

Women and Girls as Change Agents: The Global Mandate for Girls' Education

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Introduction

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) outlined by the United Nations in 2000 aimed to create a safer and more prosperous world. Key to achieving this are two prominent goals: “achieve universal primary education” for boys and girls by 2015 (goal 2) and “promote gender equality and empower women” by eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2005 and in all levels of education by 2015 (goal 3).¹ One of the most important aspects of the MDGs was their focus on measuring and monitoring progress. While progress was uneven, several key targets were reached ahead of the 2015 deadline, including the target to achieve gender equality in primary and secondary education (Target 3.A).²

The United Nations renewed and expanded upon these goals in 2015 with its Sustainable Development Goals. By 2030, the United Nations aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong opportunities for all” (goal 4) and “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” (goal 5).³ Despite the increased awareness of gender inequality in education and pushes by the United Nations and other international organizations to promote girls’ education, millions of girls are still being left behind. Many of those who do attend school receive low-quality instruction and face other challenges. The UNESCO Institute for

Statistics estimates that of the 25 million primary school-age children who would never enroll in school in 2014, two-thirds were girls.⁴ Gender disparities in secondary education have changed little since 1999 and the “biggest gender gap comes in the transition from primary to secondary school.”⁵

Benefits of girls’ education

The importance of girls’ education cannot be underestimated. Educating girls has effects beyond just the girl herself. The entire community feels its impact. Former secretary-general of the United Nations Kofi Annan said, “There is no tool for development more effective than the education of girls and the empowerment of women.”⁶ Educating girls can be key to the economic development of the girl, her family, her community, and her country.

Girls’ education and economic growth

Educated girls provide economic benefits to their families and to their country’s economy. They have access to more and better economic opportunities, are more likely to hold jobs that have good working conditions and better pay, and help narrow the wage gap between women and men. In Pakistan, working women with good literacy skills earn 95 percent more than women with poor literacy skills.⁷ The World Bank estimates that an extra year of

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schooling beyond the average amount boosts girls' wages by 10 to 20 percent.⁸ Better jobs with better pay can lift families out of poverty. Education also gives women the skills and knowledge they need to protect their families from economic crises like higher food costs or other shocks like unexpected illness or death that can have adverse economic impacts.

Educated women create a better and more productive workforce. Providing girls with vocational skills and life skills training helps them attain higher skilled jobs. It also increases the skill level of the labor force, which can be an important factor for countries looking to attract foreign investment. Educated women are more likely to run successful businesses or farms. One study in Kenya found that if female farmers had the same education and inputs as male farmers, farm yields would increase by 22 percent.⁹ If women had access to the same agricultural resources as men, agricultural yields on farms run by women would increase by 20 to 30 percent and national agricultural output would increase by 2.5 to 4 percent.¹⁰

Educating women gives them the skills and confidence necessary to improve their economic outcomes, which in turn improves the economic outcome of their countries. A 100-country study by the World Bank found that "an increase of 1 percentage point in the share of adult women with secondary school education implies an increase in per capita income growth of 0.3 percentage points."¹¹

Educated girls, healthier communities

Providing girls with education leads to better health outcomes in the community. It can lead to lower rates of infant and maternal mortality as well as lower fertility rates. Data from 108 countries demonstrates that if every woman had at least a primary education, maternal deaths would fall by 66 percent. In sub-Saharan Africa specifically, maternal mortality would fall by 70 percent.¹² Educated mothers are more likely to seek out postnatal care and are less likely to be disabled or die due to complications from pregnancy and childbirth. The global decline in child mortality has also been linked to increases in mothers' schooling. A child whose mother is literate is 50 percent more likely to live past the age of five.¹³

As the rate of child mortality goes down, the fertility rate declines. Previously, mothers often compensated for the expected loss of a child by having more. Women with a primary school education tend to have up to 30 percent fewer children than uneducated women.

Women with a secondary school education tend to have 10 to 50 percent fewer children than women with a primary school education.¹⁴ In sub-Saharan Africa, women with no education have an average of 6.7 births, while women with a secondary school education have an average of 3.9 births in their lifetime.¹⁵ In addition to having fewer children, educated women begin having children later in life and leave more time between births, which leads to fewer complications at childbirth. For example, in Kenya the probability that a woman with a secondary education would give birth within two years of the birth of a child was 17 percent compared to 27 percent among women with no education.¹⁶ Educating girls leads to smaller and healthier families.

