



Women and Education

By Lori S. Ashford



The Zarghuna Girls School in Kabul, Afghanistan, depicted here, is supported by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). *UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe*

Few investments have as large a payoff as girls' education. Educated women are more likely to ensure health care for their families, educate their children and become income earners.

The right to education for all has been an international goal for decades, but since the 1990s, women's education and empowerment have come into sharp focus. Several landmark conferences, including the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo, and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, placed these issues at the center of development efforts.

The Millennium Development Goals — agreed to by world leaders at the U.N. Millennium Summit

in 2000 — call for universal primary education and for closing the gender gap in secondary and higher education. These high-level agreements spawned initiatives around the world to increase girls' school enrollments. Changes since 1990 have been remarkable, considering the barriers that had to be overcome in developing countries.

In many traditional societies, girls are prevented from attaining their full potential because of lower priority placed on educating daughters (who marry and leave the family) and the lower status of girls and women

in general. Families may also have concerns about the school fees, girls being taught by male teachers and girls' safety away from home. Governments and communities have begun to break down these barriers, however, because of overwhelming evidence of the benefits of educating girls.

Why educating girls matters

Few investments have as large a payoff as girls' education. Household surveys in developing countries have consistently shown that women with more education have smaller, healthier and better-educated families. The linkages are clear: Educated women are more likely to take care of their health, desire fewer children and educate them well, which, in turn, makes it more likely their children will survive and thrive into adulthood.

Research by the World Bank and other organizations has shown that increasing girls' schooling boosts women's wages and leads to faster economic growth than educating only boys. Moreover, when women earn more money, they are more likely to invest it in their children and households, enhancing family wealth and well-being. Other benefits of women's education captured in studies include lower levels of HIV infection, domestic violence and harmful practices toward women, such as female genital cutting and bride burning.

How girls and women have fared since Beijing

Advances in girls' education worldwide have been a success story in development. According to UNESCO, 96 girls were enrolled in primary school for every 100 boys in 2008, up from 84 girls per 100 boys in 1995. The ratio for secondary school is close behind, at 95 girls to 100 boys in 2008.

By 2005, nearly two-thirds of countries had closed the gap between girls' and boys' school enrollments. Girls still lag behind boys in university-level education worldwide, but the gap is closing over time.

There is progress, but girls still lag far behind boys in countries where overall school enrollments are low, as in much of sub-Saharan Africa and Western and Southern Asia. In sub-Saharan Africa, just 39 percent of girls were enrolled in lower secondary school in 2009, according to UNESCO. UNESCO also reports that in Somalia half as many girls were enrolled in school as boys: 23 percent of girls compared to 42 percent of boys in 2008. Much work remains to be done.

At the other end of the spectrum, in countries with high levels of school enrollment, girls often fare better than boys. In much of Latin America, Europe, East Asia and in the United States, girls' enrollments in secondary and higher education have surpassed those of their male peers, demonstrating what girls and women can achieve once the barriers to education have been overcome.

Still, women account for two-thirds of the world's illiterate adults, because older women are less likely to have attended school than their younger counterparts. They are also much more likely to be illiterate



Corporate support of girls' education is exemplified by Motorola's "Introduce a Girl to Engineering" event, part of the company's initiative to attract U.S. children to science and foster innovation early. Here Motorola engineer Deb Matteo conducts a light and color experiment with two young participants. *PRNewsFoto/Motorola, Inc., Aynsley Floyd*

if they are poor and live in rural areas. Literacy programs and continuing education exist, but the efforts are not systematically reported across countries. In addition, girls and women are disadvantaged when it comes to technical and vocational education, in fields such as science and technology that have long been dominated by men.

What can we learn from successful efforts?

Many gains in women's education can be attributed to special interventions such as the elimination of school fees, scholarships, community schools for girls and the training of women teachers. Such targeted efforts have translated into higher girls' school enrollments in countries as diverse as Bangladesh, Yemen, Morocco, Uganda and Brazil. Political commitment is essential for raising the profile of the issue and increasing girls' access to schooling. Mexico pioneered a major social program — now replicated in impoverished communities in the United States and other countries — that pays families to keep their children, particularly girls, in school.

Because the gender gap is wider at higher levels of education, it will not be enough for girls to merely sign up for school; they need to stay in school. Governments, educators and communities must address issues such as gender stereotypes that reinforce women's lower status, poor school quality, and early marriage and childbearing, which often cut short women's education. Also, the mismatch between education and the skills needed for today's workforce must be corrected. These steps may ensure that girls reap the greatest benefits from education. Countries that are committed to gender equality will not only see better report cards in education, they'll be healthier and wealthier as well.

Lori S. Ashford, a freelance consultant, has written about global population, health and women's issues for 20 years. Formerly with the Population Reference Bureau, she authored the widely disseminated "Women of Our World" data sheets and the Population Bulletin "New Population Policies: Advancing Women's Health and Rights," among other publications. This article is from Global Women's Issues: Women in the World Today, published by the U.S. Department of State.



A woman participates in a USAID-supported science education program in Tanzania that helps women expand their opportunities through science. USAID/Zahur Ramji