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## Girls and Education: A Global Approach

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Girls' education globally has received increasing attention in recent years. A wide range of development and policy organizations advocate for and provide programs in girls' education. This fact sheet presents 1) basic data about gender inequality in education globally 2) some of the major policy approaches and 3) a list of relevant NGOs and policy organizations.

### **THE BIG PICTURE: DATA ON GENDER INEQUALITY IN EDUCATION**

#### **Educational Access**

One measure of gender equality in education is the Gender Parity Index (GPI), the ratio of girls to boys enrolled at a particular level of education. GPIs worldwide in 2008 indicated continued exclusion of girls from schooling; fewer than two-thirds of countries with data have gender parity, or equal enrolment of girls and boys, at the primary level, and only around a third of countries at the secondary level (UNESCO 2011a, 73). Yet most regions have seen impressive increases in girls' school enrolment both at the primary and secondary levels in the last decade. UNESCO data show an overall increase in enrolment at both the primary and secondary levels, as well as a narrowing of the gap between male and female enrolment, though secondary enrolment remains much lower than primary enrolment.<sup>1</sup> At the tertiary level, female enrolment has grown almost twice as fast as that of males in the last 40 years, and gross female enrolment now equals or surpasses male enrolment in every region except South and West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO 2011a, 77).<sup>2</sup>

#### **Educational Achievement and Experience**

Education reforms in the developing world have increasingly emphasized educational quality in addition to access (Hanushek 2005). Data on educational attainment show that girls are less likely to drop out or to repeat grades than boys are (UNESCO 2011a, 42, 47). SACMEQ, a consortium that tests learning outcomes in Southern and Eastern Africa, has found consistent advantages for girls in reading and for boys in math (Saito 2011), results similar to PISA findings in OECD countries (Marks 2008; OECD 2010).

Beyond test scores, some organizations, such as UNICEF, have more complex definitions of educational quality that include gender-sensitive curricula and classroom environments. Girls' experience in school is difficult to define and measure in universal terms. U.S. sociologists of education (Martin 1998; Giroux and Purpel 1983) have documented ways in which the "hidden curriculum" can operate to reproduce inequalities and normalized forms of gendered behavior. In addition, girls can face physical or sexual violence in school (Dunne, Humphreys, and Leach 2006). The race and gender of teachers may also shape experiences of school (Dee 2005). The proportion of female teachers worldwide is still much lower at the secondary than the primary level; further, in countries where teachers are higher paid, the proportion of male teachers tends to increase (UNESCO 2011a, 100–104). These gendered dynamics affect boys as well as girls. Girls and "feminine" behavior can be advantaged by some aspects of the "hidden curriculum," and girls may earn better grades and enjoy school more than boys do (Buchmann, DiPrete, and McDaniel 2008).

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<sup>1</sup> Gross enrolment ratios were 108 for males and 105 for females at the primary level, and 68 for males and 66 for females at the secondary level in 2008, up from 102 for males and 94 for females at the primary level, and 62 for males and 56 for females at the secondary level, in 1999 (UNESCO 2011b, 309, 325)

<sup>2</sup> Fields of tertiary study are often highly segregated by sex (UNESCO 2011a; Charles and Bradley 2002).

## Local and Global Inequalities

- *Global Wealth Inequalities.* In general, greater national wealth is associated with greater educational access. However, the relationship between national wealth and educational access is complex; low-income countries like Malawi and Ethiopia now have school life-expectancies on par with much richer countries, like China and Turkey (UNESCO 2011a, 10). In general, “developed” regions of the world, such as North America and Western Europe, have greater gender parity in education or an over-representation of girls compared to “developing” countries, but many such countries are quickly erasing this difference.
- *Race, Class, and Regional Inequalities.* Gender inequalities operate in relation to other axes of inequality. In the U.S., race and class can intersect with gender to disadvantage girls of color in terms of educational attainment, self-esteem and school climate (Hanson, Smith, and Kapur 2000; Corbett, Hill, and St. Rose 2011). Similarly, in many developing countries, class, race, ethnicity, region, rural/urban location, and first language work together to shape educational access and quality (Buchmann and Hannum 2001; UNESCO 2010).
- *Geopolitics and Conflict.* Conflict directly affects educational attendance and exacerbates gender inequalities: on average, the GPI at the primary level is less than 0.90 at the primary level in conflict-affected countries and less than 0.80 at the secondary level (compared to around 1 in other countries) (UNESCO 2011b, 133).<sup>3</sup> At the same time, foreign aid for education, and girls’ education in particular, is increasingly funded by defense budgets in Iraq and Afghanistan as part of a “hearts and minds” strategy. For example, in 2008, the U.S. aid budget for education in Iraq, which made up 86% of aid spending on education there, was fully channeled through an “emergency response” portfolio (UNESCO 2010, 178). This defense focus may shape the emphasis of girls’ education funding.
- *Financial Crisis.* Austerity measures in both developed and developing countries, encouraged by neoliberal financial institutions, often involve major cuts to all levels of public education. For example, a survey of 18 low-income countries found that 7 had made cuts to their education budgets in 2009 and 3 had made no increases (UNESCO 2011b, 112). Such cuts have taken place across the U.S. and U.K. as well, and shape the context for overall educational access as well as potentially exacerbating race, class, and gender inequalities.

