent in the National University of Malaysia. The high-achieving non-Malays, who are mostly Chinese, were able to gain entry to the key universities. The students at the other universities were mainly Malays, but largely those studying for certificate and diploma courses. For example, the Malays accounted for 93 percent of the student population in the International Islamic University and 81 percent in the Agricultural University of Malaysia (Selvaratnam 1987, 19). Likewise, while degree course enrollments were still dominated by the Malays in 1988 (62 percent), the Chinese fared well (31 percent). However, the certificate and diploma courses are mainly taken by the Malays (70 percent and 93 percent respectively) (Lee 1997, 190).

The above discussion is related to an "advantaged minority" group. Returning to the issue of disadvantaged minorities, data suggest that minorities within DMCs continue to be disadvantaged in access to education. This may be demonstrated by case studies of Cambodia, PRC, Lao PDR, and Nepal.

Case One: Cambodia

Nearly 90 percent of Cambodians are ethnic Khmers. The remaining 10 percent are diverse. They include Cham-Muslims, Vietnamese, Chinese,

Thais, Laotians, Filipinos, and members of hill tribes. The 200,000 Chinese have assimilated into Khmer society, and the 200,000 Cham-Muslims live in compact villages north and east of Phnom Penh, practicing their own religions. In addition, over 25 other groups, including Lao, Phnong, Kul, Tumpoun, and Koreung, are subsistence slash-and-burn farmers in the provinces of the north and east. Presently there are no coherent strategies for improving health, education, or training provision for ethnic minorities, mainly situated in the northern and northeastern provinces.

The minorities are vastly underrepresented in the mainstream provision of social services. Families suffer access constraints (such as distance to schools and clinics, and no money for books and drugs), which are characteristic of these provinces. Additional obstacles for minority children include language difficulties for non-Khmer speakers, lack of traditions of formal schooling and health care, and nomadic lifestyles (UNDP 1996, 16, 17).

Cambodia has other vulnerable groups, including 380,000 Cambodians who had been living in Thai border camps and who were later repatriated. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that one third of returning refugees remain vulnerable. They lack the security of family connections, and they lack links with local authorities. Ironically, many residents of the camps enjoy education opportunities not available to those who stayed in the country. There are classes in subjects ranging from English language to business administration. An estimated 3,000 camp residents have earned credentials as teachers and thousands more as medical technicians. Many returnees have experienced problems in finding work. Measures are needed to optimize this human resource base (UNDP 1996, 29).

Case Two: People's Republic of China

The PRC has 55 national minorities, totaling 80 million people, accounting for some 8 percent of the population, and occupying 62 percent of the country's total land area (or 90 percent of the country's border area), and cluster mainly in eight provinces and autonomous regions in the west: Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, Tibet, Ningxia, Xinjiang, Guizhou, Yunnan, and Qinghai. The minorities in the eight regions have much lower education attainments than the national average and the Han Chinese. In 1990, the national average for illiteracy and semi-illiteracy in the population aged 12 years and above was

Table 36: Education Attainments of National Minorities in the PRC, 1987
(per 10,000 population)

<i>Level of education</i>	<i>Nationwide</i>	<i>Minorities</i>	<i>Nationwide/ Minorities</i>
University	86	37	2.3
Upper secondary	682	455	1.5
Lower secondary	2,097	1,216	1.7
Primary	3,580	3,021	1.2

Source: Postiglione, Teng, and Ai 1995, 190.

16 percent. Five of the eight regions had a rate higher than the national average: Ningxia 23 percent, Guizhou 26 percent, Yunnan 27 percent, Qinghai 30 percent, and Tibet 49 percent. Illiteracy rates were particularly high among the minorities: 61 percent among Jinpo, Achang, and Ducong; 62 percent among Yi, Shui, and Sala; 63 percent among Nu; 69 percent among Luoba and Wa; 70 percent among Hani; 72 percent among Lisu; 73 percent among Daur; 76 percent among Baoan; 82 percent among Lahu; and 87 percent among Dongxiang. The minorities achieved a lower proportion of enrollments than the national average (Postiglione 1992, 308; Postiglione, Teng, and Ai 1995, 190-1). As shown in Table 36, apart from the primary level, in 1987 the proportion of enrollments among minorities fell short of the national average by about half.

