

How to keep girls in high school in India

Renu Singh, Country Director, Young Lives India

Cath Porter

So today, I'm delighted to be with Dr Renu Singh, who's our country director of Young Lives in India, and she is an expert on early childhood development, gender equity and inclusion.

Renu has over 30 years of teaching experience, teacher education, early child development, policy analysis and research in India and overseas. She's held post as the director of the School of Rehabilitation Science at the University of Delhi. She's been the director of Save the Children in India.

She's been on several working groups in the education sector, and she's a research associate here at the Oxford Department of International Development. So Renu, thanks for joining me.

Renu Singh

Thank you very much Cath, and thanks for the introduction.

Cath Porter

Thank you. So I wanted to hear more about your own journey. I mean, you've been a teacher and now you work in education policy. So yeah. How did it all begin?

Renu Singh

Yeah, it all began, I think when after I had my children, I realized that I love kids. I didn't know that till then to be honest and I then decided to train as a Montessorian.

It's probably runs in the family. My mother ran 35 schools, Montessori schools, and I grew up as a Montessori child, and so that for me was you know, I thought I didn't really have what it takes to be a good teacher. So like I said it, it was quite late that I, you know, I moved into the education sector and then I set up a school in Dubai. That's how it started. I ran a Montessori school.

And that's, you know, we had about I think 20 odd nationalities. You know, children from different nationalities and we had children with disabilities, and I realized that I you know I wanted to do more for children with disabilities. So that's when I trained to become a special educator and in fact I went on to do my PhD in Inclusion of children with disabilities and set up when I came back to India, I had the opportunity of setting up the School of Rehab Sciences the 1st one of its kind, because we had no training programs at that stage at the postgraduate level for special educators to be trained. And so there were no human resources available and I that's what actually moved me from being a direct hands-on practitioner, though I continued to teach for two days and that was my understanding with the university that I would go into classrooms and continue to teach twice a week if I wanted to hold on to that academic position because I couldn't think of not being with children and you know and bringing back all that to the classroom with the trainees, so and then I think over the years I, you know, I moved to Save the Children when Save the Children India was being set up.

Because it, you know, it gave us a chance to actually look at changing programs on the ground and, you know, being contextual and responding to the needs of different states.

And Young lives was actually part of My Portfolio in Save because we were the policy partner. And yes, I guess the rest is history. I've been now part of Young Lives since 2010.

Cath Porter

That's fantastic. And I mean, not all academics have that direct experience working as a teacher.

So I can see how your passion is coming through. And so, yeah, so obviously you're based in India and one of your big passions is, is around gender inequality. And as you said, inclusion, disability inclusions so how do you see the situation? Do you see things improving in India over time since you've been working on these issues of gender and disability inclusion?

Renu Singh

I think so. I think you know, because even gender has many layers, you know, so there's it, you know you today you know we are we're talking of inclusion, you know across genders beyond just binaries we're talking of you know, we're talking of discrimination that happens because of caste and gender because of location, caste and gender because of ability, caste, gender and location. So look at the multi layers of exclusion that happens. And I think that that today there is more dialogue, and I see that as definitely progress, you know, because at least we are now opening up to discussing a lot of things which were constantly brushed under the carpet. Patriarchy still continues to remain. I don't think social norms change happens overnight and it will take a long, long time because it's, so I think it's almost institutionalized in our very fabric and but I think you can see that the younger generation is now questioning, and you know, there is more freedom given to girls you know, in terms of at least choosing what they want to do, though, even today, you know many, many you know it, it's all about the, you know, the resources that families have yet child marriages are continuing. So girls often are left, you know, don't have the opportunities to continue education so yes, I think definitely there is progress, but is it fast enough? I don't think so. There is a lot that we still have to do.

Cath Porter

Yeah, yeah. And in our own work in young lives, we see that gender disparity coming out quite strongly in terms of education outcomes. Yesterday I was talking with Matthew Jukes about social and emotional skills in which girls are behind in, in empowerment related skills and so we see it in our own data, right.

Renu Singh

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely.

Cath Porter

And so what I what I wanted to talk about is your most recent piece of research that you've done on higher education in India. So could you tell us about that please?

Renu Singh

Sure. So this is drawing upon the Young Lives India data from of course Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, which are two southern states of India. So of course, you can't generalize our findings to the rest of India. But if you look at the data that we have, you know, at the All-India level. You know, there are barely 27.3% GR, which means, you know, the of children who are young people who are actually completing actually not even completing, going into higher education and this looks at completion of higher education, so we've kind of taken it a little further. So it's not just about access to higher

education, but how many completed higher education and there therefore I think it makes a little you know, a contribution, particularly in light of the national education Policy 2020, which is now aspiring to have at least 50% of young people enter higher education. So that's the background to the paper.

Cath Porter

Yeah. So it's an important issue then. And so what do we find? What are the factors that are causing young women to not complete their education in the way that maybe young men can?

Renu Singh

So I mean there is definitely a gender disparity with significantly lower percentage of women in our cohort. We only did this paper with the older cohort because they had turned 26 in Round six. So this is drawing upon the longitudinal data of course also from Round 1 and 2 but mainly Round 6 because we could see how we have 26. Most of them would have completed higher education, right? So we find that 34.5% only if the women had completed higher education compared to almost half the men, you know, just over 50%. So you could see that you know there is a significant difference.

