

Number 9, March 6th 2000

Education: The Global Gender Gap

Key Messages

Girls' education is a fundamental right, as well as a catalyst for economic growth and human development. Despite this, girls comprise two-thirds of the 125 million children across the world who are not in school.

The World Education Forum in Dakar in April provides an opportunity to launch a concrete programme to deliver the internationally agreed target of achieving Universal Primary Education by 2015, and to close the gender gap in education.

The British Government should provide the international leadership required to tackle the global education crisis, and to close the gender gap. This kind of leadership has been extremely effective on debt relief. The Prime Minister should take the lead in launching a global initiative aimed at mobilising \$8 billion per annum in support of national education reform strategies with robust monitoring of progress towards Universal Primary Education, and the elimination of the gender gap in education.

Increased aid for basic education should be conditional on progress towards eliminating the gender gap, using focussed, culturally-sensitive interventions to increase girls' enrolment and attendance. National Education reform strategies should set out the financing requirements which will allow gender parity to be achieved in basic education by 2005.

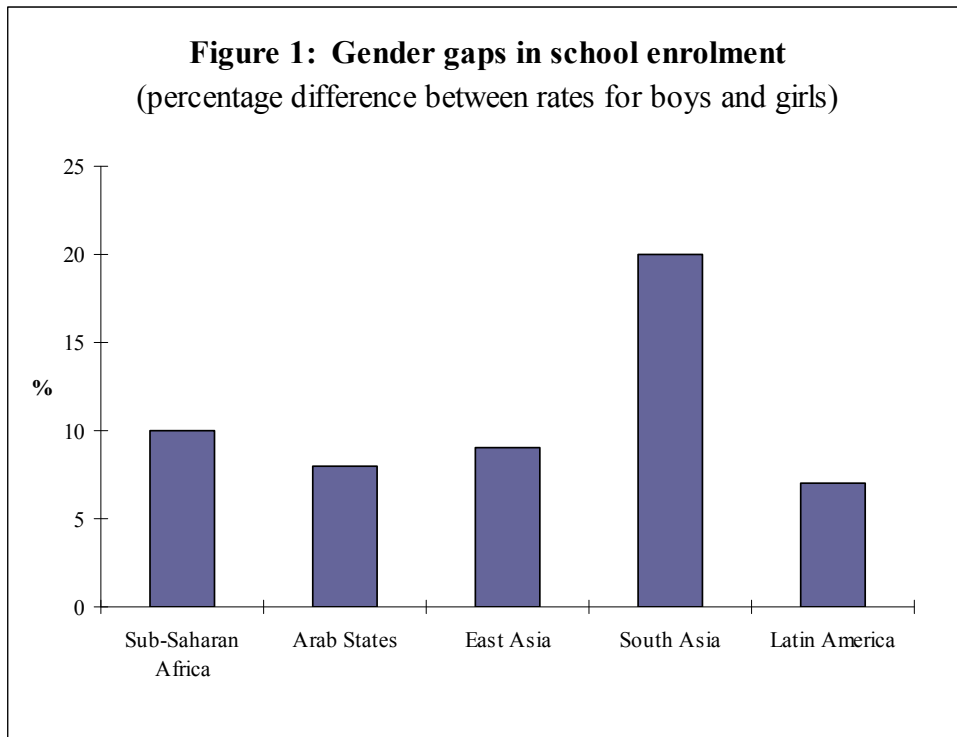
Introduction

Ten years ago, at the Jomtien "Education for All" conference, world governments committed themselves to attaining basic education for all by 2000, with a special emphasis on closing the gender gap. The World Summit for Social Development in 1995 shifted that deadline to 2015, with an interim goal of achieving gender equity by 2005. However, on the eve of the World Education Forum to be held in Dakar in April, the picture still looks bleak; girls comprise two-thirds of the 125 million children across the world who are not in school.

The educational gender gap world-wide: facts and figures

There are 42 million fewer girls than boys enrolled in primary schools across the world. South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa have the widest gender gaps. In both regions improvement is coming far too slowly. The proportion of girls in South Asian primary schools increased by only 0.2% in the first half of the 1990s. Even when girls are enrolled, they are less likely than boys to complete their schooling. Every year one million more girls than boys drop out of Indian primary schools. The

outcome of these gender disparities is that most of the world's illiterate people are women. Figure 1 illustrates the gender gap in school enrolment across the developing world.



