

Education:

The world has seen significant progress over the years, but there is one area that still leaves much to be desired: women's education. Across the globe, women continue to suffer from extreme examples of patriarchal societies that keep them from receiving the same access to education as their male counterparts. Take Africa, for example, where only a mere 14% of women in the low-income category graduate from secondary school. Even in the upper- to middle-income category, numbers peak at 57%. Overall, 122 million African people do not finish secondary school and more than half of them are female. Education also strengthens economies. When female citizens are better educated, they have a greater chance of becoming gainfully employed, which then raises the income of the entire household. For proof, a 2003 study by UNESCO, showed that for every year a country's average years of schooling increases, its long-term economic growth increases by 3.7%.

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 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.

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. 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.