Mothers who are educated are better able to care for their children. An educated mother is more likely to seek out medical attention when a child falls ill. She is better able to follow doctors' instructions to care for a sick child. One study showed that educated mothers are 50 percent more likely to immunize their children than mothers with no education.¹⁷ Educated mothers are

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better able to access and understand medical resources in order to fight the spread of infectious disease and to promote healthier practices in their household and in their community. In low-income countries, mothers with a primary school education are 12 percent more likely to seek appropriate care for a child with symptoms of diarrhea and are more likely to take the necessary steps to prevent diarrhea like purifying water.¹⁸

There is also a connection between the education of girls and children's malnutrition and stunting. Women with an education have more power within their home to ensure that their children have access to nutrient-rich food. This results in reduced rates of stunting and malnutrition among children in the crucial first years of life. If all mothers in low-income countries had a primary school education, there would be an estimated 4 percent reduction in stunting. If all mothers had a secondary school education, there would be a 26 percent reduction in stunting.¹⁹

Gender discrimination and malnutrition are inextricably linked, and malnutrition disproportionately affects

women and girls at every stage of their lives. Adequate nutrition for women and girls is critical to break the cycle of inequality. As Lawrence Haddad, executive director of the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN), states: “Gender inequality begins in the womb. Every year, 16 million adolescent girls give birth, most in low- and middle-income countries. If a mother lives in an area where stunting rates are high and she is in her mid-teens, her child is more likely to be stunted—and thus more susceptible to disease and largely irreversible cognitive underdevelopment, adversely affecting their ability to benefit from education and reach their full potential.”²⁰

Educating girls is also an important tool in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Primary and secondary schools are key sites for disseminating information about HIV/AIDS. By providing girls with this information in primary school and building on it in secondary school with discussions about safe sex, healthy relationships, and the dangers of engaging in risky behaviors, girls are better able to distinguish between the facts and myths regarding HIV transmission and protect themselves. Educated girls are more likely to delay their first sexual encounter and engage in less risky behaviors like unprotected sex. They are also empowered to have discussions with partners about safe sex practices like condom use. One study found that “each additional year of education decreases the probability of contracting HIV by 6.7 percent.”²¹ Educated girls are less likely to contract HIV.

Educated girls, stronger communities

Educating girls can have a ripple effect in local communities. Girls with an education have access to better economic opportunities. This makes them less vulnerable to human traffickers who often exploit the poverty of girls or their families. Educated girls are less likely to engage in violent behavior or criminal activities. Social networks and peer networks often develop in school clubs. Stronger peer networks keep girls motivated and engaged in school.²² They foster stronger community relations.

More educated girls support stronger civic participation. Primary and secondary education teaches critical thinking and analytical skills that empower girls to become involved in their community. Educating girls tends to promote support for democracy.²³

Educated women are more likely to participate in politics and make concrete changes in the community than uneducated girls. When women in India were on rural legislative councils, they were able to direct the commu-

nity’s resources toward development projects that were important to them, like clean drinking water and roads.²⁴

Another benefit of providing girls with an education is that it increases the education level of the next generation. In many countries, women have a great impact on decisions regarding educating children. Educated women will support educating their children, particu-

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larly their daughters. According to UNICEF, children of mothers with no education are more than twice as likely to be out of school as children of educated mothers. In eight specific countries, children of uneducated mothers are three times as likely to be out of school.²⁵ Educated mothers are able to help their children with their studies. One study in India found that children of literate mothers studied over one hour more per day than children of illiterate mothers.²⁶ Educated children will have access to better economic opportunities as adults and will promote education among their own children. This can help break the poverty cycle and improve the living situation of future generations.

Empowering women at home

Girls’ education is the key to their empowerment. It boosts their self-esteem and self-awareness and gives them critical thinking skills to become agents of change in their home and in their community.