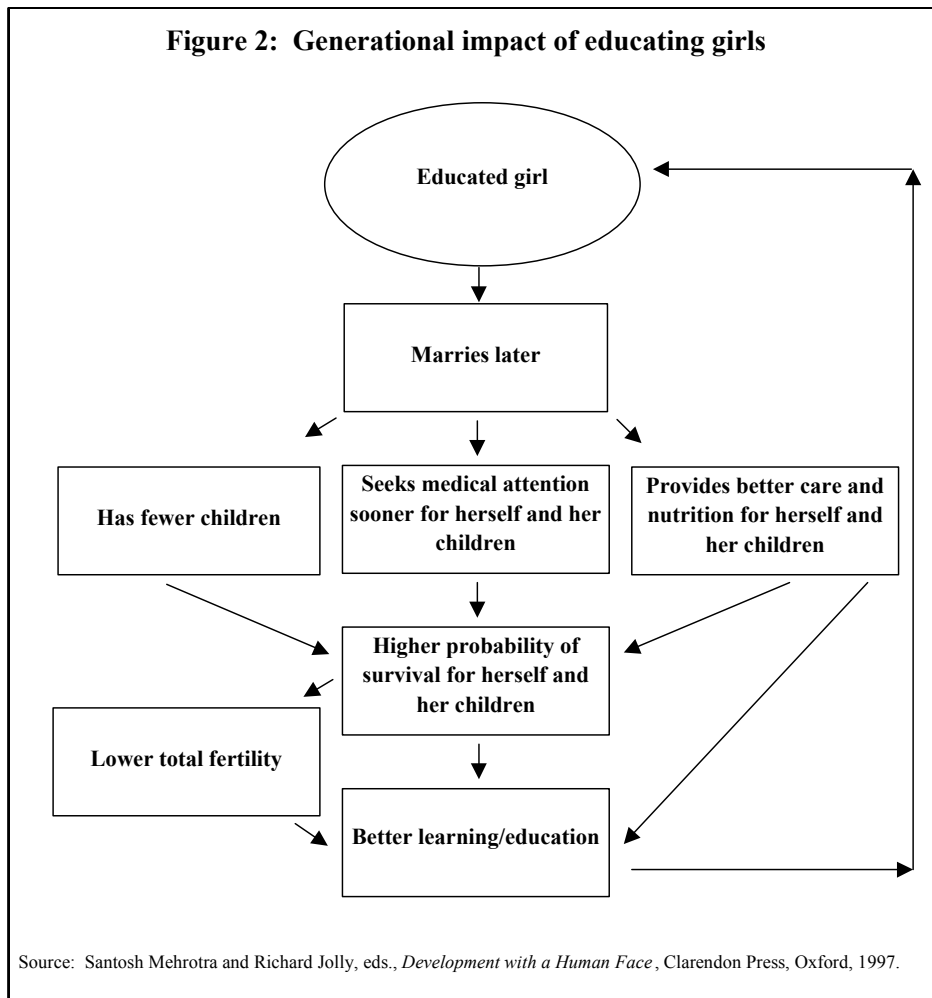
The benefits of educating girls

The fundamental right of girls to education is recognised in a range of international agreements. Education for girls is also a hugely effective means of achieving a wide variety of other development goals. It is widely accepted that increasing the number of girls in school, and so increasing the number of literate adult women, has a positive effect on both economic growth and social wellbeing. High female school enrolment is associated with:

- *Longer life expectancy for both women and men*
Female life expectancy in the Indian state of Kerala, where 86% of women are literate, is 73 years, compared with 45 years in Uttar Pradesh, where less than 25% of women can read.
- *Lower infant mortality*
A child in Uttar Pradesh is seven times more likely than a child in Kerala to die in his or her first year.
- *Lower maternal mortality*
Although average incomes in Pakistan are higher than in Vietnam, the maternal mortality rate is twice as high. This appears to be linked to the much higher female school completion rates in Vietnam.

In families with educated mothers, daughters are more likely to go to school, producing a “virtuous circle” effect. Figure 2 shows how the benefits of girls’ education accrue from one generation to the next.

Figure 2: Generational impact of educating girls



What is preventing girls from receiving basic education?

Poverty, both at state and household level, is a major factor, but so too are cultural and social constraints that interact with poverty to set up barriers to girls' education. A useful way to look at these different dimensions of the problem is to divide them into *supply-side* and *demand-side* factors.

Supply-side factors

- *Shortage of places and poor physical infrastructure*

Shortages of school places, the remoteness of rural schools and poor physical infrastructure are major problems in many developing countries. Such deficiencies are often due to lack of resources, especially in highly indebted countries. Zambia, for instance, spent four times as much on debt servicing than education between 1993-1996. Misplaced government priorities also play a part; in Pakistan, the government spends 27% of its budget on defence and only 4% on primary education. Girls tend to suffer more than boys do from such deficiencies. Girls are often disadvantaged because of well-founded concerns about their physical security (as in some

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parts of Ethiopia). The poor quality of school facilities in the developing world also militates against girls' attendance.

