

Women and Girls: Education, not Discrimination!

Of the 110 million children out of school in developing nations, sixty per cent are girls. According to the United Nations, which is launching a ten-year Girls' Education Initiative at the World Education Forum, girls are systematically more disadvantaged than boys solely on the basis of discrimination by gender.



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A mother and child in South Asia. An educated woman has fewer and healthier children, and is more likely to send them to school.

Despite the fact that 44 million more girls attend primary schools in developing countries than in 1990, and despite the fact that the education of girls and women is now on policy-making agendas in most developing nations, the gender gap is still unacceptably wide. "Girl's education makes all the difference, not only in terms of economic development but human development," says Mary Joy Pigozzi of UNICEF. What, then, explains such discrimination, when all indicators show that girls' schooling is a proven effective investment for society. Perhaps the fact that individual families do not always see it as an immediate benefit. "Policy-makers should recognize the costs and benefits from the parents' perspective," suggests a recent World Bank discussion paper. "If parents incur greater costs to educate girls but society reaps greater gains, then governments ought to consider special measures and targeted subsidies to help girls attend school."

Many governments now realize this. Southern Egypt's 200 girl-friendly community schools are a shining example. The Egyptian government is now integrating their best practices – active learning and child-centred class management – into the formal education system. Malawi has cut the costs of schooling for parents by eliminating school fees and abolishing compulsory uniforms. In Mashan County in China, villages and households that take effective measures to send girls to school are awarded priority for loans or development funds. Even a simple measure like building separate toilets for girls is sometimes enough to keep them in school.

African and South Asian countries especially have a long way to go to close the gender gap. An average six-year-old girl in South Asia can expect to spend six years in school—three years less than a boy the same age. And when gender disparities meet urban/rural disparities, girls lose out even more. A girl based in a rural area runs three times the risk of dropping out of school than a city boy. Discrimination is reinforced in the classroom, as research shows that both male

and female teachers tend to give more attention to boys, a trend now being tackled by gender-sensitive training programmes.

Traditional beliefs and practices are often at the root of the gender gap. Girls may be expected to help look after home and siblings and be forced to marry young, or else their parents lack trust in the education system. One of the reasons parents lack trust is the threat of sexual harassment by male pupils or even teachers. The onset of puberty, which can occur as early as ten, is a crucial time. In many societies, parents who willingly send their daughter to school remove her at puberty, for fear of an unwanted pregnancy, and marry her off early instead.

"Education is the right of every child, even the girl who becomes pregnant," says Eddah Gachukia of the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) who has successfully lobbied against national policies in Africa that deny schooling to pregnant girls.

The Multiple Benefits of Girls' Education

- *Increased family incomes*
- *Later marriages*
- *Reduced fertility rates*
- *Reduced infant and maternal mortality rates*
- *Better nourished and healthier children and families*
- *Greater opportunities and life choices for women*
(including better chances to protect themselves against HIV/AIDS)



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Benin now offers basic education opportunities to girls who drop out from school. Guinea has raised the marriage age and made it an offence for male teachers to harass female pupils. A promising initiative in Tanzania helps girls speak out about their problems and find solutions to overcome obstacles to their own social and academic development.

"You can't dissociate the education of girls and the education of women," claims Aicha Bah Diallo of UNESCO, who underlines the necessity of reaching both girls and their mothers in the same initiative. This dual approach was successful in the Kayes project in rural Mali, where an imaginative community-based campaign used riddles, rhymes and the radio to change long-held attitudes to girls and women. Once the village women were involved in literacy and income-generating activities, they supported the movement to educate girls. They made daily visits to the homes of absent daughters and marched them off to school if the parents had no good excuse! In three years, school enrolment in eighteen villages doubled to 44 per cent, and girls' enrolment rose from 18 per cent to over 33 per cent – well beyond the original goals.

"Now I am somebody; before, I felt like nobody," is how Namibian women expressed their feelings after attending literacy classes.

"Gender-Sensitive" Means Boys Too

Is it true that "parents look after girls more" in the Caribbean, as 16-year-old Sebastian Brizan, from Trinidad and Tobago, complains? Unlike elsewhere in the developing world, boys in the Caribbean do significantly worse than girls at school.

Since the 1970s, women in the Caribbean have taken greater advantage of education. As a result, they have been demonstrating higher levels of achievement. Among the trends are equal opportunities at preschool, primary and secondary education; enrolment in favour of females in the Bahamas and St Lucia; better performance of girls than boys in school on average and more females passing the secondary school entrance test.

But if "gender-sensitive" means a concern for equality for boys too, rigid ideas about gender roles are going to need addressing. So is the low proportion of male teachers in the region, especially in Jamaica. "It's not popular to be male and studious," remarks a teacher from Barbados. "It's not macho." In the Caribbean, as elsewhere, there is a need to make the education system more gender-sensitive – ready to tackle obstacles to progress at school for girls and boys alike.

"Now I am somebody; before, I felt like nobody," is how women interviewed in northern Namibia expressed their feelings after attending literacy classes. The empowerment which literacy brings is the key to a better life. It is well known that an educated woman has fewer and healthier children, and is more likely to send her children to school. In Brazil, for instance, illiterate women have an average of 6.5 children, whereas those with secondary education have 2.5 children. The child of a Zambian mother with a primary education has a 25 per cent better chance of survival than a child of a mother with no education. Literacy also gives women a voice. In Bangladesh, women with a secondary education are three times more likely to attend a political meeting than are women with no education.

Micro-credit schemes modelled on the Grameen Bank have literally revolutionized the lives of thousands of poor rural women. Bangladeshi women participating in the UNESCO/Grameen Bank Life-oriented Education Programme decide themselves what training they require, from accountancy, legal matters to health and family life. Ownership is a vital element of such programmes. When a group of fisherwomen in Benin decided they needed numeracy before literacy, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization adapted educational material using symbols instead of words to describe goods and services.

Many non-governmental organizations promote women's issues and gender sensitivity. Associations of University Women from Nepal to New Zealand run initiatives to provide educational opportunities for teenage mothers, demystify economics or provide training in mediation skills to reduce domestic violence.

Finally, female leadership is an emerging theme in education. The Women's Institute in Chile promotes educational activities to enable women to take an active public role and to deal with social and political issues. A far cry from literacy classes in a rural village, or is it? The principle is the same: empowerment, empowerment, empowerment. ■

