Battle for Schools and Children's Right to Education in India: An Informal Conversation with Shantha Sinha

What lessons does India’s recent compulsory right-to-education Act offer for the global health efforts relevant to other youth around the world? To learn more, Harvard faculty and students gathered at the Harvard Global Health Institute (HGHI) on April 7 to explore this question in conversation with child rights activist, Shantha Sinha. Dr. Sinha is Professor of Political Science at Hyderabad Central University in India, and founder of MV Foundation, an organization dedicated to building the capacities of rural and urban communities to abolish child labor by universalizing school education. She is also the first Chairperson of India’s National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR). The conversation, moderated by Professor Jacqueline Bhabha, Director of Research at the Harvard University FXB Center for Health and Human Rights, and co-sponsored by HGHI and the FXB Center, was part of the Institute’s Informal Conversation Series. The series offers faculty and students the opportunity to engage in dialogue on cutting-edge cross-disciplinary issues, exploring new ideas, challenges, and opportunities that impact global health. Learn about other Conversations in the Spring 2014 series.

Children’s education should be treated as a national asset, said Sinha. Even though compulsory and free education for all children up to 14 years of age has been affirmed — in theory, at least — since India became a nation in 1947, children’s schooling in India has long been plagued by excuses and compromises that have been indefensibly costly for children who miss out on their right to learn. Education helps kids bridge social inequities, she noted, linking them to a larger universe and encouraging self-confidence and self-esteem. School is also an effective way to support children’s physical health, for example, in the distribution of mid-day meals, said Sinha, in response to a question about the role of food in incentivizing education, raised by Meena Hewett, Executive Director of the Harvard University South Asia Institute.

Calling for a proactive priority on children’s rights, Sinha focused her reflections on the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, which was passed in 2009 and entered into force on April 1, 2010. The new Education Act represents “a huge paradigm shift,” said Sinha, focusing on the positive steps in child rights activism that can support and affirm what works. Instead of blaming teachers for poor schools, and impoverished parents for sending their children to work, she said, the Act puts the onus for children’s education on the state by requiring free compulsory education for all children between ages 6 and 14. Those who don’t complete elementary education by age 14 can benefit under the Act up to age 18, and may start school at any time of the year without being delayed by paperwork and documentation “red tape” that is so common in educational administration.

Even with the Act in force, educational gaps continue to plague the system. Many children are still out of school, often employed in child labor, and high school dropout continues. Experts also battle over data intended to measure the practical effectiveness of the Act, said Sinha; many officials claim that 90 percent of all eligible children are now in school, but looking at the same data, Sinha finds the results closer to 50 percent.

The educational challenge in India of parents pulling children from school for work at an early age differs radically from China, noted one participant in the Informal Conversation, since China forbids all child labor. Since the existing Child Labour Act in India does not prohibit all forms of child labor (read more about child labor in a recent FXB Center report), the new Education Act also appears to have limited effect on the attitudes of legislators. “The system still has a total indifference to poor children,” said a lawyer who has worked with Sinha on legal efforts to put the Act into practice. The law is a vital step toward change, but much work remains.

Despite such challenges, we should not underestimate the agency of children themselves in pushing for education, Sinha insisted.
Throughout her activism for children’s rights, she has seen girls defy their parents by attending school against immense pressure to work. In many cases, she added, parents eventually came to recognize and praise the value of their daughters’ decisions.

Bhabha concluded the conversation with a brief summary of the relevance of Sinha’s work for educators in other nations and other fields. As in India, said Bhabha, the effect of stigma on education is relevant across the world, as she has seen in her research on the Roma community in Europe. Addressing the “young activists in the room,” Bhabha especially praised Sinha’s radical philosophy of “zero tolerance.” “If you really want to change injustice, you must start with some very clear principles. Of course you need nuance. Of course you need political skills,” she noted, “but the starting point has to be this sense of clarity about what is not-negotiable.”

Photo courtesy of Shantha Sinha.