In societies which ascribe great importance to female "modesty", as in South Asia, something as simple as a lack of toilet facilities can make school environments inhospitable to girls and deter parents from sending their daughters to school.

- *Poor quality of education*

The quality of the education offered in developing countries is often very poor. This is particularly so for girls, with curricula and textbooks frequently reinforcing limiting and demeaning stereotypes about women's roles. Studies show that girls often have to spend more school-time than boys doing non-educational "house-keeping" tasks. Where there is little educational benefit to be gained, it is not surprising if poverty-stricken parents decide it is not worth incurring the costs of sending a girl to school.

- *Lack of female teachers*

Studies in sub-Saharan Africa by FAWE (Forum for African Women Educationalists) show that the lack of female teachers as role models is discouraging to girls and can prevent them from doing well at school. According to an Oxfam-funded study, in Pakistan, only 35% of teachers are women, despite the necessity of having female teachers to ensure higher enrolment and completion rates for girls.

Demand-side factors

- *Cultural and social attitudes*

In many developing countries, a woman's role is still defined in terms of marriage and child rearing, and girls' education is seen as less important than boys'. Other cultural features also have a strong effect on girls' education. For instance, in India, a woman moves into her husband's household on marriage, so it is her husband's family rather than her birth family that reaps the rewards of her education. In both South and East Asia parents look to sons to take care of them in old age, which is another incentive for parents to educate sons rather than daughters.

- *Direct costs*

User fees are a strong disincentive to sending girls to school. Even where there are no such fees, parents may still have to bear the cost of uniforms, books and lunches. Where parents see little benefit from girls' education, these costs are more likely to deter them from sending their daughters to school than their sons. In this way, household poverty combines with cultural and social attitudes to keep girls out of school.

- *Indirect costs*

Poor families are often dependent on their children's labour for household survival. For instance, a 1994 study of poor rural families in northern Ghana found that girls were often the sole breadwinners in their extended families, and had to juggle the conflicting demands of work and school. In many societies girls are taught from a very young age to look after smaller

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siblings and help with housework. If their mothers need to work outside the home, it is older girls, rather than their brothers, who tend to be kept out of school.

What has to be done to close the gender gap?

Increasing the number of school places is not enough in itself to close the gender gap. Focussed and culturally-sensitive interventions are also needed which both increase the benefits of girls going to school and reduce the costs. In Sri Lanka, for instance, the introduction of flexible school hours, allowing girls to do their household tasks before going to school, have been found to work well.

Simple measures, which directly address economic, social and cultural barriers, can be very successful.

Oxfam is encouraging developing countries to assess their gender gaps and develop strategies to tackle them within the framework of a Global Action Plan (GAP) to achieve universal basic education by 2015. The GAP proposals include:

- Participating countries will produce Education Action Plans setting out the financing requirements which will enable them to achieve gender parity in basic education by 2005 and universal primary education by 2015 at the latest.
- Developing countries to raise \$4 billion through increased resource mobilisation, redistribution of wasteful public spending such as military spending, and reallocation within education budgets towards basic education.
- An additional \$4 billion in development assistance for basic education (in the form either of an overall increase in aid budgets, an increase in the share of aid budgets allocated to basic education, and earlier and deeper debt relief).
- Increased aid for basic education to be conditional on progress towards eliminating the gender gap, using focussed, culturally-sensitive interventions to increase girls' enrolment and attendance.

Suggested Action for MPs

1. Write to the Prime Minister urging him to:
 - Make the attainment of Universal Primary Education one of his personal priorities for the new millennium.
 - Make closing the gender gap in education a priority for governments and donors, not only because it is a human right, but also because education for girls acts as a catalyst for economic growth and achieving a wide range of human development goals.
 - Attend the Education For All conference in Dakar, and take the lead in launching a global initiative aimed at mobilising \$8 billion per annum in support of national education reform strategies with robust monitoring of progress towards Universal Primary Education.

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- Use other opportunities in the millennium year such as the World Social Summit, G8 Summit, and the UN Millennium Assembly to raise the issue of Education For All.
 - Increase the UK's overall aid budget during the current resource round and continue to increase the proportion of aid sending which is invested in basic education to the proposed target of 8%.
2. If you are able to, please support Early Day Motion #351 "Achieving Universal Primary Education" (Sponsors: Tony Worthington MP, Bowen Wells MP, Jenny Tonge MP, Dafydd Wigley MP, Oona King MP, Valerie Davey MP.)

Also available:

Oxfam Parliamentary Briefing #8: Achieving Universal Primary Education

Oxfam Parliamentary Briefing #7: The WTO after Seattle

Oxfam Parliamentary Briefing #6: International Policy Priorities

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First published by Oxfam GB in March 2000.

Published by Oxfam GB under ISBN 978-1-84814-156-8 in October 2010.