Education can also help prevent early marriage. As many as one in three girls in low- and middle-income countries is married before she turns 18. One in nine girls is married before the age of 15.²⁷ Early marriage keeps girls out of school as they are needed to carry out domestic chores and take care of children. Girls with a secondary school education or higher are three times less likely to be married by their 18th birthday.²⁸

Girls with an education have greater understandings of their rights, have the self-confidence to assert their rights, and have the ability to transform their lives. Education also gives them the confidence to resist domestic violence. Research in Sierra Leone found that one additional year of education for a woman reduced

her approval of wife-beating by 10 percent.²⁹ Girls who are educated have better economic opportunities and are less economically dependent on abusive spouses or partners. They have more resources and self-confidence to take control in relationships and in their household. In Pakistan, 63 percent of women with at least lower secondary education believe they have a say in the number of children they will have. In contrast, only 30 percent of women with no education believe they have control over this.³⁰ Female genital mutilation is less likely to occur when women have an education, and educated women are less likely to force their daughters to undergo the procedure. Education is the key to these changes—and the key to women becoming agents of transformation.

Education is a fundamental right

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), proclaimed by the UN General Assembly in December 1948, declared: “Everyone has the right to education. . . . Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.”³¹ Every girl has the right to an education and to the self-esteem, economic opportunity, and strength that education brings.

Barriers to girls’ education

Despite the efforts by many countries, international organizations, and NGOs, millions of girls are never enrolled in school or are forced to drop out or are taken out of school. These girls face numerous barriers to education including concerns about safety and security, poverty, lack of female teachers, inadequate instruction, and inadequate school facilities.

Safety issues

One of the primary barriers to education is concern over safety. This includes safety of girls not only while they are in school but also as they try to get to school.

One factor that prevents parents from sending girls to secondary school is the long distance between many villages and secondary schools. While great strides have been made to expand universal primary education by building primary schools in rural areas, less progress has been made at the secondary school level. For example, according to a 2006 survey of the Kindia area of Guinea, there were 681 primary schools but only 41 secondary

schools.³² Fewer secondary schools mean that girls need to travel longer distances from home to attend school. In a survey of 21 countries, the average distance to primary school was approximately two kilometers, and the average distance to secondary school was 21.5 kilometers.³³ Girls experience higher rates of harassment and sexual violence en route to school. Many parents do not enroll their daughters in secondary school or withdraw their daughters from school to avoid violence.

Concern about the safety of girls within school buildings is also a major barrier. Girls can experience harassment and sexual abuse at the hands of peers and teachers. Poorly trained and poorly paid teachers can make school environments unsafe for children, particularly girls. They might not be aware of incidents of violence toward female students or be unable to handle such concerns. They can also perpetuate gender-based violence in school by exploiting their authority over girls to extract sexual favors from them in exchange for better grades. Poor societal perceptions of the teaching profession and low compensation are cited as driving factors behind male teachers’ desire to engage in sex-

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ual relationships with their students.³⁴ These situations make schools a dangerous environment rather than a safe haven. Many girls drop out of school rather than endure such abuse. The unsafe learning environment can also affect the quality of education a girl receives as the trauma of school-related, gender-based violence can prevent her from fully engaging in school or receiving a quality education.

In conflict zones and war zones, safety issues can become an even greater concern for parents. Schools are often used for military purposes and become military targets, where armed groups or governments looking for child soldiers forcibly recruit both boys and girls.³⁵ Girls who are recruited can be used as soldiers but are more often recruited for forced marriages or sexual purposes. School insecurity prevents parents from sending girls to school.

School fees

The cost of school can deter many parents. Although many countries have enacted policies to officially eliminate or reduce primary school fees, these same policies do not always apply at the secondary school level. Secondary school fees are often higher than primary school fees.³⁶ In addition to direct costs like tuition, other indirect school costs like textbooks, school supplies, and uniforms can be prohibitively high. In families where only one child can attend school because of the cost, boys' education is often prioritized over girls'. When schools are located far from rural villages, parents often cannot afford the transportation fees to send girls to school or the fees associated with lodging the girls at school.

Along with the outright cost of school, unexpected education fees can prevent girls from attending schools. Teachers and administrators sometimes try to extract bribes from families for students to receive higher grades or additional instruction. Parents who cannot afford these "fees" are forced to withdraw their daughters from school.³⁷

Opportunity cost

There are also opportunity costs to sending girls to schools. Girls often have to contribute to the welfare of the household through domestic chores, like taking care of the house, fetching water, working in the fields, or working in the market. For girls who are in school, time spent studying and completing homework takes away

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time that could be spent on domestic labor. Time needed for parents to chaperone their daughters to school or supervise their safety in school environments also factors into a family's decision about whether to send a daughter to school. For many families who rely on the labor of their daughters, the opportunity cost of sending girls to school is too high.³⁸

Girls also serve as caretakers in many low-income families. They are withdrawn from school to take care of younger siblings and elderly or disabled relatives. In countries with high rates of HIV/AIDS, often girls are

expected to stay home to care for sick relatives. The opportunity cost of sending girls to school is high for families who need girls to serve as caretakers in order for parents to work and earn money.