Minority groups in the PRC generally live in areas where the soil is too poor for even subsistence crop production, so they are net buyers of food and have been hit hard by higher prices. The incidence of poverty in these groups is much higher than in the general population (UNDP 1997, 50). Primary schools in poor and minority areas often do not offer all six grades. About 30 percent of the rural primary schools in its project counties are incomplete schools, i.e., they do not offer the full primary program, and some offer only three or even fewer grades. Small villages are served by "teaching points," in which only two grades, 1 and 3, or 2 and 4, are offered. In 1993, their project counties had 9,726 such teaching points. Since complete primary schools may be located 4 to 5 kilometers away from small villages, and boarding schools are costly, many children discontinue their education after attending an incomplete school (World Bank 1996a, 5).

Case Three: Lao People's Democratic Republic

The Lao PDR is also characterized by strong ethnic and cultural diversity. The 1985 census identified 47 distinct ethno-linguistic groups. However, the main Laotian population can be grouped into three main ethnic groups, based on origins, history, and geographic locations of residence. The Lao Loum account for about 65 percent of the Laotian population. They reside in the stronger economic areas, i.e., the lowlands, and they play a dominant role in the country's political and economic system. The other two groups are the Lao Theung and Lao Soung, accounting for 20-25 percent and 10-15 percent of the population, respectively. Both these minority ethnic groups reside in the hilly uplands and practice swidden rice farming. They live in remote areas and have higher illiteracy, especially among women (65-80 percent). Dropout rates from primary education are exceedingly high (60-80 percent). These minorities also suffer from inadequate transport and lack of telecommunications networks (ADB 1996b, 3). As shown in Table 37, while the survival rates in education in the country are generally low, they are especially low among the Lao Theung and Lao Soung: whereas among the Lao Loum, out of 100 entrants to primary education only 32 and 13 completed lower and upper secondary education respectively, the respective figures among the Lao Theung were 11 and 1 and among the Lao Soung, 7 and 1.

Table 37: Survival Rates by School Type and Ethnic Group in the Lao PDR, 1991/92
(percent)

<i>School type</i>	<i>Lao Loum</i>	<i>Lao Theung</i>	<i>Lao Soung</i>	<i>Total</i>
Primary: New entrants	100	100	100	100
Primary: Graduates	56	25	26	39
Lower secondary: New entrants	43	15	15	36
Lower secondary: Graduates	32	11	7	21
Higher secondary: New entrants	19	3	3	15
Higher secondary: Graduates	13	1	1	8

Source: Netherlands Economic Institute 1995, 93.

Table 38: Literacy Rates by Ethnic Group in Nepal, 1997
(percent)

<i>Ethnic group</i>	<i>Literacy rate</i>	<i>Ethnic group</i>	<i>Literacy rate</i>
Dusadh	11	Sherpa	47
Chamar	11	Limbu	48
Dhobi	22	Gurung	48
Muslim	23	Thakuri	48
Tharu	28	Newar	61
Yadav	28	Thakali	63
Tamang	29	Brahmin	63
Magar	41	Kayastha	65
Rai	46	Marwari	88
Chetri	46		

Source: Bajracharya, Thapa, and Chitrakar 1997, 21.

Case Four: Nepal

Data from Nepal show great variations in literacy rates among the various ethnic groups. In 1997 the Dusadh and Chamar had a literacy rate of only 11 percent, whereas the Marwari had a literacy rate of 88 percent (Table 38). People in the disadvantaged groups (e.g., Rana Tharus) do not see education as relevant to improvement of their social and economic conditions. Moreover, the lack of confidence among people in these groups (e.g., Mushahar from Terai) poses a hindrance for them to participate in education.

