

Women's Education: A Global Challenge

She mixes the cowdung with her fingers. It is gooey, smelly; she deftly mixes it with hay; and some bran; then she tries to stand up on the slippery floor of the cowshed and skids; slowly she regains her balance, goes outside with her basket and deftly pats cowdung cakes on the walls, on tree-trunks. . . . When dry her mother uses them for cooking. . . . She does a myriad other kaleidoscopic activities. The economy would not survive without her—at least not the economy of the poor: the girl child.

While she is doing all this what is her brother doing? Studying and getting his books ready for school.

The girl child thus remains outside education.

—Viji Srinivasan, director of Adithi (Patna, Bihar, India), in its monthly newsletter

The right to education flows directly from the right to life and is related to the dignity of the individual.

—*Supreme Court of India, Unnikrishnan J.P. v. State of Andhra Pradesh*¹

It is late afternoon in the Sithamarhi district of rural Bihar, in northeastern India. Bihar is an especially anarchic state, with a corrupt government, a problematic infrastructure, and few services for the poor. Roads are so bad that even a Jeep cannot go more than twenty miles per hour; thus it has taken us two days to go what must be a relatively short distance from the capital city of Patna to this area near the Nepalese border. We arrive to find little in the way of public education but a lot of activity provided by a local branch of the Patna-based nongovernmental organ-

¹ All India Reports 1993 SC 2178. The court is referring to an interpretative tradition according to which Article 21 of the Constitution (the analogue of our Fourteenth Amendment), which stipulates that no person may be deprived of “life or liberty” without due process of law, should be interpreted broadly, so as to include within the concept of life the idea of a life with human dignity. This tradition has therefore also held that the right to life includes the right to livelihood.

ization (NGO) Adithi, founded and run by Viji Srinivasan, whose dynamic organization is one of the most influential advocates for women's education in this difficult region.²

The girls of the village, goatherds by day, are starting school. They come together in a shed, all ages, to attend the Adithi literacy program. In some regions of India, most notably Kerala, the state government has been highly effective in promoting literacy for both boys and girls. Here in Bihar, the state government, run from jail by demagogue Laloo Prasad Yadav, fails to deliver essential services to the poor, so most education for the rural poor is pieced together in this way.³ Viji and I sit on the ground to watch the class, which, like the one-room schoolhouses I read about as a child in stories of the American West, covers all levels and subjects at once, with about fifteen students. Somehow, it all seems to work, through the resourcefulness and responsiveness of the teachers, themselves poor rural women who have been assisted by Adithi's programs.

Viji, who has worked in women's development for almost forty years, began to run Adithi in 1988. It currently helps more than twenty-five thousand women and children in rural Bihar. After the math and the reading comes drama: the girls proudly present for Viji and me a play that they have improvised and recently performed for their entire village, about a young man who refuses to demand a dowry when he marries. (Dowry is a major cause of women's poor life chances in India, both because it defines a girl child as a drag on family resources and because it can later be used as the occasion for extortionate demands for more, frequently involving domestic violence and even murder.) The girls play all the roles; one big tough girl, whose six-foot stature gives surprising evidence of good nutrition, takes special pleasure in acting the young man's villainous

² Adithi had to begin by creating teaching materials. India has 385 or so languages, seventeen official, and many with no written traditions. The poor are often simply unable to obtain an education if their only language is one in which education is not offered.

³ Laloo Prasad Yadav's wife, Rabri Devi, was running the state officially, given that he had been jailed for corruption (a grain/bribery scandal). Shortly after this time, a state of national emergency was declared in Bihar, and the state was put under the direct governance of the national government for a month or two, not long enough to effect any real change. I cannot resist adding one point connected to my earlier writing. In several papers, most recently "Human Capabilities, Female Human Beings" (Nussbaum 1996), I criticized a paper by anthropologist Frédérique Marglin that attacked the practice of smallpox vaccination in India on the grounds that it had eradicated the cult of Sittala Devi, the goddess to whom one prays in order to avert smallpox. I can now announce that Sittala Devi is alive and well in Bihar. Indeed, she flourishes under the patronage of Laloo Prasad Yadav, who believes that she cured him from a liver ailment. I have seen her beauteous shrine in a slum in Patna, surrounded by the signs of Laloo's neglect of his civic duties.

father, greedy for dowry. (This area of rural Bihar has a female-male ratio of 75 to 100, giving strong indication of unequal nutrition and health care; girls in school do better because their families expect that they may bring in an income.) At last, young love and good sense triumph: the couple get married and go their own way, and no money changes hands. Even the groom's parents say that this way is better. The girls giggle with pleasure at the subversive thing they have cooked up. One little girl, too young for the play, sits by the window, her hair lit up by the setting sun. On her slate she draws a large and improbable flower. "Isn't she wonderful?" Viji whispers with evident zest.

Since my practice is to follow activists around, observing what they do, I usually do not see villages in which activists have not been active. So I usually do not see the most depressing things. But I know that, for every village like this one, there are ten where girls have no education at all, no employment options, and no opportunity to criticize the institutions that determine the course of their lives. In the nation as a whole, female literacy is still under 50 percent.⁴ And the sex ratio, a good index of the worth in which female life is held, has been plummeting, from 92/100 in the 1990 census to around 85/100 now.⁵ Those are aggregate figures and official statistics. Here in this particular region of Bihar, a head count by Adithi has found the astonishing figure of 75/100. Talking about this to Viji, I ask, "How do you sustain hope in a situation like this, when you can see that, even if you do some good in one place, there are so many more places that you haven't influenced?" She says, "I just try to focus on what my organization can do here and now. That is the way I keep on."

Women's education is both crucial and contested. A key to the amelioration of many distinct problems in women's lives, it is spreading, but it is also under threat, both from custom and traditional hierarchies of power and from the sheer inability of states and nations to take effective action.

In this article, I shall try to show, first, exactly why education should be thought to be a key for women in making progress on many other

⁴ The rate is 45.5 percent, according to the 2000 census; the male ratio is 68.4 percent. (For data here and elsewhere, see UNDP 2001.)

⁵ Even the 1990 figure was the lowest since the census began to be taken early in this century. It is estimated that when women and men receive equal nutrition and health care, the sex ratio should be around 102 or 103 women to 100 men. The recent sharp decline can be attributed to the new availability of techniques for determining the sex of the fetus and a resulting increase in sex-selective abortion. These techniques are illegal, but they are available more or less everywhere.

problems in their lives. Second, I shall describe the sources of resistance to educating women and argue that objections from the side of traditionalism are misplaced and incoherent. (Here I shall draw on my experience with women's development groups in India.) Finally, I shall argue that, if women's education is to be fostered around the world, two things must happen that are now not sufficiently happening. First, nations, and states within nations, must make women's education a high priority matter and devote a good deal of their resources and energies to it. Second, wealthy nations, their concerned citizens, and their corporations must all commit resources to the effort.

In the process, all concerned should recognize that promoting economic growth is not a sufficient way to promote education for women. Development theorists who focus only on maximizing economic growth, assuming that growth alone will provide for other central human needs, are very likely to shortchange female education. In their comparative field studies of the Indian states, Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen have shown that growth-oriented policies do not improve the quality of education, particularly female education, in the absence of additional focused state action (1995).⁶ Thus states such as Gujarat and Haryana that have done well in fostering economic growth often do quite poorly in basic education,⁷ and Kerala, whose economy has not grown well, can boast 99 percent literacy for both boys and girls in adolescence, against a background of 35 percent female and 65 percent male literacy for the nation as a whole.⁸ In Kerala, intelligent state action has delivered what NGOs like Adithi currently try to provide in states such as Bihar, where the public sector has not assumed the challenge of female education. And indeed it is very important to insist that development is a normative concept and that we should not assume that the human norms we want will be delivered simply through a policy of fostering economic growth. As the late Mahbub ul Haq (leading development economist and former director of the United Nations Development Programmes [UNDP]) wrote in 1990, in the first of the *Human Development Reports* of the UNDP, "The real wealth of a nation is its people. And the purpose of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy, and creative lives. This simple

⁶ The field studies are published in Drèze and Sen 1996.

