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# A Review of the Literature on the Role of Non-formal Education in Promoting Girls' Education in South Asia

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## ABSTRACT

Many girls in South Asia face significant barriers in accessing education. However, non-formal education (NFE) programs are sometimes able to address or work around these barriers to reach and teach girls who would otherwise be unable to attend the traditional school system in their region. This study provides a comprehensive review of peer-reviewed, scholarly articles about NFE and girls' education in South Asia to describe the strengths and weaknesses of NFE programs in reaching these girls. First, it provides a thorough explanation of what NFE is and the primary actors involved in its deliverance. Next, it identifies common barriers to education faced by girls in South Asia, including distance to schools, conflict, conservative cultural norms and practices, and inappropriate or irrelevant curricula. Then, it briefly describes some challenges that NFE programs face in delivering education to girls in South Asia, such as concerns relating to sustainability and proper certification for learning. It suggests that future NFE programs should focus on these shortcomings and highlights the lack of attention to educational quality compared to educational access in NFE research and programming.

## KEYWORDS

girls' education, non-formal education, South Asia, barriers to education, educational access

Worldwide, about 258 million children, adolescents, and youth—or 17 percent of the total—are out of school (UNESCO, 2020). Women and girls make up a disproportionate share of this total, with just 88.2 percent of girls enrolled in primary school on average worldwide, compared to 90.5 percent of boys (WEF, 2021). While significant alone, this data conceals the reality that women and girls in certain regions face harsher barriers to education than others, particularly in South Asia. For example, the gender gap in Pakistan is as large as 13 percent or more across all levels of education (WEF, 2021). Additionally, “female literacy rates are as low as 53.7% in Afghanistan, 65.8% in India, 59.7% in Nepal, 57% in Bhutan and 46.5% in Pakistan, with little sign of closing in the near future” (WEF, 2021, p. 27). Existing literature highlights factors such as an absence of formal schooling in certain communities, personal safety concerns, conservative cultural norms that restrict women and girls' schooling, and a misalignment of the curriculum to their needs as barriers that women and girls face in accessing formal education in South Asia. However, non-formal education (NFE) programs that address or work around these barriers are often successful at reaching girls who would otherwise be out of school. NFE is a diverse term that refers to education outside the formal school system, such as home-based learning, government schemes, and community initiatives. NFE programs can consist of accredited courses facilitated by large organizations

or small, local operations with little to no funding (Khasnabis et al., 2010). This paper presents a critical analysis of literature on the role of NFE in promoting girls' education in South Asia.

While this paper attempts to find commonalities in the provision of NFE in reaching girls across South Asia, it must be acknowledged that the situation of women and girls varies greatly depending on each country's context. This can include the country's history, culture, political climate, degree of gender equality, and much more. Additionally, some countries place more emphasis on NFE than others, which affects women and girls' ability to access such programs. These factors impact the types of actors who work in each context and the implementation of NFE programs. Thus, the insights presented in this paper may not be generalizable to the entire South Asia region.

In my research, I restricted the literature to consist mainly of peer-reviewed, scholarly articles published in internationally recognized journals. I used the British Education Index and the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) as my primary databases. There are many publications on NFE by international organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that provide more insight into the topic, but they are beyond the scope of this essay. Additionally, there are community-led initiatives to provide NFE in many contexts for which there are no widespread publications to highlight their work. This analysis does not aim to include all available literature on NFE, but rather to use the literature to provide a comprehensive view of the role of NFE in girls' education in South Asia. Thus, I draw upon no more than 30 articles in this brief analysis.

The rest of the paper is as follows. I begin by discussing the major characteristics of NFE relevant to reaching women and girls. Next, I describe the various actors in the provision of NFE and explain how actors can vary by context. Then, I outline common barriers to formal education experienced by girls in South Asia and elaborate on how NFE works around these barriers. Finally, I detail some existing challenges of reaching girls in South Asia through NFE programs.