The sociocultural barriers in Nepal are significant. As mentioned above, underachievement in education is commonly attributable to sociocultural perceptions on whether education is worthwhile. The low self-esteem of the minorities and the perceived socioeconomic irrelevance of education to them is certainly one factor for the minorities' underachievement in education. Another factor relates to subtle tensions among different ethnic groups, which is an issue much more difficult to resolve. Tan's (1993, 139-40) study of Chinese in the Philippines and Koreans in Japan has identified such a tension:

Total assimilation of the Koreans has only been deterred by their not being accepted socially by the Japanese. The feeling of degradation has led many Koreans to hide their identity through the use of Japanese names....

For the Chinese in the Philippines, total assimilation is still being held back by the existence of the "three treasures" that the Chinese have in the community, i.e., the associations, the press, and the greatly "diluted" ex-Chinese schools.... [The] ethnic Chinese are different from other minorities because they have self-confidence while the other minorities lack self-esteem.

Gender Disparity from a Sociocultural Perspective

Gender disparity can also be viewed from a sociocultural perspective. As mentioned, despite general improvements in gender enrollments, females' access to education seems to be at best up to senior secondary attainment. Females tend to be barred from further development beyond that level of education, and the GEM is generally lower than the GDI across countries, especially in terms of opportunities for securing access to decision-making positions in employment. This means that females continue to be seen as the weaker sex in Asia, despite enhanced opportunities in recent years. Comments from various DMCs in respect to women's education opportunities and life chances all point to the sociocultural dimension.

- (i) *East and Southeast Asia*. In East and Southeast Asia women's status seems to be improving, but substantial sociocultural barriers still exist. Filipino society, for example, holds an egalitarian norm in terms of equal work for equal pay for both genders, emphasizes the sovereignty of the family, and the responsibilities of motherhood. However, as far as education is concerned, sons are still seen as having priority over daughters if a choice has to be made (Mendez 1990, 144).
- (ii) *Taipei, China*. Taipei, China has witnessed substantial improvements in females' education and occupation opportunities, and conspicuous waves of feminist movements in the last two decades. However, coming down to empowerment of women in society, it seems that there is still a long way to go. As Chou (1994, 352) notes:

The phenomenon of the dominance of men in the employer class and women in the unpaid category persists over time. Similarly in occupational attainment, women's representation in the highest income-generating occupations (i.e., administrators and managers) is still very low and has remained so in the past two decades. In short, it may be said that while women may not have been excluded horizontally from the process of the emerging urban productive system, they have not been integrated vertically into the core of the production process either. Sex segregation at the level of ownership of the means of production remains the biggest obstacle in the way of gender equality.

- (iii) *Hong Kong, China*. Likewise, in Hong Kong, China where females are

relatively well represented in both education and employment, and where an Equal Opportunities Commission was established and a Sex Discrimination Ordinance was enacted in 1997, recent studies show substantial sociocultural perceptions that are disadvantageous to women. In education, analyses of textbooks show substantial sexual stereotyping. For example, in popular kindergarten textbooks, while fathers are usually described as wage-earners, mothers are described as housewives who stay at home and are responsible for household chores. Ma (1991) found only one mention of father doing household chores, but such mention was much clearer in regard to motherhood in the textbooks. Other studies of primary and secondary textbooks also show that men are depicted positively as heroes whereas women are pictured negatively as hindrances to men's success. Moreover, passive characteristics are mostly associated with women, such as docility, passivity, dullness, and lack of confidence (Yau and Luk 1990).