## Thinking Beyond the Classroom

Girls’ education is often assumed to have automatically transformative effects for gender equality. Yet education is one of a complex set of factors shaping female well-being: girls’ education is not a panacea. A literature review by the International Center for Research on Women examines the evidence on the relationship between female education and various measures of gender equality (Malhotra, Pande, and Grown 2003). The following discussion draws on this literature review, unless otherwise stated.

- *Education and Health/Well-Being.* High levels of female education are associated with improved health outcomes, lower fertility, and greater use of maternal health services, but are not always linked to sexual health. For example, early in the HIV epidemic, higher education was associated with greater risk of HIV infection, but as the epidemic progressed, it became associated with lower risk (Hargreaves and Boler 2006). Female education may be associated with lower levels of domestic violence, but only in some settings.

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<sup>3</sup> A GPI less than 1 represents higher male enrolment, 1 parity, and above 1 higher female enrolment.

- *Education and Social Position.* Female education is associated with increased freedom of movement, but not necessarily increased decision-making power within the family. Secondary-level education is more associated with increased decision-making power than primary schooling. In many contexts, ethnographic research suggests that female education does not necessarily overturn women's position within patriarchal social structures.
- *Education and Employment.* Depending on context, marital status, and type of schooling, the relationship between female education and labor-force participation is sometimes positive, sometimes U-shaped (with lower labor-force participation at middle levels of education and higher participation at the lowest and highest levels), and sometimes insignificant. However, in all 9 studies reviewed on earnings, female education had a positive or conditional relationship with increased earnings, particularly in the formal sector. This relationship is clearest at the highest levels of education.
- *Education and Political Participation.* While limited evidence exists, secondary education for girls may be associated with greater representation of women in politics. A study drawing on data from India and from the World Values Survey (Chhibber 2002) links education, belonging to an association, and employment to women's political activity.

## POLICY APPROACHES TO GIRLS' EDUCATION

Policy approaches to girls' education are often motivated by very different concerns and orientations. The following are adapted from Aikman, Halai, and Rubagiza (2011).

- *The Human Capital Approach.* Campaigns such as the "Girl Effect," sponsored by the Nike Foundation and the World Bank, emphasize girls' education as "smart economics" because of its impact on national wealth and economic growth. They emphasize gender parity and sameness of educational resources to girls and boys.
- *The Rights-Based Approach.* A rights-based approach, such as that of Education for All (led by UNESCO), emphasizes girls' right to education. Civil society campaigns such as the Global Campaign for Education attempt to address gendered inequalities in the attainment of these rights at the level of education ministries and development aid institutions.
- *Postcolonial and Feminist Critiques.* Some social movements for education have emphasized the role of formal schooling in promoting hegemonic forms of knowledge over indigenous or marginalized knowledges, and reifying categories such as that of the "Third World" girl. These movements might promote alternative forms of education.
- *The Capabilities Approach.* This approach, proposed by Unterhalter (2007), focuses on the intersections between gender inequality and other forms of inequality, and frames gender inequality in schooling within a broader struggle for social justice.

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## GIRLS' EDUCATION: KEY NGOS AND POLICY ORGANIZATIONS

- Action Aid <http://www.actionaid.org/what-we-do/education>
- American Association of University Women <http://www.aauw.org>
- Amnesty International <http://www.amnesty.org/en/campaigns/stop-violence-against-women/issues/empowerment-women/safe-schools>
- Care International/ Girl Scouts of America <http://www.care.org/campaigns/powerwithin/index.asp>
- Center for Global Development <http://www.cgdev.org/section/topics/education>
- The Coalition for Adolescent Girls [http://www.coalitionforadolescentgirls.org/for\\_girls\\_education](http://www.coalitionforadolescentgirls.org/for_girls_education), <http://www.girlsdiscovered.org/>
- Council on Foreign Relations <http://www.cfr.org/issue/education/ri126>
- International Center for Research on Women <http://www.icrw.org>
- Global Campaign for Education <http://www.campaignforeducation.org>
- National Coalition for Girls and Women in Education <http://www.ncwge.org>
- National Council for Research on Women <http://www.ncrw.org/issues-expertise/104/education-education-reform>
- Nike Foundation <http://www.girleffect.org>
- Oxfam <http://www.oxfam.org>
- Plan International <http://www.plan-international.org/girls>
- Population Council [http://www.popcouncil.org/topics/youth\\_schooling.asp](http://www.popcouncil.org/topics/youth_schooling.asp)
- Right to Education Project <http://www.right-to-education.org/node/241>
- UNESCO <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/gender-and-education/>
- UNICEF/UNGEI (UN Girls' Education Initiative) <http://www.ungei.org>
- U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) [http://www.usaid.gov/our\\_work/cross-cutting\\_programs/wid/ed/index.html](http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/cross-cutting_programs/wid/ed/index.html)
- World Bank <http://go.worldbank.org/1L4BH3TG20>