### **What is non-formal education (NFE)?**

The most significant characteristic of NFE is that it falls outside the scope of the formal education system (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974; UNESCO, 2011; Witenstein & Iyengar, 2021). In the 1960s and 1970s, there was widespread sentiment that formal education was inadequate in many countries, and failure to coordinate global interventions would result in disaster (Cordasco, 1969). Thus, NFE programs were necessary to reach children who were failed by the formal system. The World Bank's first study of NFE programs defined them as "any organized, systematic, education activity carried on outside the framework of the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups of the population" (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974, p. 8). This study focused on addressing rural poverty in developing countries through agricultural extension and farmer training programs. It emphasized that rural areas disproportionately suffered from a lack of formal education resources and opportunities, so NFE programs were needed to close the gap. Decades later, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics (UIS) crafted a definition for NFE programs that also emphasized that they must fall outside of the formal system. It explicitly stated, "the defining characteristic of non-formal education is that it is an addition, alternative and/or a complement to formal education" (2011, p. 11). The UIS created this definition as part of its International Standard Classification of Education, which is used to assess national education systems. Thus, it studies how well formal education systems perform in reaching and educating a country's citizens and considers where NFE programs are needed to catch learners who fall through the formal system.

The second major characteristic of NFE is that programs target subgroups of the population. This aspect is crucial when considering how NFE programs can reach and educate girls. In the World Bank's initial study of rural communities, it emphasized that some subgroups were in more need of NFE programs than others because they were often excluded from existing programs due to their marginalized statuses, such as women and girls. Gee (2015) states that many current NFE programs focus on educating marginalized children, which has translated into a concerted effort to educate girls in "fair and equitable ways" (p. 207). Today, many NFE programs specifically target girls, and many have even narrower foci, such as women in rural areas or child brides.

### **Actors in the provision of NFE**

There are many actors in the provision of NFE. At the highest level, international organizations like UNESCO fund and implement education programs across the world. All countries in South Asia are Member States of UNESCO. The World Bank is also a major actor, acting as a source of funding for other bodies to implement programs. At the next level are international and national NGOs. Some of the most active international NGOs that work in South Asia are the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), CARE International, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and Save the Children. Additionally, the international aid departments of foreign governments also fund and operate NFE programs across the region, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Finally, at the lowest level, community-led organizations and individual actors organize and implement small-scale NFE programs at the local level. Sometimes, larger organizations contract their work to these smaller actors as they are often members of the local community themselves. The actors involved in NFE programs differ depending on each country's historical, cultural, and political contexts, as well as the level of recognition and involvement that the government affords outside actors in the education system. Similarly, the programs themselves are implemented and evolve in different ways to meet each community's needs.

### **Why is NFE perceived as beneficial to girls?**

NFE programs are viewed as particularly beneficial to girls in many contexts because they address or work around barriers that girls face in accessing the formal education system. While the barriers that girls face vary widely by context, this section identifies common barriers to the formal system that are present throughout South Asia, as well as explanations of how NFE programs have worked through or around these barriers.

#### *Reducing the distance girls must travel to school*

One's physical location plays a significant role in whether he or she can access the formal education system. Children "tend to be marginalized from the formal school sector because they live in geographically remote areas and thus lack access to school" (Gee, 2015, p. 208). For example, in the Ghor province of Afghanistan, just 29 percent of the population lives within five kilometers of a primary school (Burde & Linden, 2013). Only 28 percent of children aged six to 13 in the Ghor province are enrolled in school, with 35 percent of boys and just 18 percent of girls enrolled (Burde & Linden, 2013). As this data suggests, girls in the Ghor province are "more sensitive than boys to distance" (Burde & Linden, 2013, as cited in The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab, n.d.). Girls' enrollment rates were shown to fall by 19 percent per additional mile they had to travel to school compared to 13 percent per additional mile for boys (Burde & Linden, 2013). One reason for this disparity is that in many contexts, girls face additional restrictions on their movement. In some cases, girls may not be allowed to use public transportation (if any is available) or walk to school unaccompanied by a male relative (Kirk & Winthrop, 2006). Long commutes to school make it difficult for girls to work

around these barriers.