⁷ Bihar is not doing well either economically or in its record on health and education.

⁸ The democratically elected Marxist government has allowed labor unions to force wages very high, which has caused jobs to move to neighboring states. Many Keralan men are forced to look for employment outside the state.

but powerful truth is too often forgotten in the pursuit of material and financial wealth” (UNDP 1990, 1).

Mentioning the *Human Development Reports* gives me a way to respond, in a preliminary way at least, to a perpetual question: What is the use of theory when we can see that what makes women’s lives better is courageous activism of the Viji Srinivasan type? Now one might respond, first, with a plea of personal competence. Some people are good activists; others are not. If theory is what one can do, and professionally does, then one might as well try to see how theory might make a positive contribution to the lives of women. I believe, however, that the examples of Sen and ul Haq point the way to a stronger defense of theory.

Good theories are an important part of getting a hearing for urgent moral concerns in the international arena. Before the “human development” paradigm was crafted by ul Haq, drawing on Sen’s ideas, the development paradigm was focused exclusively on economic growth. The quality of life was measured by looking only at gross national product (GNP) per capita, an approach totally inadequate for analyzing the problems women face in the developing world (Nussbaum and Sen 1993). Having a new explicit theory of what real development consists of, and putting that forward in reports that packaged information in a new way and ranked nations in a new way, was not a totally original contribution, for, of course, advocates for the poor had been saying just such things for years. But the theorization of such insights was a big part of enabling the new “human development” paradigm to capture the attention of governments, development agencies, and, increasingly, agencies such as the World Bank. The “capabilities approach” to the measurement of the quality of life (which Sen and I have developed in different ways) needed to be brought down to earth and made easily accessible for policy makers and bureaucrats: this was the tremendous contribution of ul Haq, who had a keen instinct for what would “work” politically and what would be too fussy or complex.⁹ But the background theoretical ideas needed to be there to be scrutinized, and these ideas continue to be a source of further work and of argument against the still-dominant economic growth paradigm. It is only because the work has some degree of theoretical sophistication that it is increasingly being used by economists who consult in international agencies and by philosophers who develop its implications further.¹⁰

⁹ For some differences between Sen’s version of the capabilities approach and my own, see Nussbaum 2003a.

¹⁰ For example, see Alkire 2002.

Our world is increasingly dominated by the profit motive, as multinational corporations and global markets increasingly leach sovereignty away from national governments. The dominant economic paradigm encourages continued insensitivity to the situation of the world's poorest people and to the special disadvantages suffered by women—not because economists are by nature bad people, but because they see things through the lens of a bad theory (which, of course, might have insensitivity somewhere behind it, or maintaining it in place). This paradigm, and the practices it supports, should be contested. Consumer protests and protests in the streets are one crucial part of that critical process, but good theory is another part that is not without value. It is not as though we could ever remake the world so that it was simply run by the wisdom of people such as Viji Srinivasan. It is run by think tanks, corporations, bureaucrats, and politicians, and these people typically use some formal model of what they are pursuing. If they have no “human development” paradigm and no writings expressing the importance of women’s education and other goals stressed by that paradigm, they will use the existing paradigm, and they will focus exclusively on growth. So those of us who do not have Viji Srinivasan’s creativity, stamina, local knowledge, and physical courage may still have a task that we can undertake that could possibly be of some use, when sufficiently attentive to the complexities of experience.

Education and women’s capabilities

Despite a constant focus on women’s education as a priority in global discussions of human rights and quality of life, and in the efforts of activists of all sorts and many governments, women still lag well behind men in many countries of the world, even at the level of basic literacy. In many countries, male and female literacy rates are similar. These include virtually all the countries that the *Human Development Report, 2001 (HDR)* of the United Nations Development Programme identifies as countries of “high human development,” because most of these nations have close to 100 percent literacy, at least as measured by data supplied by the countries themselves (UNDP 2001).¹¹ But relative male-female equality can also be

¹¹ Countries in this group that show a striking male-female disparity (more than five percentage points) include Singapore, Hong Kong, Brunei Darussalam, Bahrain, and Kuwait. Lest we think that the “Arab States” are systematically depriving women, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar show a higher literacy rate for women than for men. The sheikh of the United Arab Emirates is a vigorous supporter of female education and is also opening a coeducational liberal arts university that recently offered a position to one of my graduate students who specializes in feminism and environmental ethics.

found in many poorer nations, such as Trinidad and Tobago, Panama, Russia, Belarus, Romania, Thailand, Colombia, Venezuela, Jamaica,¹² Sri Lanka, Paraguay, Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, South Africa, Guyana, Vietnam, Botswana, and Lesotho.¹³

There are, however, forty-three countries in which male literacy rates are higher than the female rate by fifteen percentage points or more. Since the *HDR* lists 162 nations, this means more than one-fourth of the nations in the world. These nations include India, Syria, Turkey, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Sudan, and in general most, though not all, of the poorer nations of Africa.¹⁴ (China's gap is 14.5 percent, so it barely avoids being part of the group of 43.) In absolute terms, women's literacy rates are below 50 percent in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Egypt, and the preponderant number of the nations listed in the "low human development" category.¹⁵ Some of the lowest rates are Pakistan at 30 percent, Nepal at 22.8 percent, Bangladesh at 29.3 percent, Yemen at 23.9 percent, Senegal at 26.7 percent, Gambia at 28.5 percent, Guinea-Bissau at 18.3 percent, Burkina Faso at 13.3 percent, and Niger at 7.9 percent.

If we now turn to secondary education, the gaps are even more striking. Moreover, as is not generally the case with basic literacy, the gaps are actually growing: in twenty-seven countries the secondary school enrollment of girls declined between 1985 and 1997. And this happened, as the *HDR* stresses, during a time of rapid technological development, in which skills became ever more important as passports to economic opportunity (UNDP 2001, 15). Finally, although data on university enrollments of women are not presented in the *HDR*, it is evident that, in many nations, women form a small fraction of the university population.

Why should we think that this matters deeply? Is not all this emphasis on literacy an elite value, possibly not relevant to the lives that poor working people are trying to lead? Approximately in January 1988, Rajeev Gandhi came to Harvard to deliver a large public lecture about the achievements of his administration. Questioned by some Indian students about why he had done so little to raise literacy rates, he replied, "The common

¹² Jamaica, although relatively poor (78 on the Human Development Index [HDI]), actually shows 90.3 percent female literacy and 82.4 percent male literacy.

¹³ In Lesotho, women allegedly have 93.3 percent literacy as against only 71.7 percent for men, so there is really a large gender gap, but in the atypical direction.

¹⁴ Kenya, which barely gets into the "medium" rather than "low human development" group, does unusually well on education, with 74.8 percent literacy for women, 88.3 percent for men.

¹⁵ The most striking exception at the bottom of the HDI is Zambia, with 70.2 percent female literacy, 84.6 percent male literacy.

people have a wisdom that would only be tarnished by literacy.” Why was this answer so ill received by the Indians in the audience, and (more importantly) why was it a bad answer?

First of all, let us get rid once and for all of the idea that literacy is a value that is peculiarly “Western.” Women all over the world are struggling to attain it, and some of the biggest success stories in the area of literacy are non-Western stories. Kerala, for example, raised literacy rates to virtually 100 percent for both boys and girls—by virtue of intense government concern, creative school designing, and other things that I shall later discuss. That is a staggering achievement given Kerala’s poverty, and it is supported with joy and energy by girls and women.

We can add that most women in developed countries do not have to struggle to become literate: it is foisted upon them. So we do not really know how deeply we value it, or whether we would, in fact, fight for it, the way women in India and other developing countries do every day, often at risk to safety and even life. But perhaps we can see even more clearly why literacy is not a parochial value if we begin to ponder the connections between literacy and other capabilities for which women are striving all over the world.