Many families also need the income that girls can bring in if they are working as paid labor. Sending girls to school could mean a loss of income to the family.

Teacher quality

Inadequate teachers and substandard curricula also contribute to the perception of the low value of girls' education. Poorly trained teachers contribute to the low value placed on girls' education in several ways. They provide a low-quality education, and parents withdraw their daughters from school because they see it as a waste of time if their daughters do not learn anything. In many low-income countries, the teaching profession is not prestigious. Hiring and retaining quality teachers is difficult when pay is low, especially in rural schools where there is a greater need for high-quality teachers but little to attract them to the schools. Many rural schools are forced to hire unqualified teachers or teacher's aides rather than fully trained teachers. These unqualified teachers show parents that further education is not necessary to get a job, particularly a teaching job. This makes parents even less inclined to educate their daughters.³⁹

The poor quality of instruction is also a barrier to girls' education. Many parents do not view education as a right of their daughters. They view it as an investment and look for an immediate return on that investment. According to the United Nations, only half of students who graduate primary school have the minimum basic proficiency levels in mathematics and reading.⁴⁰ Many schools do not teach life skills or other skills that students need to access new economic opportunities and contribute to the income of their household. Parents do not see the value in educating their children, particularly daughters, and withdraw them from school.

A school's curriculum and teachers also are often gender biased against girls, which can leave girls disengaged from the classroom and more prone to dropping out. Many textbooks do not include women at all or reinforced gender norms by only depicting women in traditional, submissive roles.⁴¹ Teachers and administrators also use girls as laborers in the school to make up for budget shortfalls. Girls might be pulled from class in order to run errands, cook for school functions, or clean the school. Girls fall behind due to poorly trained teach-

ers and biased curricula and often drop out of or are withdrawn from school by their parents.⁴²

Gender of teacher

A lack of female teachers is also a barrier to education. Female teachers provide many safeguards to girls in school. First, female teachers are less likely to harass or sexually exploit their students. Second, female teachers are more likely to call out colleagues who are harassing or discriminating against their students, making the classroom a safe environment for girls to learn and thrive.⁴³ Third, female teachers serve as role models and mentors for girls. Their presence provides an example

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of a professional and skilled woman who is economically independent, someone that many girls from poorer families might not have encountered before. For parents, having a qualified female teacher in the classroom encourages them to send their own daughters to school and provides an immediate example of the economic benefits of investing in their daughters' education.

In areas where cultural or social beliefs and attitudes place restrictions on the movement and freedom of girls, many parents are uncomfortable with having men teach their daughters. This can lead to an endless cycle of uneducated or undereducated girls. A lack of female teachers in the classroom prevents parents from enrolling their daughters in school. This results in a small pool of educated and qualified girls to recruit to become teachers. As a result, there are fewer female teachers in classrooms and parents are reluctant to send their girls to school.⁴⁴ The lack of female teachers is more apparent at the secondary school level where there is generally even fewer female teachers. Having female teachers has a positive impact on girls' enrollment and retention rates, but many low-income countries have few qualified female teachers to fill those positions.

Inadequate school facilities

School facilities are often inadequate for the needs of girls. Many schools in low-income communities do not

have separate toilet facilities for boys and girls, which is especially important when girls begin menstruating. In Tanzania and South Africa, girls reported that attending school during menses was difficult due to the lack of facilities like separate toilets, running water, or doors with locks.⁴⁵ In South Africa, girls also reported that they did not go to school during menses rather than try and use inadequate facilities. Missing multiple days of school each month because of inadequate sanitation and hygiene facilities or no access to feminine hygiene products means that girls fall behind in their schoolwork. It also gives them a feeling of low self-worth as they are often isolated from their communities during this time. This contributes to girls feeling as if they are less important than boys and girls deciding to drop out of school.

