

Learning: Providing Opportunities for Women and Disabled People in rural communities of Pakistan.

Small village located in eastern suburb of Lahore, there is a Community Learning Centre (CLC). This centre is not different from any other stone structured residential house in the village with one floor building. We found 20 female students learning in this Centre, sitting on the ground but enjoying friendly atmosphere and seriously learning skills. Now here is Ms. Tahira Ghafoor aged 19 and Ms. Sidra Ghafoor aged 14 who are sisters, commuting to this Centre 6 days a week to be trained in literacy, sewing and other skills. They are friendly and well integrated with other students. A significant factor is that they are deaf and mute (meaning they cannot talk and hear).

In this country Pakistan, male literacy rate is 69% in contrast with female literacy rate of merely 45%. Traditionally there has been reluctance for women education. This gender disparity is more severe in the rural communities particularly for women with disabilities. It is difficult for them to have access to education in rural communities. Their opportunities are limited. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has initiated new activity this year to improve this situation in a close collaboration with local NGO. UNESCO has established 50 CLCs for women in different parts of the country and has provided services not only for women but also for disable people to promote their social participation.

Concurrently in this month the Government of Pakistan has ratified the international Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which was not yet ratified by the Government of Japan. CRPD upholds the principle of inclusive and integrated education for all, including both disabled and non disabled people together. This Centre is in accordance with this principle of CRPD. There are still some challenges such as teaching methodology for teaching disabled students. However, these sisters are trying to communicate with teachers and other students using gestures and body language as well as reading lips. The Director/Representative of UNESCO Islamabad Dr.

Kozue Kay Nagata commented “To enjoy learning together with non-disabled children is most important initial step for disabled students”. The UNESCO Director is very positive and proactive about learning of disabled students.

“I would like to learn a lot of other things” says Ms. Tahira in oral language, in her best possible manner.

In this Centre you do not know who is disabled and who is not disabled because the students really enjoy learning together and they are enthusiastic. It is their positive attitude that impressed me most.

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