If there was a time when illiteracy was not a barrier to employment, that time has passed. The nature of the world economy is such that illiteracy condemns a woman (or man) to a small number of low-skilled types of employment. With limited employment opportunities, a woman is also limited in her options to leave a bad or abusive marriage. If a woman can get work outside the home, she can stand on her own. If she is illiterate, she will either remain in an abusive marriage for lack of options, or she may leave and have nothing to fall back on. (Many sex workers end up in sex work for precisely this reason.) While in the family, an illiterate woman has a low bargaining position for basic resources such as food and medical care because her exit options are so poor and her perceived contribution to the success of the family unit is low.¹⁶ Where women have decent employment options outside the home, the sex ratio tends to reflect a higher valuation of the worth of female life.

Literacy is, of course, not the only key factor in improving women’s bargaining position: training in other marketable skills is also valuable, though literacy is more flexible. Property rights that give women access to credit and programs that give them credit even in the absence of real property are also highly significant.¹⁷

¹⁶ See Sen 1991.

¹⁷ See Agarwal 1994, 1997.

Because literacy is connected in general with the ability to move outside the home and to stand on one's own outside of it, it is also connected to the ability of women to meet and collaborate with other women. Women may, of course, form local face-to-face networks of solidarity, and they ubiquitously do. But to participate in a larger movement for political change, women need to be able to communicate through mail, e-mail, and so forth.

More generally, literacy very much enhances women's access to the political process. We can see this very clearly in the history of the *panchayats*, or local village councils, in India. In 1992, India adopted the seventy-second and seventy-third amendments to the Constitution, giving women a mandatory 33 percent reservation in the *panchayats*.¹⁸ (Elections take place by rotation: in each cycle, a given seat is designated as a woman's seat, and the woman's seat shifts from cycle to cycle.) This move, of course, had intrinsic significance. Increasing women's literacy by itself would not have produced anything like a 33 percent result, as we can see from the United States, where women still hold only 13 percent of the seats in Congress. But in order for this result to be truly effective, making women dignified and independent equals of males, literacy has to enter the picture. According to extensive studies of the *panchayat* system by Niraja Jayal and Nirmala Buch, women are persistently mocked and devalued in the *panchayats* if they are illiterate. (Jayal and Buch note that illiterate men do not suffer similar disabilities.)¹⁹ Women often campaign as stand-ins for husbands who can no longer hold their seats—and their independence is greater if they are literate, able thus to have greater independent access to information and communications. As a woman seeks to contest a non-reserved seat (sometimes running against her own husband), her chances are clearly enhanced if she can move as a fully independent actor in society, with access to communications from memos to national newspapers.²⁰ Literacy is crucial in this transition. Buch finds that one of the biggest changes brought about by the new system is a greater demand on the part of women for the education of their daughters—so that they can take their place as equals in the new system. While this finding shows us that we should not push for literacy in isolation from other values such as

¹⁸ See Nussbaum forthcoming a.

¹⁹ See Buch 2000 and Jayal 2000; I am also greatly indebted to Zoya Hasan (2000).

²⁰ See "Sex, Laws, and Inequality: What India Can Teach the United States" (Nussbaum 2002b), where I discuss one such case and the history in general. (*Caveat lector*: the publishers, in their infinite wisdom, removed reference to teaching the United States from my title when they put it on the cover of the journal, calling it simply "Sex, Laws, and Inequality: India's Experience.")

political participation—for here it is the fact of greater participation that drives the demand for literacy, not the reverse—it does show us that the two are allies.

On the plane of national and international politics, it is very difficult indeed for an illiterate woman to enjoy full participation. India makes it easy for illiterate people to vote by using party symbols instead of words on ballots; national elections have a remarkably high voter turnout, including many illiterate women and men. But obviously enough, a person who can read the newspapers has a much fuller and more independent voice than one who cannot. (In most of rural India, electricity is sporadic, often available only at odd hours of the night. Thus television is no solution. There are many television sets that are purely decorative.) As actual participants in national legislatures and in international gatherings such as human rights meetings, illiterate women are obviously very likely to be left out. Even if at times their voices are heard, they cannot participate fully as equals in meetings that involve the circulation of draft upon draft of a human rights document.

Even in professions where literacy is not crucial to the employment itself, it proves crucial to the politics of employment, as women need to band together, often transnationally, to fight for better labor standards. A fine example of this fact is Women in the Informal Economy Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), an international group of female home-based workers (hawkers and vendors, craft laborers, etc.) who have organized for better working conditions. This group does reach out systematically to illiterate women, but again, it is obvious that participants in the international meetings of this organization, where draft resolutions are discussed, are overwhelmingly likely to be educated women.

Literacy is crucial, too, for women's access to the legal system. Even to bring a charge against someone who has raped you, you have to file a complaint.²¹ If your father or husband is not helping you out and some legal NGO does not take on your case, you are nowhere if you cannot read and write—and, indeed, more than that. For you need an education that includes basic knowledge of the political and legal process in your own nation. Many NGOs in India spend a lot of time helping uneducated women bring their complaints, and individual educated women often do this as a kind of voluntary public service. But obviously enough, more such work could be done if more people could do it!

²¹ Called, in India, a “First Information Report” (FIR), these documents must be initiated by the victim: thus in India law-enforcement agencies all on their own typically do not initiate criminal prosecution.

These concrete factors suggest some less tangible connections. Literacy (and education in general) is very much connected to women's ability to form social relationships on a basis of equality with others and to achieve the important social good of self-respect. It is important, as well, to mobility (through access to jobs and the political process), to health and life (through the connection to bodily integrity and exit options)—in short, to more or less all of the “capabilities” that I have argued for as central political entitlements.²²

Especially important is the role that female education has been shown to have in controlling population growth. No single factor has a larger impact on the birth rate: for as women learn to inform themselves about the world they also increasingly take charge of decisions affecting their own lives. And as their bargaining position in the family improves through their marketable skills, their views are more likely to prevail.²³

So far I have focused on the role played by education in supporting other capabilities. But learning has a more subtle value as well, as a cultivation of powers of thought and expression that might otherwise go neglected. Such neglect of a human being's mental space is especially likely in lives given over to heavy physical labor and the added burden of housework and child care. The girls in Bihar were learning useful skills, but they were also learning to value their own humanity. The pride and confidence of their stance as they performed the play, their happy giggles as they told us how they first shocked, then influenced, their village—all this shows us that what is at stake in literacy is no mere skill but human dignity itself and the political and social conditions that make it possible for people to live with dignity. A young widow in an adult literacy program in Bangladesh told activist Martha Chen that her mother questioned the value of the class. She replied: “Ma, what valuable things there are in the books you will not understand because you cannot read and write. If somebody behaves badly with me, I go home and sit with the books. When I sit with the books my mind becomes better” (1983, 202).²⁴ The feeling of a place of mental concentration and cultivation that is one's own can only be properly prized, perhaps, if one has lacked it. There is

²² See Nussbaum 2000 and 2003a. The list of capabilities, as published in Nussbaum 2000, is presented as an appendix to the present article.

²³ See Sen 1996. Presented as a working document at the Cairo Population meeting, Sen's paper strongly influenced their conclusions. For a more general discussion of women's bargaining position and the factors affecting it, see Agarwal 1997.

²⁴ Rohima, the woman in question, also emphasizes the way in which literacy has increased her general mental concentration and understanding.

something in sitting with a book, this young woman was saying, that makes her feel more herself, less willing to be pushed around by others.