Many NFE programs target children in rural and hard-to-reach communities who lack an accessible formal school. Offering NFE projects in a community without formal education mitigates the concerns regarding girls' safety on long commutes to school, the time they spend traveling, and the logistics of having to travel with a male relative (Kavazanjian, 2009). When these factors are mitigated, girls enroll in school in higher numbers (Gee, 2015). In Burde and Linden's (2013) study of the Ghor province, they found that placing a community-based school in a village "dramatically improves academic participation and performance for all children, particularly for girls" (p. 28). They identified that overall enrollment increased by 42 percent when a school was placed in a village, and girls' enrollment rates were 16.8 percent higher than boys' enrollment rates. Additionally, NFE programs that specifically target girls in rural or hard-to-reach communities can help reduce gender disparities in education in the community. For example, when BRAC first established schools throughout rural villages in Bangladesh in 1985, it ensured that 70 percent of its student population were girls to address their lower rates of enrollment in the existing formal schools (Nath, 2005).

*Reaching girls in communities affected by conflict*

Girls living in conflict areas may face personal safety concerns that prevent them from traveling to formal schools (Gee, 2015). In Afghanistan, "[e]scalating insecurity encourages families to keep their children at home—and families usually have less tolerance for sending girls to school in insecure conditions than boys" (HRW, 2017, p. 63). Concerns in this context involve both the conflict itself and the "lack of rule of law stemming from the war," which may embolden criminals and abusers to harm girls on their commute (HRW, 2017, p. 63). This means that routes that were once safe for girls to travel may become too dangerous during times of conflict. Girls living in communities affected by the Taliban and ISIS face particularly strong safety concerns as both groups have forcefully opposed girls' access to education (HRW, 2017). Even when girls do endure the commute to school, they risk targeted attacks on education buildings while they learn. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan reported that in 2016, there were 94 documented incidents in which education was targeted or affected in an attack, resulting in 24 deaths and 67 injuries (HRW, 2017). Moreover, "girls' schools were targeted at a higher rate than boys' schools and mixed-gender schools" (Harmer et al., 2011, p. 210).

In some cases, government officials, NGO providers, and community members have negotiated with terrorist groups to protect education for girls (HRW, 2017). According to one report, "Taliban officials liaise directly with NGOs and with local Afghan government officials through mediation by elders in the communities and community councils" (HRW, 2020). In these cases, the formal school may continue to operate. However, in most cases, formal school buildings are likely to be targeted, but NFE programs in the form of community-based education (CBE) can be effective in offering inconspicuous education. They can also serve the role of spreading information related to safety to children and parents (Burde et al., 2015). CBE schools are advantageous because they require no additional infrastructure, which makes them less obvious targets of attack; classes are taught out of homes and mosques (Harmer et al., 2011). Additionally, teachers and staff are often members of the local population who may operate independently or be employed by international aid organizations. This is essential to not draw any attention to the education programs, which could then be targets of an attack. While it is usually international aid organizations that support these programs, in some hard-to-reach areas of Afghanistan, the Ministry of Education has formally supported some community-based schools (Harmer et al., 2011).

*Navigating conservative cultural practices that restrict girls' learning*

Conservative cultural practices in certain contexts can also prevent girls from accessing formal education systems. For example, child marriage largely limits education prospects for girls (Wodon et al., 2017). This is a large issue in South Asia, which “is home to more child brides than any global region” (Scott et al., 2021). In this region, seven percent of women aged 20 to 24 are married before the age of 15, and 28 percent are married before the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2021). These statistics differ among countries within the region depending on historical and cultural context; in Afghanistan, 33 percent of girls marry before the age of 18 (HRW, 2017). Child brides may leave school to take on additional homemaking duties, resulting in fewer opportunities to enroll or continue with educational programs. Additionally, child marriage often leads to early childbearing, which is also linked to reduced educational prospects for the mother (Wodon et al., 2017). One study shows that “women in South Asia have their first child 1-2 years after marriage on average” (Scott et al., 2021, p. 63). Both child marriage and early childbirth have a cyclical relationship with being out of school; girls who marry or have children early are more likely to drop out or be excluded from education, and girls who are out of school are more likely to be married and have children earlier.

