

Promise and Poverty in India

"India is a land of bright promise. It is also extremely poor. About 27m Indians will be born this year. Unless things improve, almost 2m of them will die before the next general election. Of the



children who survive, more than 40% will be physically stunted by malnutrition. Most will enroll in a school, but they cannot count on their teachers showing up. After five years of classes, less than 60% will be able to read a short story and more than 60% will still be stumped by simple arithmetic."

The Economist, May 21, 2009

With these facts in mind, Lotus Outreach developed the Lotus Education As a Right Network (LEARN) to enroll school-aged children who are currently left out of the education system and to bring substandard schools up to par through right to education advocacy. The LEARN program utilizes a combination of legal advocacy, community mobilization and independent monitoring to ensure the quality of government schools in rural Haryana. By focusing on improving—rather than replicating—existing educational infrastructures, Lotus Outreach is able to ensure access to quality education for thousands of children while operating on a shoestring budget.

Meonis: Muslim women hardest hit by poverty in Mewat

India's Haryana state is relatively wealthy, but houses one of the most regressive districts in terms of education in all of India. Although its farthest point is no more than 145 km from the national capital, Haryana's Mewat district lags behind the rest of the state on most development indices: there are few paved roads, electricity is available only three hours a day, and medical facilities are dilapidated at best.¹

Home to one million people, Mewat is largely populated by the Muslim Meo tribe whose misfortunes clash sharply with more affluent surrounding areas. Lack of public transport has severely depressed economic development and 94 per cent of the community relies on agriculture as its chief source of livelihood. There is no industrialization despite the fact that

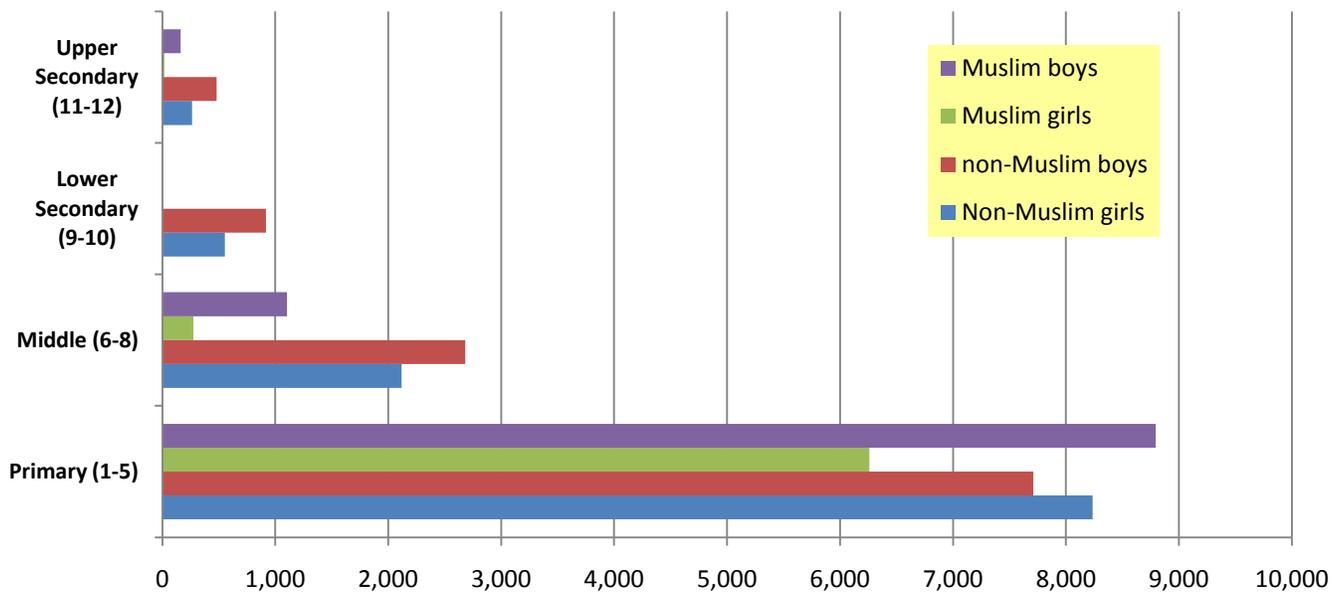


¹ Meshack, Anshu. (Aug-Sept 2008). In the Shadows. *Charkha Development Communication Network*. Retrieved October 2, 2009, from <http://www.charkha.org/newsletter/shadow.html>.

an industrial belt lies just 30 kilometers away in adjacent districts.