Thinking about the intrinsic value of basic education makes us see that what should be promoted—and what good activists typically promote—is not mere rote use of skills; it is an inquiring habit of mind and a cultivation of the inner space of the imagination. The girls in Bihar did not just drill on their sums and write letters on their slates. They gave plays, sang, and told stories. They used imagination to address their predicament, and this use of the imagination was woven into the entire educational process. This is typical of the approach of good NGOs in this area—unless entrenched social forces block their efforts. One day in January 2000, I went with activist Sarda Jain to visit a girls' literacy project in rural Rajasthan, several hours from Jaipur. This is the region of India in which child marriage (illegal) is the most common. Large groups of girls are married off at ages four or six. Although they do not live with their husbands until age twelve or so, their course in life is set. Their parents must keep them indoors or watch over them constantly to guard their purity, so that they can not really play outside like little boys. In addition, the parents know that these girls will not support them in their old age—they already “belong” to another family. So their development and health are typically neglected. The program I was visiting, run by an NGO called Vishaka, gives basic literacy and skills training to girls between the ages of six and twelve, that is, before they go to live with their husbands and while they are doing either domestic work or goatherding.²⁵ On this particular day, the girls from many different villages were coming together for testing in a large group. Sarda said to me, “I don't want to see the sums on their slates. I want to see the look in their eyes.” The girls duly appeared—all dolled up in their women's finery, unable to move freely, faces partly covered. The expected presence of strangers had made their parents costume them so as to assume their role as wives. They were physically unable to dance. Sarda was profoundly disappointed, for she interpreted the demeanor and appearance of the girls as a sign that all their training was merely skin deep and would not survive in their new lives as married women, as an inner shaping of their mental world.

²⁵ Vishaka is famous in India because it was the plaintiff in one of the landmark sexual harassment cases (*Vishaka v. Rajasthan*, discussed in Nussbaum 2002b and also in Nussbaum forthcoming b). The Vishaka case is not the one I call “problematic”: it is a promising example of the creative use of international documents in crafting domestic law. The Supreme Court held, in this case, that the guidelines on sexual harassment in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) were binding on the nation through its ratification of the treaty.

My argument about the role of education in developing central human capabilities in no sense implies that, without education, women do not have selves worthy of respect or basic human dignity. We may acknowledge that the absence of education involves a blighting of human powers without at all denying that the person who has been so blighted retains a basic core of human equality that grounds normative claims of justice. Indeed, in the capabilities approach it is precisely the presence of human dignity that gives rise to a claim that core human capacities should be developed, as an urgent issue of justice. Thinking about how to reconcile the recognition of dignity with the recognition that life's accidents can deform and deeply mar human powers is a very difficult matter, one that political philosophy has not yet resolved in a fully satisfactory way.²⁶ But it does seem clear that we can respect basic human capacities (what I elsewhere call "basic capabilities") without denying that the failure to support them (by nutrition, health care, education, etc.) can blight them in a serious way, by denying them a full development that is essential to the person's ability to live a life worthy of human dignity. The uneducated woman is likely to be a woman whose human powers of mind have been seriously underdeveloped, in just the way that the starving and powerless workers whom Marx describes in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* ([1844] 1982) are cut off from the fully human use of their faculties.

So far, I have focused on basic literacy—and with much reason, given the depressing statistics about women's literacy in the developing world. And basic literacy already opens up many options for women, as well as having intrinsic value as a cultivation of mind and thought. But one should emphasize that most job opportunities require far more than basic literacy. So does most active participation in citizenship and politics. Secondary education is a more difficult goal by far for women than primary education, since it is at this time that girls who have managed to go to school are often taken out of school to do housework or to get married. University education is the most difficult of all, because it usually requires going away from home, and the sacrifices involved are more readily made for boys than for girls. But the reality of politics in developing countries suggests that university-educated women are far more likely to be able to influence debates at a national level as well as to have access to the most influential and higher-paying jobs.

Women from poor rural areas face particularly great obstacles in seeking a higher education. A new university is currently being founded to address this need. The Asian University for Women (AUW) will be located in

²⁶ See Nussbaum 2002a, 2002c.

Bangladesh under a land grant arrangement from the national government. It will seek out female students from all over South Asia, preferring students from poor and rural areas and focusing on nations that have a weak higher education structure, such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal, although it will also include women from India, Sri Lanka, and possibly Indonesia and Malaysia. It will be similar to the liberal arts college as we know it in America; that is, two years will be spent pursuing a wide variety of subjects thought to constitute a “liberal education,” and then two will be spent in a major subject connected to job opportunities and culminating in the equivalent of a European or Indian M.A. The major subjects are largely in the sciences and social sciences (computer science, public health, etc.), but the “humanities,” much neglected in Asian higher education generally, will play a central role. Thus the required curriculum will probably include an emphasis on public debate and critical thinking, the study of the major world religions and cultures, and a large role for the arts.²⁷ (These ideas have deep roots in Bengali educational traditions, and particularly in the thought and educational practice of Rabindranath Tagore.) All these subjects will be introduced not as abstract elite refinements but as deeply interwoven with the experiences, traditions, and problems of developing nations. The language of instruction will (inevitably) be English, but, through intensive language training prior to the start of regular enrollment, much effort will be taken not to disadvantage women who have not had much exposure to English in their high school education (or who have been badly taught).²⁸ Faculty will be drawn from young Asian and also non-Asian scholars all over the world. The project itself is

²⁷ The curriculum committee as of June 2003 consists of Savitri Goonesekere, former chancellor of the University of Colombo in Sri Lanka and one of the redactors of CEDAW; Ayesha Jalal, a prominent Pakistani historian who writes on the history of India; Fran Volkmann, a former acting president of Smith College; and myself. In January 2003, we held a meeting at Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan, West Bengal, India, the university founded by Rabindranath Tagore together with his famous Santiniketan school. Leading female educators from Bangladesh and India were present and advised us on the future of the university. Those especially active (and likely to be involved in future planning) were Jasodhara Bagchi, head of the Women’s Commission in the state of West Bengal, and founder of the first program in women’s studies in India (at Jadavpur University in Calcutta) and Roop Rekha Verma, former vice-chancellor of the University of Lucknow and chair of philosophy and women’s studies at that university. (For some of my own educational ideas, see Nussbaum 1997.)

²⁸ In India there is a huge class gap here: the children of the upper-middle class typically go to “English medium” schools (private, often Roman Catholic), where they gain native-speaker fluency in English. In the regular public schools, instruction is mechanical and does not impart real fluency.

Asian in inspiration but also fully international; most of the members of the board of advisors are from Asia, though there are a few outsiders.²⁹

The mission of AUW will inevitably be controversial, especially for its commitment to single-sex education. Many development thinkers are skeptical about encouraging the segregation of women. I myself believe that, in an era of gross inequalities, single-sex institutions perform a very valuable function, helping women to achieve confidence and to overcome collective action problems that exist in their home settings. I also applaud the choice of the liberal arts format, which will promote an education focused on the needs of citizenship and the whole course of life rather than simply on narrow preprofessional learning. This format, too, permits explicit study of the history and problems of women and a focus on their experience in developing countries. Women's studies has proven enormously difficult to integrate into the European model, where students enter university to pursue only a single subject.³⁰

The problems of educating women in the developing world are enormous, as my data show. And yet, education for women is crucial to women's other opportunities and entitlements, as well as being of great intrinsic value.

Resistance to women's education

If all this is so, why should women's education encounter any resistance at all? Why should not the whole world agree that it is an urgent priority? Of course, at this point we encounter resistance of an obvious sort from entrenched custom and power. I have stressed that women's education is

²⁹ The founder and guiding spirit is Kamal Ahmad, originally from Bangladesh, educated at Harvard, currently working for a law firm in London; Asian members of the board of advisors have included Corazon Aquino, Fazle Hasan Abed from the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, Mohammed Yunus of the Grameen Bank (Bangladesh), feminist lawyer Asma Jehangir (Pakistan), and others from India, Indonesia, and Japan. The U.S. members have included Alice Huang of the California Institute of Technology and myself. Mark Malloch Brown from the UN Development Programme has also been involved at various stages, as have Mary Robinson of the UN and Henry Rosovsky of Harvard.