However, each year of secondary school can reduce the likelihood of marriage before the age of 18 by five percent or more in many countries (World Bank, 2017). Thus, it is crucial to reach vulnerable girls who are subject to child marriage and early childbirth to prevent such practices from occurring, as well as reaching girls who are already married or have given birth to ensure that they finish their education. NFE programs that provide conditional cash transfers (CCTs) for younger girls that transition into unconditional cash transfers (UCTs) for older girls have been shown to reduce rates of child marriage and pregnancy and increase years of schooling (Klugman et al., 2014). This type of program has been implemented in various regions of India with the support of non-state actors. For example, in 2003, the World Bank and other actors partnered with the government of Punjab to launch the Female School Stipend Program, which provides a quarterly stipend to families whose girls regularly attend middle school (Center for Global Development, n.d.). Research shows that after the program was implemented, girls in districts in which the program operated were likely to marry about 1.2 to 1.5 years later than before. Furthermore, girls who were exposed to the program had slightly fewer children on average than girls who were not exposed (Alam et al., 2011).

*Delivering contextually appropriate curricula*

Even when formal education is available to girls, misalignments between the curricula and what girls need to know or would find useful disincentivize some girls from attending school or their families from sending them to school. However, “learners are keen to learn skills as long as they clearly perceive the potential... opportunity cost to their advantage” (Islam & Mia, 2007, p. 99). Many NFE programs navigate this issue by catering their curricula to their community and students. In Afghanistan, home-based school teachers focus on their students' *tarbia*, or their moral character, in addition to academic content (Kirk & Winthrop, 2008). This involves teaching children “good and clean language, respect for elders and parents, bodily cleanliness and hospitality” (Kirk & Winthrop, 2008, p. 883). Home-based teachers are uniquely positioned to do this as their knowledge of *tarbia* is shaped by their personal experiences in the local community. These teachers are also able to relate content-specific information from textbooks to students' lives because of their personal experiences as members of the community. Additionally, Afghan mosque schools can provide more culturally relevant knowledge to students than traditional government schools deliver. Students learn to read Arabic, the rules of Arabic grammar, how to read and write in the students' spoken language, how to recite Persian or Pashto poetry, and memorize the Qur'an (Burde et al., 2015). The emphasis on

reading and writing for religious purposes in mosque schools has contributed to children’s literacy (Burde et al., 2015). Thus, an essential skill is taught to children through religious education, which may be more relevant to children but not taught in the official curricula.

Furthermore, NFE programs can create and implement “girl-friendly” curricula that combat gender stereotyping found in some formal education systems (Gee, 2015). This includes making traditionally masculine fields such as science and engineering more accessible and welcoming to girls. For example, the Technical/Engineering Education Quality Improvement Project in India increases access to training for female faculty and refurbishes campuses to make them more accessible for female students (World Bank, 2012, p. 219). NFE programs may be more successful at conducting these programs because many formal education systems do not have the capacity or drive to implement them.

### **What are the challenges of NFE in reaching girls?**

Despite the successes of NFE described above, the current setup still poses some challenges that can harm girls in the long run. Most pertinent is the dilemma that the prolonged use of NFE systems is not sustainable. Related to this is the issue of certification for NFE programs. When students leave or graduate from these programs, they are not always awarded certificates or degrees to signify their learning, which can prevent them from enrolling in further education or obtaining certain jobs in the future. These issues must be addressed by NFE providers so that these programs can continue to effectively serve the most marginalized girls.

#### *Sustainability concerns*

NFE programs are designed to be temporary, aiming to reach children who would otherwise be out of school. The goal of such programs is to integrate into the government’s formal education system. However, prolonged instability and government incapacity in many contexts have resulted in the continuation of many NFE programs past their anticipated conclusion. This poses an issue for programs that are funded by foreign governments and charitable foundations that agree to support programs for a fixed period by offering a predetermined amount of funding. Furthermore, small-scale programs that receive no funding and are run by community volunteers are even less likely to be sustained for extended periods. For example, many home-based school teachers are not paid, which creates a “precarious economic situation” that likely cannot be sustained in the long term (Kirk & Winthrop, 2008, p. 882). The unsustainability of these small-scale programs poses a particular threat to girls’ education as they are used in contexts in which formal education for girls is banned, such as in Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. In sum, “[t]he absence of long-term strategic thinking by government and donors exposes CBE programs—and students—to unpredictable closures, which can compromise students’ educational future” (HRW, 2017, p. 25).