We used, you know, a discrete time hazard model to actually examine, you know, when they dropped out and what, what has, what have been the fact. And because Young Lives has panel data, we could actually pick on some of the early, you know, individual factors as well as household factors. So of course at the household level, we looked at parental aspirations. We looked at wealth index, of course, but we also looked at, you know, rural urban divide and at the individual level.

We looked at how many children actually had gone into paid work, for example at age 12 and we find all these factors their own occupational aspirations at age 12, and even that we have maths achievement test results. We have the PPVT, which is the picture Peabody vocabulary test, which is like a proxy for cognition that we've been collecting in the Rounds. And all these have significant relationship with, you know, with higher education completion, often we don't find, we overlook these very critical associations.

And I think you know, the paper draws focus on, you know, things like domestic chores, you know, for more than a particular number of hours for at each 12 and how it impacts girls, particularly compared to boys. And so does paid work.

Cath Porter

Absolutely. I think this is one of the really fascinating parts of the paper is saying that even at age 12, we could almost predict who would be able to succeed in higher education based on the chores they have to do the test scores that they get, and this is, yeah, this is quite striking, I think and important.

Renu Singh

Right. Yeah, we shared this with the with NITI Aayog which is our policy think tank that the about two weeks back and I was saying that you know this all the more reason draws attention to the fact that we need to now work with parental aspirations. That doesn't cost a lot of money.

You know can be used, you know, pupil, teacher. You know the parent teacher association meetings. To build their aspirations and to have dialogues with how important it is, and girls can do you know better, if not as well as boys, you know and give those messages, get role modelers of alumni from schools to

come and talk to parents and things like that. You're not. They they're not such resource intense interventions and easy interventions to do.

So we were talking to the ministry about this, and I hope they will take it on. But I think the bigger issue still is some preference and until we really you know go down to running a huge campaign to address this. And I think as a country we have you know we are ready for something like this.

Because you know you've got upper middle class, you know households now realizing that girls can do as well if not better than boys, people. But you still have a larger population, which still has a very strong some preference. So if there is a choice between who's going to. Where are we going to put our money? They will still spend on the boy.

Cath Porter

Yeah, well, this is a really big issue to address right now. I mean, you yourself are a role model. I think for women.

Renu Singh

I think there are many out there, you know, particularly coming from the same communities where these, you know, young people come from you know, so I think we, yeah, we need to really draw upon those role models.

Cath Porter

Fantastic. So I mean you've mentioned this now a little bit you that you already opened up a discussion about your findings with the Ministry of Education. That was something I wanted to come to now is to think about how to affect change in policy when we have research findings because it's quite common that people write academic papers and then they go to the journal, but they're never brought to policymakers. But I think that's something where you place quite a focus in your work.

Can you tell us any suggestions about what you do to try and get your point across to policymakers and to get them to really understand what the findings mean and what it means for them as policymakers?

Renu Singh

I think what's been very critical is to speak in their language. You know, we can't.

They're not really interested in the model that you've used to reach the findings. What they're interested in is what implication does it have for our programming?

You know what is it that we could do easily, and it needs to be scalable. It needs to be cost effective. So when you even talk about the findings, they have to relate to, you know, something that is doable. So we try and make those pictures and we also write policy briefs in young lives exactly for that reason, you know, to make it simple. Not to get into the methodological issues, but to just give the clear give clear messages to policymakers about things that they could do.

You know, so just translating the findings into just clear, you know, interventions that can be taken up not just the ministry but also partners like the UN, you know the like, UNDP or UNICEF. I mean I, you know, all of them can, you know, can really learn a lot from some of these findings in terms of what interventions they could do on the ground when they're doing these large-scale programs with government schools and with rural communities, et cetera.

Cath Porter

Thanks, Renu. So the fight continues for equality in education.

Renu Singh

Absolutely not just equality, because equality in education will come when there's equality overall. You know, when you have the same space to express yourself and girls are given the same standing as the son is in the household. I think it begins very early. It starts from the nutrition the child gets, you know, a girl child vis a vis the boy child, you know I mean. And I think that that then needs then moves on to the educational sphere, the health sphere. You know, a lot of other things. And you mentioned agency I mean you know you today you we need to we need to really unpack that. You know, it's not just about learning, but it's also about these young people have, you know, believing in themselves and having the agency to drive and reach the ambitions that they have for themselves.

Cath Porter

Absolutely and I think you've been to see the field workers who are right now doing our survey for Round 7.

Renu Singh

Yes, yes, yeah, I we've, we've just, we're already in the field. We've you know we've just you know we're really happy that we're able to locate and track a lot of our older cohort and younger cohort even though they have moved many of them, especially the girls have got married and gone into new homes. So these are new homes that they have, but yes, I think we, we have you know I think of a very good set of supervisors who have those contacts on the ground who are able to then locate them. And so yeah, we're very excited. We're really looking forward to the data coming in and learning more about what's happening to her young index children. Both younger cohort and older.

Cath Porter

Cohort. Absolutely. And that's where we're going to find out where they are now with their education with them.

Their agency and all these? Yeah.

Renu Singh

Especially the younger cohorts, yes, because they're 22.

Now so we will know more about.

Their educational trajectories for sure.

Cath Porter

Yeah, yeah. Exciting.

Yes, absolutely. Well, thank you, Renu, for taking the time to talk and it's fascinating.

Renu Singh

My pleasure. Completely. My pleasure.