³⁰ Hence there is a growing interest in liberal arts education in Europe as well, e.g., there is the European College of Liberal Arts in Berlin and the University for Humanist Studies in Utrecht. But the concept is being discussed all over, from Sweden to Italy. Whether these discussions will inspire real change depends largely on whether faculty will become willing to teach undergraduates in small groups and really pay attention to them. Thus AUW, drawing as it will on Asians educated in the liberal arts system (*inter alios and alia*), is initially better placed than are the huge European universities, where professors rarely have serious contact with undergraduates.

revolutionary; it is a key to many other sources of power and opportunity. It is therefore not at all surprising that people who resist extending these other sources of power and opportunity to women typically oppose women's education, or at least its extension. Sometimes this opposition takes an extreme form, as it did in Afghanistan under the Taliban. Often, it takes a less extreme form, but it is real enough.³¹

Sometimes this type of opposition is masked by benign neglect. Thus many states that pay lip service to women's education and may at some level really think it important are simply not willing to do much to bring it about. India has been very slow to translate the equality of opportunity that its constitution guaranteed women in 1950 into actual policy aimed at making these opportunities real. Some part of this is sheer mismanagement and inefficiency, aided by widespread corruption in local government. But there can be no doubt that there are many people involved in politics in India who really do not want more educated women, in employment or in politics.

Resistance to female education is increased when its proponents push for real education, by which I mean an overall empowerment of the woman through literacy and numeracy but also the cultivation of the imagination and a mastery of her political and economic situation. Obviously enough, the sort of education I am favoring in this article is far more threatening than mere literacy and numeracy, and to that extent it faces a tougher struggle.

Sometimes, however, resistance comes from sheer economic necessity. Thus, many individual parents who have no objection to educating girls and boys on a basis of equality may be able to afford to educate only one of their children (in the sense that they will need to keep some at home to do the housework or send some out to do unpaid work such as herding or even wage work). In many cultural circumstances, existing employment opportunities dictate that the one educated must be a boy because his overall employment opportunities are greater and education is a necessary passport to these.³² So the neglect of female education may be a matter

³¹ On the history of this resistance in Bengal, a region marked by early progressive efforts to educate women, see Bagchi 1997. Bagchi describes the way in which the language of purity and nationalism was used to oppose women's literacy.

³² Interestingly, although this is the most common situation for poor parents in India, it is not so for the Muslim minority. Muslim men typically have poorer job opportunities than do Hindu men, both because of poverty and because of discrimination. Muslim parents do not press hard for the education of boys where they believe that the boy's job opportunities are in low-paying jobs that do not require education. In this situation, parents frequently continue the education of their daughters and send their sons out to work.

of survival for parents in many parts of the world. This sort of resistance must be addressed, and I shall get to that point in my next section.

So far, however, we have not dealt with anyone who uses a plausible normative argument to oppose female education as a goal. Let us therefore turn to such an argument. For want of a better name, let us call it the Rajeev Gandhi argument. Put a little more elegantly than he put it, this argument says that the world contains many cultures. Many are nonliterate. These nonliterate cultures should not be held in contempt. They, and the artistic and other human achievements they have made, should be respected. But literacy radically transforms such cultures. For example, oral poetry does not survive the advent of widespread literacy. So pushing for universal literacy is tantamount to destroying sources of value.³³

In response to this argument, we must make two points from the outset. First, cultures are not museum pieces to be contemplated; they are lives of human beings to be lived. So it is inappropriate to romanticize any aspect of culture that is either misery and injustice or linked to misery and injustice. Thus, when Frédérique Marglin romanticizes the lives of *devadasis*, child temple prostitutes, on the grounds that they preserve beautiful traditions of dance, this seems a misplaced nostalgic reaction that objectifies the misery that such girls suffer, taken from their families at a very young age and subjected to sex without consent.³⁴ Illiteracy itself may already be such a misery and injustice intrinsically, at least for many women in many places. This is especially likely to be true when not going to school is replaced by long hours of grinding labor, not by any other type of cultivation of mind and imagination, and this is typically the case for women who do not go to school. Oral poets are usually either males or highly educated leisured females. Illiteracy, moreover, is strongly linked, as I have already argued, to other forms of injustice: domestic violence without exit options and unequal political and employment opportunities.

Second, cultures are not monoliths. They do not contain a single set of norms and a single normative tradition. They contain real people, jockeying for power and opportunity. Women are often at odds with the norms that are well known as “the norms” of “the culture.” The cultural argument, basing its case on the values enshrined within a culture, should not fail to note these tensions.³⁵ But then what we have on our hands will probably be much more complicated than a choice between the value

³³ This argument has the general form of arguments about the preservation of traditional cultures in rural India by Frédérique Marglin and Stephen Marglin (1990).

³⁴ See F. A. Marglin 1985. For a different view of *devadasis*, see Omvedt 1983.

³⁵ See Nussbaum 2000, chap. 1.

of educating women and the value of traditional poetry and art: for we must include the resistance of women to tradition as one of the values that is also internal to the culture. In general, these internal tensions and disagreements make it very hard to use existing culture as any source of norms. The appeal to culture is thus in danger of falling into utter incoherence: for what is appealed to is in tension with other elements of itself.

We can add to this point the fact that, very often, powerful groups within a culture who are resisting change attempt to brand the internal demand for change as foreign in order to discredit it. This has been a persistent phenomenon in the history of women's attempts to become educated. Jasodhara Bagchi records that nineteenth-century women's education programs in Bengal, although led by internal reformers, were branded as "English" and "Western" by traditionalists. This happens all the time around the world. Chen quotes a woman in the literacy project run by the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee as saying, "They [male village leaders] say we will become Christian and English people will take us away. We are ruining the prestige of the village and breaking *purdah*. If we can get food, we will become Christian." To this already sarcastic characterization of the opponent, this woman adds, "We do not listen to the *mullahs* any more. They also did not give us even a quarter kilo of rice. Now we get ten maunds of rice [i.e., because the women are earning incomes]" (Chen 1983, 176). We obviously should not be misled by the fact that opponents of a movement for change name it Western. If it is there in the culture, it is in it, no matter whether it is new or old, traditional or antitraditional. We may often be inclined to say that literacy is more a part of the culture of rural women in India and Bangladesh than it is of our own, in the sense that they choose it, fight for it, grab hold of it, where none of us has ever done any such thing.

What about the fact, though, that women themselves sometimes voice a reluctance to become educated? Bagchi records in her 1997 book that one-fourth of the school-age girls she surveyed in West Bengal thought that women should have less education than men. "When we asked them why they felt so, the answers we received all pointed to the fact that from childhood most girls had been conditioned to believe that men were superior to women and boys to girls" (1997, 105). Such views are typical examples of "adaptive preferences," preferences that have simply adjusted to traditional norms and opportunities; it is not clear that public policy should take them into account. These girls know their options and op-

portunities: so, as Jon Elster says, why desire the grapes that are out of reach?³⁶

There are other possibilities when girls express a reluctance to become educated. The girls studied by Bagchi are still living at home, so, even if they have a strong desire for education, they may be unwilling to voice it. A third possibility is that they have a genuine nonadaptive preference for less or no education but that it is not fully informed: they do not know, for example, how much their political and employment opportunities will be limited if they do not become educated. A fourth possibility is that they have a genuine, fully informed preference for little or no education, but that it is a rational response to other inequalities in their lives: they may think, "What point is there in going to school when I am going to be married off at age ten and denied any chance to leave the house thereafter, and when being educated may make my husband and my in-laws more likely to abuse me?"³⁷ A fifth possibility is that they do not want to go to school because it seems difficult and no fun. Many children have such preferences, although we rarely consider them fully informed. Finally, there may be cases in which an individual girl or woman (more convincingly a woman), surveying all of the possibilities in life, concludes that education is not for her, not a constituent of the life that she would wish to lead.

How should we respond to these different types of resistance on the part of women themselves? It seems to me that, where we are dealing with children, we should not honor such preferences. The debate over compulsory primary and secondary education has been a long and difficult one in the history of most nations, but by now there is an international consensus that education has the status of a fundamental human entitlement and that the only way to secure it for people is to make education compulsory for children of certain ages. This has proven the only way to surmount the resistance of parents and other adults who would like, say, to use these children for labor inside the house or outside it. It has also

³⁶ For discussion of the whole issue of adaptive preferences, and the views of Elster (1985) and Sen, see Nussbaum 2000, chap. 2. Sen discusses this question in many writings; one good example is Sen 1991.