#### *Certification and recognition of learning*

Another concern is that girls are often not recognized for their non-formal learning in a way that is comparable to formal education systems, or at all (Pilz & Wilmshömer, 2015; UNESCO, 2011). This issue has become a topic of debate in Europe in the last decade after a European Council Recommendation in 2012 urged countries to have national policies to support the validation of non-formal and informal learning in place by 2018 (Looney & Santibañez, 2021). The goal behind this discourse is to make non-formal learning more visible, especially for “disadvantaged individuals, including immigrants, refugees, early school leavers, individuals with disabilities, the unemployed and those at risk of unemployment, older individuals, and others” (Looney & Santibañez, 2021, p. 439-440). In South Asia, the impetus for recognition of non-formal learning is similar; people need formal recognition

of their learning to access further education and jobs. For example, in Bangladesh, some students in NGO-provided primary schools have had difficulty sitting for entrance examinations for the government secondary schools for this reason (Rose, 2011).

### Conclusion

This critical analysis suggests that NFE programs in South Asia can mitigate some of the most common barriers that girls face in accessing formal education, serving as a viable alternative for the many marginalized girls. Many programs reach children in rural and geographically remote areas, sometimes partnering with the government to do so. These programs often aid girls in particular, who have been shown to be more sensitive to distance. In communities affected by conflict, NFE programs play a crucial role in educating girls who have been banned from learning. In some cases, NGOs and community members can negotiate to continue operating non-formal schools for young girls, but for most girls, discreet home-based schools are the only source of learning. Furthermore, NFE programs can address conservative cultural practices that typically restrict girls from going to school. Programs that incentivize families to continue sending their girls to school with cash grants can be particularly effective in delaying child marriage and early childbirth, two major barriers to continuing education. Programs that offer contextually relevant education can also incentivize families to send their girls to school. Afghan home-based schools and mosque schools serve as strong examples of programs that receive strong parental support and teach children essential information for navigating their society.

Despite the strength of NFE programs in promoting girls' education, some challenges must be addressed, notably related to sustainability and certification. When NFE programs are forced to continue past their intended period because the government does not have the capacity to integrate the learners into the formal system, the eventual closure when funding runs dry can leave learners in a precarious state. Additionally, a lack of certification for non-formal learning poses significant challenges for accessing further education or jobs. While the discourse around this topic has taken off across Europe, more action must be taken to aid recipients of NFE in South Asia. Failure to address these concerns risks further marginalizing the girls that such programs seek to help.

This research also revealed that there are notable gaps in the literature about NFE. My primary observation is that much of the literature on NFE in South Asia focuses on increasing access to education rather than the quality of education. While ensuring that all children have access to education is essential, especially for girls, it is equally important that the knowledge they are taught is of quality. There is little literature on utilizing NFE to teach girls skills for emerging economies, such as "green" skills or technological skills that would open more economic opportunities for them in the future. There is also a gap in the literature that focuses on teaching girls "soft skills" to increase their agency in their communities, such as building confidence in girls. The literature that does exist about soft skills emphasizes how NFE programs can teach children how to behave in accordance with cultural expectations, which may perpetuate the marginalization of women and girls. These gaps could be due to a lack of research on such programs, or due to a lack of programs that teach these skills.

Through these insights, I hope to have emphasized that NFE programs can provide education to many girls across South Asia who would otherwise be out of school. Although such programs are not without their challenges, careful attention to the implementation, curricula, and recognition of such programs can help ensure their success. As we collectively work towards achieving education for all, state and non-state actors should continue to work together to implement and operate NFE programs, recognizing their strengths in mitigating some of the barriers posed to marginalized groups by formal



education systems.

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