- (iv) *The PRC*. Studies on women in the PRC commonly argue that the PRC is still influenced by a feudalistic view of women, advocating that virtuous women should be untalented, docile, and submissive (Shi 1995, 140). Referring to contemporary women's status in the PRC, Niu (1993, 26) notes that:

The overall participation of females in Chinese education has increased since 1949, but significant disparities between men and women persist. Most of the participation of females is at the elementary level and low secondary level, while males continue to dominate the most important part of education – institutions of higher learning. Gender inequality is apparent not only in education, but also in other parts of the society. The gender inequality in Chinese society and the gender inequality in education influenced each other and made the situation of females worse... There appeared institutional discrimination in education and work, as well as promotion of social positions.... Female aspirations were usually low, which in return greatly prevented females from climbing up the social ladder.

- (v) *Sri Lanka*. Women's status remains notably low in South Asia. Their conditions are far worse than their counterparts in East and Southeast Asia. Commenting on women in Sri Lanka, Jayaweera (1991, 9) argued that empowerment of women is simply difficult in a patriarchal society:

Sociocultural factors that stem from patriarchal norms impinge strongly on the lives of women. The perceptions of policymakers, administrators, employers and in fact, of society, of men as breadwinners and women as dependent housewives or at most secondary earners, despite the reality of women's lives and their economic contribution, perpetuates the gender division in the labor market and the relative invisibility of women in development plans. Women are perceived to be passive consumers of services and are subsumed in

the family.... There is contradiction between patriarchal norms to which many women subscribe and the reality of women's centrality as mothers and as economic providers especially in low-income families. The acceptance by women of practices such as arranged marriages, the dowry system and domestic violence reflects the failure of education and economic participation to empower them to function as individuals with human rights and dignity.

- (vi) *The Lao PDR*. ADB's report on human development in the Lao PDR (1996b, 23) comments that females' low attainment in education needs to be viewed in the larger context of Laotian society:

Barriers to women's and girls' participation need to be viewed within the larger context of Laotian society. Cultural factors have shaped attitudes toward men and women. In poorer families, it's girls not boys who work at home instead of attending schooling, as a result of social attitudes that deem boys more worthy of education than girls.... The barriers to women's and girls' participation in education frequently described include: family maintenance, thus leaving little time for female participation in formal or nonformal education; family economics, which often dictate that given the limited resources boys are sent to school before girls because of the belief that boys have better opportunities for employment; perceived lack of benefits from education, both by rural families and women who may not link the benefits of education to their immediate lives leading to their disinterest in education programs.

- (vii) *India*. Referring to women in India, the UNDP (1996, 34) simply says: "Women in India suffer on two counts – first, because the society as a whole is impoverished, and second, because they are women."
 (viii) *Cambodia*. Similarly, ADB's report on human development in Cambodia (1996a, 28) notes that "Women are more likely than men to be among the poorest of the poor."
 (ix) *Nepal*. It is striking to find a comment referring to modern Nepalese women that seems to portray a continued classical view of female inferiority:

In many communities, women are treated as impure or as untouchable during their menstruation period, and in Jumla they are forced to spend this period outside their home. As one commentary puts it:

All the drudgeries of domestic life are to be shouldered by the women. She is the cook, the grinder, the water carrier, fuel or wood carrier, the washerwoman and utensil cleaner. On top of all that she is a cattle tender and a farm worker. All these would pass on as normal because she does them without a wail.

The lifestyle imposed on females is such that in most parts of rural Nepal, engagement in household chores is “naturally” expected of daughters, even at the expense of their schooling. Even those who are fortunate enough to start school often have to leave it abruptly, especially with the onset of puberty (Shrestha et al. 1990, 88).

In conclusion, the issue of gender-related equity is at heart a sociocultural issue. Measures should be taken not only to enhance education opportunities and economic participation, but also social and political participation of girls and women, and to change the social and cultural perception toward parity in gender status.