³⁷ For one example of such abuse, see Tagore (1913) 1990. Similarly, Gary Becker argues in Becker 1995 that both women and African Americans "underinvest" in their "human capital" as a rational response to the discrimination that they actually suffer in employment. Women's preference for veiling, where it exists, typically falls in this category: it is often described as a rational response to the way men actually treat them, though it might not be the woman's preference if that bad state of affairs were not in place.

proven the only way to get children themselves to see what the value of an education is for them. And we typically do not think it objectionable to make children go to school when they do not want to. Indeed, we would think ill of either parents or governments that said that there shall be public education only for children who actually want to go to school and only when they have this preference. I see no reason why we should think otherwise about children in other countries. Indeed, it seems quite condescending to say, "Of course we require education of our own Western children, because we think their minds are terrible things to waste, but it is not so big a deal when it is those Indian or Pakistani or Bangladeshi minds." It seems just right that the Indian government has recently made the right to compulsory primary and secondary education a fundamental right of all citizens (see below).³⁸

If compulsory primary and secondary education were ever securely implemented, there would be no question about how to treat illiterate adult women. But, for the foreseeable future, there surely is such a question. Obviously enough, it is wrong to dragoon a woman, working or otherwise, into schooling that she refuses. On the other hand, however, it seems possible to err in the opposite direction, expecting that women will come demanding schooling if they want it, and not taking cognizance of the problems of ill-informed and adaptive preferences, to say nothing of resistance from husbands, the difficulties of a working life with children, and so forth. So it seems right to work hard to design programs for adult women that are compatible with their working day, attractive, and thoughtful about how to deal with the resistance the women may encounter. The most successful literacy programs for rural adult women typically include a large element of social bonding and consciousness raising, because in this way women gain many benefits over and above literacy: emotional solidarity, collective action to overcome shared problems, courage in facing opposition. Successful literacy programs also typically link education to programs of economic empowerment (through credit and labor organization) that are more attractive to husbands than their wives' education may be. Many women who do not initially favor literacy may join a group for the other benefits it offers, or even for education for their daughters, and then come upon the pleasures and advantages of education subsequently.

For such reasons, the most successful programs are always grounded in the local region and sensitive to the local scene. As I have mentioned, the language problem by itself makes this necessary: rural women may

³⁸ See Mehendale 1998.

not speak any language that literate activist organizers speak. Typically, therefore, the headquarters of an organization is in a major city, for example Patna, Bihar's largest city, but its field offices enjoy considerable autonomy and operate by recruiting successful graduates of the program as new employees. Regular visiting from the center is important to oversee and coordinate activities and also to protect the local leaders from intimidation and help solve any legal and political problems that arise.³⁹ Activist leaders typically go to bat for their local field organizations with political leaders, courts, and employers. They also attempt to forge good relationships with influential organizations and businesses in the urban center, another strategy through which they exercise influence.

Solving the problem

The worldwide crisis of female education has multiple dimensions. In part, it is a problem of poverty and cannot be stably solved without raising the living standard of the poor in each nation. In part, the data indicate, it is a separate problem, whose solution requires special, focused action. Action aimed at raising the education level of women and girls has, in turn, several distinct elements. Both nations and states within nations must get involved, and rich nations must support the efforts of poorer nations.

To see the importance of intelligent state action, we need only consider the case of Kerala, frequently discussed in the development literature.⁴⁰ A relatively poor state in India, it has nonetheless achieved 99 percent literacy for both boys and girls in adolescent age groups. Several factors play a role here. The history of matrilineal property transmission and matrilineal residence makes female life take on, from the start, a greater worth in the eyes of parents than it seems to have in many parts of the nation. Thus, while the sex ratio in the nation as a whole is plummeting,

³⁹ *Vishaka v. Rajasthan* (see n. 25 above) arose out of a sexual assault against field-workers working for Vishaka in a rural area. Adithi is currently dealing with the prosecution of one of its rural leaders, in the very area that I visited, for murder. A local landowner, unhappy about the sharecropping women's newfound solidarity and aggressiveness, alleged that his aunt had been fatally poisoned by an Adithi local field coordinator—on the grounds that the aunt died some time after leaving that woman's house. Although it is perfectly obvious to any unbiased person that this is a preposterous charge, local law enforcement is very corrupt, and the organs of the deceased woman, crucial for the resolution of the case, have been impounded by the pathologist, who refuses to release his report to the defense. Literacy activism is full of such perils.

⁴⁰ See Drèze and Sen 1995; in the companion volume of field studies (Drèze and Sen 1997), see the field study of Kerala by V. K. Ramachandran.

as a result of access to sex-selective abortion, and has now reached the alarming figure of 85 women to 100 men (see above), the sex ratio in Kerala is 102 women to 100 men, just what demographers say one should expect if equal nutrition and health care are present. Education for women, moreover, is a tradition with a long history in Kerala. In the seventeenth century, Jesuit missionaries began campaigning for literacy for both boys and girls, and this influence had an important effect.

But these historical factors are only a part of the story. For much of its history since independence, Kerala has had a democratically elected Marxist government that successfully pursued an ambitious plan of land reform, crucial to the empowerment of the poor, and that has pushed hard for both health services and education. Some of the techniques the government has used to increase literacy—besides aggressive campaigning in every region—are the provision of a nutritious school lunch for children, which offsets much of the lost income for parents who depend on child labor, and flexible school hours, which allow working children and children who help their parents in the home to enroll in school.

There is no reason in principle why these excellent ideas cannot be followed elsewhere. (Indeed, a Supreme Court decision late in 2002 has now ordered all states to adopt Kerala's program of providing a nutritious school lunch, and there is evidence that this directive is being implemented.) All too often, what happens is that local officials are corrupt and take the education money without establishing schools or teachers are corrupt and take government money without showing up.

National governments are also a large part of the solution. Sen and Drèze show dramatically how India and China diverged after India's independence. The two nations had similar literacy rates in 1947; fifty-five years later, China has 76.3 percent adult literacy for women and 91.7 percent for men, by contrast to India's 45.4 percent and 68.4 percent.⁴¹ Another useful contrast is Sri Lanka, a nation geographically and ethnically close to India, which by now has achieved adult literacy rates of 89.0 percent for women and 94.4 percent for men. Clearly one of the key failures of Nehru's plan for the new nation was an insufficient emphasis on basic education. This fact is now generally recognized.

Adithi in the past has received much of its funding from the national government, which funds a few programs of its own but also helps NGOs that do so much of the work in rural areas. Recently, however, the Hindu

⁴¹ These are data for 2000, cited in the *Human Development Report, 2002* (UNDP 2002), 223–24.

right-wing government has taken a most unfortunate turn. Although basic literacy for the poor is a crying need and also a key to the nation's economy, the minister of human resource development, Murli Manohar Joshi, a very ideological Hindu fundamentalist, has focused most of his energy on an expensive attempt to rewrite school textbooks to "Hinduize" them, removing references to bad acts of Hindus in history (such as violence against Muslims), removing the evidence that Hindus ever ate beef, and so forth. In the process he has carried on an aggressive campaign against leading historians (e.g., Romila Thapar, one of the most distinguished living scholars of India's history), charging them with being subversives for simply wanting to write the truth. His new curriculum has been repeatedly challenged in the courts but has not yet been found unconstitutional.⁴² Among the many things that are wrong with Joshi's policy, not the least is the fact that it represents a major diversion of both energy and funds away from the problem of basic literacy. This is very likely no accident, given that raising the fortunes of the poor, a large proportion of whom are either Muslim or lower caste, may not be high on Joshi's personal agenda in any case.

