

Alpana has lived in the remote village of Gourdah in West Bengal since she married Sanjit Pramanik when she was just 15 years old. Although child marriages are illegal in India, the ancient Hindu custom is practised widely in the populous northern states. For boys, early marriage brings increased financial responsibility but for millions of girls like Alpana, it brings a cycle of early pregnancy, poor health, gender marginalisation and poverty, as well as signifying an end to education.

More than 40 percent of India's population is illiterate, with women, tribal and scheduled castes affected particularly. Three-quarters of the country's male population is literate, compared to less than half of the female population. Even though the constitution guarantees free primary schooling to everyone up to 14 years of age, only 39 percent of girls in India attend. This is partly because all the females in a household have the responsibility of the housework. So, although education does not burden the family financially, it costs the time a daughter spends away at school. In addition, even if a woman is educated, there is little hope for a job. Most jobs women perform are agricultural or domestic, neither of which require a formal education.

India's rural poor, of which there is an estimated 400 million living below the poverty line, are locked into a cycle of poverty. High levels of illiteracy, combined with inadequate health care, limited access to social services and a growing population are major causes of poverty. To alleviate this India must empower its women. This can only be achieved through educating communities about the effects of child marriage, making learning more accessible for girls and providing health care and education on pregnancies and diseases such as AIDS.

India is making progress, with an entire ministry dedicated to formulating and implementing policy for women. And, although women are still socially, politically and economically weaker than men, India has the

world's largest number of professionally-qualified women, with more female doctors, surgeons, scientists and professors than the US.

Unfortunately for Alpana, her circumstances are unlikely to change. She is not literate and has never gone to school, nor is she intending to send her three children, who range from two to eight years old. Alpana simply does not understand the benefits education could bring and the only school in the area is very far away. Instead, she spends her day managing her home and children, walking the four kilometre round trip for clean water and making incense sticks to supplement her husband's meagre salary made as a casual labourer sweeping roads. It takes her one day to make 1,000 sticks, earning only rupees 55 or less than € 1.

Abhijit Nandi, the photographer who captured Alpana in *Happy in Her Own World*, laments: 'Alpana is the victim of her circumstances. Her father-in-law drinks profusely and her husband Sanjit recently lost his job as a sharecropper. Since the cost of seed, fertiliser and pesticides has gone up, employment opportunities in agriculture have decreased. When I said goodbye to Alpana, I urged her to apply to her block development officer for electricity and a new well for her village. I also suggested that she and her husband go to an adult education centre and her children to primary school. But I felt that these changes will not be met.'

He concludes: 'Development is a composite concept. It is related to social reforms in health, access to food, water and sanitation, and the ability to live in a healthy environment. Unless developments in all these aspects go hand in hand, every thing is lost. My comfort comes from looking at this mother and child, the green paddy field and the blue sky after rain, which fills me with happiness, hope and joy.'

***Emily Doyle** is Press and Marketing Officer at CIWEM.



Since being photographed by Abhijit Nandi and featuring in the winning photograph of the Environmental Photographer of the Year (EPOTY) competition, Alpana's image has graced national newspapers and exhibitions, attracting vast media interest. But as **Emily Doyle*** explains, life for Alpana is anything but glamorous.

BEHIND THE SMILE