This severe penury has exacted a disproportionate toll on Mewat's female population, the Meonis, which bears the multiple burdens of maintaining the household, working the fields and childrearing. The cultural institution of child marriage further cripples the Meonis, who commonly become mothers at puberty and bear children throughout their reproductive years. Very few of these women study beyond the primary level, and female literacy rates linger at an abominable 2.13 percent.²

School Attendance Rates in Mewat



Our Solution

“It’s generally accepted that one of the reasons that East Asia has prospered in recent decades is that it educates females and incorporates them into the labor force, in a way that has not been true in India or Africa.”

Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *Half the Sky*

Lotus Outreach believes that providing girls with basic education is one of the most powerful catalysts for reducing poverty and remedying its tragic consequences. The simple fact is that children born to mothers with primary school



² Akhter, Khalid. (May 6, 2008). Next to dazzling Gurgaon, the backward district of Mewat is all that ‘India Shining’ is not. *HardNewsMedia*. Retrieved July 6, 2009, from <http://www.hardnewsmedia.com/2008/05/2168>.

education are only half as likely to die before the age of 5.³ Educated girls tend to marry later, space pregnancies and raise healthy and educated children.

Educated women also have increased earning potential – one extra year of primary school can boost a woman’s eventual wages by 10 to 20 percent⁴. Women with a greater voice in household decisions are demonstrably more likely to put the medical needs, education and general well-being of their children first, reinvesting up to 90 percent of their income into their families compared with 30 to 40 percent for men⁵. It is no surprise then, that children of educated women have improved survival rates, nutritional status and school attendance.⁶

The greatest obstacle to female education in Mewat is a prevailing conservative attitude towards women. The scarcity of secondary schools prevents girls from continuing their education: while boys travel to neighboring villages, girls are strictly forbidden from leaving their own villages without an escort. For the Meos, allowing a woman to travel unprotected invites temptation and moral transgression.

Thus, as part of its wider education program in the area, Lotus Education As a Right Network (LEARN), Lotus Outreach would like to mitigate this egregious shortcoming in female schooling by providing safe, chaperoned transportation. While LEARN is petitioning for the establishment of more secondary schools in the longer term, it seeks to immediately remedy the shortfall by getting girls to the schools which exist.

We need your help.

LEARN field officers have worked diligently since the inception of the program in 2007 to develop a solid rapport with families in more than 40 villages. Building on that foundation, field officers have persuaded a sufficient number of these families in villages with the most acute female drop-out rates to participate in a pilot program. This is where you come in.



Lotus Outreach has identified 12 van owners and chaperones to transport 12 girls each to adjacent villages for secondary school, as well as the students to fill them. But we lack the financial support to pay the drivers for their services. One van can provide daily transport, five days a week, for \$178 per month. Will you help us introduce these promising young girls to a path out of poverty?

³ United Nations Children’s Fund. The State of the World’s Children 2007. New York: United Nations, December 2006.

⁴ George Psacharopoulos and Harry Anthony Patrinos, “Returns to Investment in Education: A Further Update,” Policy Research Working Paper 2881. (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2002.)

⁵ Fortson, Chris. “Women’s Rights Vital for Developing World.” Yale News Daily, 2003.

⁶ United Nations Children’s Fund. The State of the World’s Children 2007. New York: United Nations, December 2006.

Contact Us

For more information, please contact:

Erika Keaveney

Executive Director

Lotus Outreach International

P.O. Box 620222

San Diego, CA 92162-0222

Tel / Fax: 888-831-9990

Email: Erika@lotusoutreach.org

www.lotusoutreach.org