So that is an example of how not to solve the problem at the national level. How to solve it? Struggling against the corruption of state and local governments, funding special programs in areas where state government is not delivering services, funding NGOs like Adithi—all these measures, taken in the past, have a track record of at least some success. Another key issue is the removal of school fees for textbooks, uniforms, and so forth, which often make it impossible for the poor to attend nominally free state-run schools. All these measures must be coupled with more aggressive enforcement (which in some regions just means more than none) of laws against child marriage and dowry and, again, funding of NGOs that do good work on these problems. In other nations, similarly, governments need to figure out what particular factors are blocking girls and women from being educated and then to design policies to address the problem.

Courts can clearly play a role here. In 2002, India placed compulsory primary and secondary education in the Fundamental Rights section of the Constitution, following the Supreme Court case cited in my epigraph, which stated that it was one. Such a decision does not go far in the absence of suitable legislation and implementation, but it can provide a nudge to

⁴² For just a few of the recent discussions of this controversy, see Dhavan 2001; M. Hasan 2002; *Hindustan Times* 2002; *Times of India* 2002a, 2002b.

policy makers, as it did in this case, giving strong support to the legislative push for a new constitutional amendment.⁴³

The enormous worldwide problem of female education cannot, however, be solved by domestic policies in each nation alone. Adithi's projects in the Sithamarhi district alone have received support from Swiss and Dutch development agencies. In general, women's literacy projects in India receive assistance from a wide range of international development agencies, prominently including those of Sweden, Norway, and the Netherlands. International charities such as OXFAM (with its branches in various countries), UNICEF, and others play a role. Because U.S. charitable donors cannot receive a tax deduction for a donation directly to a group such as Adithi, umbrella charities have sprung up in the United States that focus on specialized funding of literacy projects in India. (No doubt the same is true of other nations.)

Well-intentioned donors must be vigilant, for many India-related charities in the United States are fronts that funnel money to Hindu-right organizations that engage in anti-Muslim violence.⁴⁴ The India Development and Relief Fund (IDRF), which claims to have various attractive purposes, is actually a front organization for the RSS (the paramilitary right-wing organization loosely connected to the governing Bharatiya Janata Party). One of the front organizations on the Indian side, recipient of IDRF money, is actually called Sewa Bharati, a name that is similar to that of SEWA, the Self-Employed Women's Association, one of the most impressive NGOs working on women's issues. There are many other such cases. United States money is behind the recent genocide of Muslim men and the mass rapes of Muslim women in the state of Gujarat: in evidence presented to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Najid Hussain, a professor at the University of Delaware, estimated that nine of every ten dollars used to foment religious violence in Gujarat came from the United States.⁴⁵ Some such donors know what they are doing: unfortunately, many wealthy Indian Americans are staunch supporters of such causes. But there is reason to believe that much of the money is given in ignorance. Kanwal Rekhi, chair of the IndUS Entrepreneurs (an organization of South Asian businesspeople), wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*: "Many overseas Indian Hindus, including some in this country,

⁴³ Comparable is the U.S. history of education of the disabled: court cases in the early 1970s led to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1972 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1997.

⁴⁴ For discussion of this problem, with references, see Nussbaum 2003b.

⁴⁵ For data, see references in Nussbaum 2003b and also A. K. Sen 2002.

finance religious groups in India in the belief that the funds will be used to build temples and educate and feed the poor of their faith. Many would be appalled to know that some recipients of their money are out to destroy minorities (Christians as well as Muslims) and their places of worship” (Rekhi and Rowen 2002).⁴⁶ I recommend either giving directly to some Indian NGO that one knows well (and forfeiting the U.S. charitable deduction) or giving to OXFAM, which does not make India a particular focus but which does good work wherever it operates and does enough in India to make those who care particularly about that nation content.

Today overall, as is the case with world poverty and need generally, the nations of the developed world are doing too little to support the education of the world’s women. The United States clearly stands out as one that is doing remarkably less than it can and should. President Clinton showed a surprising level of knowledge and involvement on this particular issue: his visit to India deliberately highlighted the issue of women’s literacy, and the groups he chose to visit in Rajasthan and elsewhere were well chosen, in a way that favorably impressed Indian thinkers and activists. But in the absence of a much larger budgetary commitment to “nation building,” these efforts will not go far.

Delicate questions arise concerning how far one may promote a political agenda in another nation. Where there is no democratically accountable government in place, it seems reasonable enough to suppose that “nation building” may take the overall empowerment of the people as its focus, a goal toward which the education of women is an extremely central strategy. Where, as in the case of India, there is a democratically accountable government in place, the nations of the developed world have different choices. They may simply give to the national government on the theory that this is the democratically elected surrogate for the people and it should not be bypassed. But in the case of India today that would both be a rather inefficient way of promoting women’s literacy (given that the national government does little of the educating in rural areas) and, at present, insofar as such money would ever support education in the first place (nuclear bombs are a project dearer to the heart of the leaders of the nation), it would be a way of lending support to Joshi’s policies, which it is not too bold to call blatantly racist, as well as violative of the free speech of historians.⁴⁷ By contrast, Clinton’s attempt to highlight the good work of

⁴⁶ The authors suggest that Indian President Atal Bihari Vajpayee should label such causes terrorist and thus strike a blow against this covert funding of violence.

⁴⁷ His attempt to glorify and whitewash the Hindu past is part and parcel of the most sinister attempts to foment violence against Muslims.

NGOs working with women seems to me perfectly acceptable, posing no delicate issue of paternalism, since the cause is so widely supported and so urgent. Funding by the U.S. government for these same NGOs, which already receive funds from many world governments through their official development agencies, seems to me also perfectly acceptable. The development agencies of nations that devote a substantial portion of their budget to these ends are constantly in the business of making value judgments, like any grant-giving agency; they review proposals, and inevitably they have some goals (in this case, women's literacy) that they want to support and others (the Hinduization of textbooks) that they might not want to support. Although it seems to me that it would be wrong to send troops to India or even to impose economic sanctions on India for its violations of free speech in education, giving money to NGOs for women's education rather than to the national government for nuclear bombs and the Hinduization of textbooks seems to me perfectly reasonable, and a way of supporting women and the rural poor against national forces that do not fully represent their aspirations.⁴⁸ Although I believe that we should make a rather strong distinction between the justification of a political value and its implementation outside our national borders, refusing actively to implement much of what we think that we can morally justify out of respect for national sovereignty, women's literacy is a value with enormously strong popular support (and indeed, the national government itself strongly backs it, though its ways of doing so are extremely odd), so there seems to be no reason why we should not judge that certain NGOs pursue that goal more effectively and acceptably than the national government.⁴⁹

The primary point to be made is that the nations of the developed world, and their individual citizens, are doing much, much too little to address this problem. So, too, we must now add, are the multinational corporations that increasingly determine the course of policy in the developing countries where they do business. To such corporations, we may make two arguments in favor of devoting substantial resources to education, and particularly female education, in the regions where they operate. First, we may make an efficiency argument. Money invested in education, we say, is money well spent. An educated workforce is a more productive and stable workforce. Women who are educated contribute to

⁴⁸ See my discussion of some of these matters in Nussbaum 2001.

⁴⁹ On justification and implementation, see Nussbaum 2003c.

the economic development and the political stability of the entire region.⁵⁰ Kerala, for example, does not have the interreligious violence that is now sweeping over Gujarat, a state that has promoted economic growth while largely neglecting education and other areas of “human development.”⁵¹

We may also, let us hope, link to this efficiency argument a moral argument. Using part of one’s profits to educate the next generation is the decent thing to do. This is not an idea utterly alien to the American rich, as the history of U.S. colleges and universities shows. Is it too much to hope that we may prevail on the rich, who are rich because of the work of people in developing nations, to make a similar commitment to the well-being of the children of their workers?