Policy Implications

Of the four aspects of equity, the sociocultural aspect is the most intractable. Sociocultural aspects of equity involve values, beliefs, and cultural traditions that are fundamental to the behavior of sociocultural groups and government policies. Although the review above has uncovered clear differences in education opportunities between cultural groups in terms of access, participation, and life chances, not all the minorities are bound to remain disadvantaged. For example, the Koreans are the most literate minority in the PRC, and the Chinese outside the PRC are generally an advantaged minority. It seems that the prospects for minorities are sometimes due to whether government policies are favorable to their development, but are sometimes also due to the determination and efforts of particular cultural groups. To facilitate identification of appropriate government policies, discussion here focuses on ways to tackle the problems with disadvantaged groups in general.

Changing Values, Beliefs, and Awareness

If values and beliefs are the fundamentals underlying the obstacles to achieving equity in education, becoming aware of the need to change values and beliefs toward equity is important for realizing the goal of equity. In this regard, a few concerns and principles may be emphasized:

- (i) *Pluralistic society and cultural rights.* Most countries have multicultural populations, and awareness of cultural diversity and pluralism is fundamental to the improvement of the conditions of the ethnic/cultural minorities. Fundamental to the recent deregulation policies in Taipei, China that began to allow for education specifically oriented to aboriginal and vernacular education is awareness of the need for education for cultural diversity. The 1995 report of the Council on Educational Reform observes (p.58) that:

A society which is open and becoming democratic is bound to face the challenge of pluralism. In this regard, the aims of education should

not only reflect pluralistic values and ideals; the contents of curriculum should also cater to the expectations of different cultural groups and cultural systems, and the education system should be adjusted to such a need.

This is consistent with the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which affirms the cultural right to education.

- (ii) *Changing the values and beliefs of disadvantaged groups.* According to a 1993 study of the values of three ethnic groups in the PRC, the minorities are suffering from low self-esteem and low aspirations. Among the three ethnic groups – the Hans, Huis, and Zangs – respondents indicated that “ambitious,” “broadminded,” and “honest” were the most important values; but “capable” was rated most important only by the Hans, and “equality” only by the Zangs (Zhao, Chen, and Liu 1993). Likewise, many gender-related studies show that low self-esteem and aspirations of females can be an underlying cause for them not to push through with their education. Of course, the formation of such values or beliefs may be shaped by society at large. The need to change the general attitude to disadvantaged sociocultural groups is a challenge to the Government.
- (iii) *Textbooks revised to avoid gender stereotyping.* One commonly identified aspect of education is the existence of gender stereotyping (and perhaps also cultural group stereotyping), which is a hidden cause for building unfavorable attitudes among and toward disadvantaged groups. Care is needed to rectify this element in textbooks.

Enhancing Equity and Access to Education

In addition to attending to the values and beliefs that may foster disadvantages, attention can be paid to the following aspects that can enhance equity and access for the disadvantaged:

- (i) *Bilingual education.* A common problem facing minorities is that the language spoken in school is not the students’ daily language. Chuard and Mingat (1996a, 19) in their dropout study have identified that in one case, 20 percent of Bhutanese pupils in Grade 4 were taught by a teacher who could not speak their language. This implies that having teachers who can speak their language and teach in the vernacular are important; but the complication is that the employment prospects of the minorities will be limited if they cannot master the national language, and some may even prefer learning the national language to their own vernacular (Mackerras 1995, 142-3). In this case, good monitoring of bilingual education is essential to allow preservation of culture and pedagogical efficiency, as well as the life chances of minorities.
- (ii) *Training minority teachers.* Parallel to the need to facilitate self-help among the females and the poor is a need to facilitate self-help among minorities. In this context, training minority teachers to return to the minority areas is important. However, an obvious problem is again to avoid a brain drain,

and the policy needs some reinforcement measures for the teachers to return to their homes to work with their people.

- (iii) *Special assistance schemes and preferential policies for the needy.* As most minorities are income poor, special assistance schemes for the poor should also be applied to minorities. These include social support or welfare systems, regular home visits, free textbooks, boarding or tent schools, etc. (World Bank 1996a, 17).