Inadequate sanitation also means that infectious disease spreads more easily in school environments as students do not practice proper hygiene like hand washing. Increased rates of infection mean increased rates of absenteeism due to illness, which impacts a student's ability to learn.⁴⁶ Since girls often serve as caretakers in the family, even if they aren't ill, they can be forced to stay home to care for sick younger siblings. A lack of access to adequate sanitation and hygiene facilities has a major impact on girls' ability to attend school and keep up with their studies.

Early marriage

Early marriage is also one of the leading barriers to education. Early marriage and early pregnancy inhibit a girl's ability to go to school as her domestic workload increases after marriage. Young brides are often forced to have children soon after marriage. Once she is pregnant, a young mother will need to care for her child, a further barrier to continuing her education.⁴⁷ Young mothers are rarely able to re-enroll in school. Child marriage and early pregnancies account for one-fifth of dropouts among girls in secondary school.⁴⁸ Conversely, girls who stay in school marry at later ages and have fewer children. One study of the impact of child marriage on fertility found that "marrying at age 13 increases the number of children that women are expected to have over their lifetime by 26.4 percent in comparison to marrying at age 18 or later."⁴⁹

Social and cultural reasons

Girls must also overcome cultural and social barriers to attend school. In many cultures, less value is placed on girls than on boys because girls marry out and join

a new family. In Mozambique, one proverb says, “Educating a girl is like watering a flower in another man’s garden.”⁵⁰ Parents don’t see the benefit in investing in their daughter’s education since she will soon marry into another family that will reap the rewards. Boys’ education is sometimes prioritized over girls’ because boys remain in the family. Parents will see an immediate payoff from educated sons.

In some societies, girls must be escorted to and from school by a male relative due to restrictions on girls’ movement in public. If her father or older brothers cannot escort her, she is unable to attend school.⁵¹ If the only teachers available are men, girls might not be allowed to attend school because of restrictions on their interactions with men who are not relatives.

Funding

Although awareness of the gender imbalance in education is rising around the world, funding for the education sector is still a small portion of development and humanitarian aid. Global health receives 17 times more funding than education.⁵² In a survey of different institutions

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engaged in funding education initiatives, Brookings Institution found that multilateral institutions, bilateral institutions, and foundations directed less than 10 percent of their aid budget toward education programs and projects.⁵³ Many countries that need aid are overlooked by donors. The same Brookings Institution survey found that of the 15 countries that have the highest levels of gender disparity at the secondary school level, 13 were not prioritized in overseas development aid by survey respondents.⁵⁴ In emergency humanitarian situations, education aid receives less than 2 percent of funding.⁵⁵ The annual external funding gap for universal basic education to children in 46 low-income countries is estimated to be \$26 billion.⁵⁶ Given the numerous benefits of increasing education levels of children, particularly girls, not enough is being done to continue to advance the work of advocacy, research, and promotion of girls’ education and empowerment.

Conclusion

Despite the proven economic, social, and health benefits of girls’ education, millions of girls around the world are not enrolled in school. Millions more will drop out or be withdrawn from school without ever achieving minimum basic proficiency in literacy or numeracy. Without those important skills and the critical thinking and analytical skills that secondary education develops, girls will be stuck in poverty without the ability to break free from the poverty cycle.

Educating girls is an important tool in lifting millions of people out of poverty and in improving living standards throughout the world. Girls have the right to an education and to the opportunities that education can provide. It is difficult to point to one investment that can have a greater positive developmental impact on communities and families for generations than increasing the number of girls in quality primary and secondary education programs. In the words of former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan: “No other policy is as likely to raise economic productivity, or to reduce infant and maternal mortality. No other policy is as sure to improve nutrition and promote health—including the prevention of HIV/AIDS. No other policy is as powerful in increasing the chances of education for the next generation.”⁵⁷ Ensuring adequate basic education is more than a girl’s right—it is our responsibility.

Investing in women and girls is the key to unlocking progress, particularly in low-income countries. Actions to support girls need to center around removing barriers to success and building up their human, social, economic, and cognitive capital. Two key ways to ensure that girls gain these assets is to ensure they receive a quality education and to focus on them as a funding priority. There are pivotal moments at every point in a girl’s life where critical actions can make a huge difference, so a lifecycle approach is imperative to address the myriad challenges facing girls and women at various life stages. Joint effort from the global community, governments, civil society, and private sector is needed to empower girls to grow, lead, and contribute to a healthy, peaceful, and prosperous world.⁵⁸

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