The issue of women’s education is both urgent and complex. But it has long been the neglected poor relation of the international development world, ignored by many of the most powerful thinkers and actors in this field in favor of the single goal of economic growth, which by itself delivers little to the poor of developing nations.⁵² Even when politicians and activists are sensitive to the predicament of the poor, they have often neglected this issue in their own way, preferring to focus on issues such as health and democratization, which appear less culturally controversial. I have argued that women’s education is extremely urgent, indeed a key to women’s empowerment. There are no good arguments against making it a top priority for development in this century. Theoretical analysis and

⁵⁰ Buch’s (2000) study shows that women’s presence in *panchayats* has increased expenditure on health, especially child health, and other aspects of the welfare of the poor, as contrasted with other goals that might contribute less to the long-term security and well-being of the region.

⁵¹ I do not mean in any way to blame the Gujarat genocide on the local poor, since it is clearly fomented at the state level, with assistance from the national government. But I do believe that a more highly educated local population might possibly have mounted more effective resistance earlier against the genocidal measures and might also, well before that, have selected a state government that would focus more on the welfare of the poor and less on Hinduization. There is also an indirect point: any government that would make female education a top priority (as in Kerala) is unlikely to be the sort of government that would also make genocide and mass rape top priorities. It is no surprise that the current chief of police in the state of Gujarat—called out of retirement in the Punjab to “restore law and order”—is none other than K. P. S. Gill, the defendant in the landmark sexual harassment case described in Nussbaum forthcoming b. Having put many innocent Sikhs to death in the Punjab and having made a second career as a champion of sexual harassment, he now presides over murder and rape.

⁵² See the analysis in Drèze and Sen 1995.

good normative models have a valuable role to play in establishing these facts in the corridors of power.

Philosophy, Law, and Political Science
University of Chicago

Appendix

The Central Human Capabilities (Nussbaum 2000)

1. *Life*.—Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely, or before one's life is so reduced as to be not worth living.

2. *Bodily health*.—Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter.

3. *Bodily integrity*.—Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction.

4. *Senses, imagination, and thought*.—Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason—and to do these things in a “truly human” way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one's own choice, religious, literary, musical, and so forth. Being able to use one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise. Being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid nonbeneficial pain.

5. *Emotions*.—Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence; in general, to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger. Not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety. (Supporting this capability means supporting forms of human association that can be shown to be crucial in their development.)

6. *Practical reason*.—Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life. (This entails protection for the liberty of conscience and religious observance.)

7. *Affiliation*.

A. Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another. (Protecting this capability means protecting institutions that constitute and nourish such forms of affiliation, and also protecting the freedom of assembly and political speech.)

B. Having the social bases of self-respect and nonhumiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails provisions of nondiscrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, and national origin.

8. *Other species*.—Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.

9. *Play*.—Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.

10. *Control over one's environment*.

A. *Political*.—Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association.

B. *Material*.—Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods), and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.

References

- Agarwal, Bina. 1994. *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1997. "‘Bargaining’ and Gender Relations: Within and beyond the Household." *Feminist Economics* 3(1):1–51.
- Alkire, Sabina. 2002. *Valuing Freedoms: Sen's Capability Approach and Poverty Reduction*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Bagchi, Jasodhara. 1997. *Loved and Unloved: The Girl Child in the Family*. Calcutta: Stree.
- Becker, Gary. 1995. "Nobel Lecture: The Economic Way of Looking at Behavior." In *The Essence of Becker*, ed. Ramón Febrero and Pedro S. Schwartz, 633–58. Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution.
- Buch, Nirmala. 2000. *From Oppression to Assertion: A Study of Panchayats and Women in M.P., Rajasthan and U.P.* New Delhi: Centre for Women's Development Studies.
- Chen, Martha A. 1983. *A Quiet Revolution: Women in Transition in Rural Bangladesh*. Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman.
- Dhavan, Rajeev. 2001. "Textbooks and Communalism." *Hindu*, November 30.
- Drèze, Jean, and Amartya Sen. 1995. *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- . 1996. *Indian Development: Selected Regional Perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- , eds. 1997. *Indian Development: Selected Regional Perspectives*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Elster, Jon. 1985. *Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hasan, Mushirul. 2002. "Agenda of Rewriting Textbooks Jeopardises the Study of History." *Indian Express*, February 6.
- Hasan, Zoya. 2000. "Women's Reservations and the 'Politics of Presence.'" Paper

- presented at the annual meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division, New York.
- Hindustan Times*. 2002. "HRDline Propaganda." *Hindustan Times*, February 25.
- Jayal, Niraja Gopal. 2000. "Gender and Decentralization." Unpublished manuscript, Centre for the Study of Law and Governance, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.
- Marglin, Frédérique Apffel. 1985. *Wives of the God-King: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Marglin, Frédérique Apffel, and Stephen A. Marglin, eds. 1990. *Dominating Knowledge: Development, Culture, and Resistance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Marx, Karl. (1844) 1982. "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," trans. T. B. Bottomore. In *Marx's Concept of Man*, ed. Erich Fromm, 87–196. New York: Continuum.
- Mehendale, Archana. 1998. "Compulsory Primary Education in India: The Legal Framework." *From the Lawyers Collective* 13(4):4–12.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 1996. "Human Capabilities, Female Human Beings." In *Women, Culture and Development*, ed. Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Glover, 61–105. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 1997. *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- . 2000. *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2001. "India: Implementing Sex Equality through Law." *Chicago Journal of International Law* 2(1):35–58.
- . 2002a. "'Mutilated and Deformed': Adam Smith on the Material Basis of Human Dignity." A lecture in memory of Tamara Horowitz, presented at the University of Pittsburgh, April 5. Unpublished, part of a book in progress titled *The Cosmopolitan Tradition*, under contract to Yale University Press.
- . 2002b. "Sex, Laws, and Inequality: What India Can Teach the United States." *Daedalus* (Winter): 95–106.
- . 2002c. "The Worth of Human Dignity: Two Tensions in Stoic Cosmopolitanism." In *Philosophy and Power in the Graeco-Roman World: Essays in Honour of Miriam Griffin*, ed. Gillian Clark and Tessa Rajak, 31–49. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2003a. "Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice." *Feminist Economics* 9(2–3):33–59.
- . 2003b. "Genocide in Gujarat." *Dissent* (Summer): 61–69.
- . 2003c. "Women and the Law of Peoples." *Politics, Philosophy, and Economics* 1(3):283–306.
- . Forthcoming a. "India, Sex Equality, and Constitutional Law." In *Constituting Women: The Gender of Jurisprudence*, ed. Beverly Baines. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . Forthcoming b. "The Modesty of Mrs. Bajaj: India's Problematic Sexual

- Harassment Law." In *Directions in Sexual Harassment Law*, ed. Catharine MacKinnon and Reva Siegel. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha, and Amartya Sen. 1993. "Introduction." In *The Quality of Life*, ed. Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, 1–8. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Omvedt, Gail. 1983. "Devadasi Custom and the Fight against It." *Manushi* 4 (November–December): 16–19.
- Rekhi, Kanwal, and Henry S. Rowen. 2002. "India Confronts Its Own Intolerance." *Wall Street Journal*, May 21.
- Sen, A. K. (not the same person as Amartya K. Sen). 2002. "Deflections to the Right." Speech. Available online at <http://mail.sarai.net/pipermail/reader-list/2002-August/001653.html>.
- Sen, Amartya K. 1991. "Gender and Cooperative Conflicts." In *Persistent Inequalities: Women and World Development*, ed. Irene Tinker, 123–49. Oxford: Clarendon.
- . 1996. "Fertility and Coercion." *University of Chicago Law Review* 63(3): 1035–62.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. (1913) 1990. "Haimanti." In *Women, Outcastes, Peasants, and Rebels: A Selection of Bengali Short Stories*, trans. Kalpana Bardhan, 84–96. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Times of India*. 2002a. "History Joshi Wants to Censor." *Times of India*, February 24.
- . 2002b. "History Row Goes to SC." *Times of India*, February 23.
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 1990. *Human Development Report (HDR)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2001. *Human Development Report, 2001: Making New Technologies Work for Human Development (HDR)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2002. *Human Development Report, 2002: Deepening Democracy in a Fragmented World (HDR)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Copyright of Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society is the property of University of Chicago Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.