

## 5. Making it Happen

### Political will for gender equality in education



*Children learning in a BRAC-run school in Bangladesh*

**Why do some countries succeed in promoting gender parity and equality in education while others do not? The answer often given is 'political will'. All too often, however, no further explanation is offered. There has been little effort to understand why governments are unwilling or unable to change their policies and priorities to achieve equal access to education for girls and boys, as expressed in the third Millennium Development Goal. This paper considers the concept of political will and explores the role that it plays in improving gender parity and equality in education.**

## Commitment, leadership, and responsiveness

Broadly conceived, 'political will' is the sustained commitment of politicians and administrators to invest the necessary resources to achieve specific objectives. It is the *willingness* of these actors to undertake reform and implement policy, despite opposition. Conversely, lack of political will is the absence of such commitment and willingness.<sup>1</sup>

Political will can be further understood in terms of three inter-related concepts: commitment, leadership, and responsiveness.

### Commitment

Visible and sustained commitment by elected leaders and administrators is crucial if positive changes in attitudes, policies, and programmes affecting gender equality in education are to take place, and if these changes are to be sustained. Commitment to achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women through equal access to all levels of education by 2015, as expressed in the third Millennium Development Goal (MDG), may be *legal* or *political*.

The majority of countries are legally committed to achieving gender equality and universal access to education. This commitment is expressed through the ratification of international conventions, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). It is also reflected in domestic legislation that guarantees free and compulsory education, and binds a government to meeting national targets for achieving parity of opportunity for girls and boys. Legislation against the abuse of girls is a measure of legal commitment to achieving gender parity in schools: psychological abuse, corporal punishment, sexual harassment, and rape all severely limit the enrolment and retention of female teachers and students in school.

Implementation and enforcement of legal commitments, however, is often weak, and well-intentioned policy becomes diluted or even evaporates as a result. Bangladesh, for instance, has a legal commitment to the provision of free and compulsory education, and has made significant strides towards gender parity. Yet almost half of Bangladeshi households have to make 'donations' to ensure the enrolment of their children. In practice, legal commitment is never enough to ensure girls' access to education. Legal commitment must be supported by political commitment: the commitment by authorities to ensure that legislation and codes of conduct are properly implemented and enforced.

### **The gap between policy and practice in Malawi**

The government of Malawi changed its policy to permit young mothers to re-enter school after giving birth. Implementation of the policy, however, has been problematic. It has met with resistance from school personnel who were concerned that it would encourage promiscuity, and that young mothers would be a bad influence on other girls in school.<sup>2</sup>

Securing such sustained commitment is difficult, especially when the changes required are contrary to socio-cultural norms and practices. Unsurprisingly, those countries that have been most successful in making rapid progress towards gender parity and equality have been those in which there is a strong and broadly supported ideology of social inclusion. This has been the case in several countries emerging from socio-political upheavals, such as post-revolution Mozambique and post-genocide Rwanda. The experience of these countries suggests that where a process of more general transformation is underway, coinciding with a drive for equality, policy makers have an opportunity to accelerate progress towards gender equality in education. Under such conditions, there is likely to be greater opportunity for introducing radical policy change and implementing institutional reforms which might otherwise run counter to traditional practices – including practices that reflect negative attitudes to girls and women.

### **Policies that make a difference for Ugandan girls**

In Uganda, the resolve of the Ministry of Education to address the abuse of girls in school has led to the dismissal and imprisonment of some teachers and male students who have had sex with under-age girls. When communities are aware of successful legal cases, and the media draw attention to the issues, other girls are encouraged to speak out. This in turn has the potential to reduce sexual misconduct and violence in schools.<sup>3</sup>

### **Leadership**

The leadership of individuals can create and sustain commitment to the empowerment of girls and women, although 'leadership' is difficult to define. It includes, for example, intelligence and vision, attractive personal qualities, rhetorical and organisational skills, openness to innovation, and a willingness to take risks, make hard choices and set priorities. Leadership is required from a range of actors at central and local levels. At the top, presidents and prime ministers, cabinet members, members of parliament, and ministry officials must exercise leadership to establish and maintain gender equality as a national priority, to ensure that programmes and policies are followed through, and to counter opposition and inertia. Leadership within national-level civil society is also essential if demand for change is to be sustained. At the grassroots level, the leadership of local administrators, head teachers, community organisers, and traditional authorities can drive progress towards gender equality.

**Central leadership** is crucial. Heads of state have unmatched authority to inspire diverse social and political groups to organise themselves to work for gender equality. The heads of government in China, Morocco, Oman, Sri Lanka, and Uganda have all spoken out in support of girls' education and made it a visible political priority. In Uganda, the state's support for free primary education, and its commitment to girls' education in particular, have contributed to the increased enrolment of both boys and girls in primary school.

**Women in positions of authority** can exert a particularly important influence on efforts to promote girls' education: they not only act as a role model, but also are in a position to change the priorities and practices of government.<sup>4</sup> The Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) demonstrates that female leaders can be strong advocates for gender equality.

The **Forum for African Women Educationalists** (FAWE) is an organisational network 'capturing the synergy of ideas, the influence and the power of women leaders working to promote the best interests of girls' education'. Established in 1992, FAWE works both across the African continent and through national chapters. Its programmes include advocacy, policy influencing, and capacity building. Full membership of FAWE includes 32 women ministers and deputy ministers of education, women permanent secretaries in education ministries, women directors of education, and other prominent women educationalists. There are also associate female members (including former full members) and associate male members who are ministers of education committed to FAWE's mandate. The overall success of FAWE can be gauged by the demands of male leaders requesting to be associated with it.<sup>5</sup>

Female leadership, however, is hampered by the fact that there are so few women in positions of authority. Women, for instance, hold fewer than 10 per cent of parliamentary seats in almost all the countries that are struggling to achieve MDG 3. Moreover, with the exception of FAWE, women are often not sufficiently organised to represent powerful pressure groups within governments.

Well-placed individuals with a commitment to gender equality in education can act as champions for girls' education. In Ethiopia, the post of Minister of Education has been filled by one woman since 1992. She has consistently drawn the attention of politicians and policy makers to girls' education. However, depending on the leadership of a few politicians or administrators may not be a reliable way to promote gender parity and equality. Key officials are often transferred from post to post, and elected leaders can be voted out of office. In Guinea, for instance, problems encountered in sustaining a strong gender focal point in the Ministry of Education can be partly attributed to the fact that the Minister (a former member of the FAWE Executive Committee) was moved from her post.

**Traditional and religious leaders** can play an important role in promoting girls' education, at both national and local levels. In many

contexts, marginalising these leaders from efforts to promote gender equality may obstruct progress or create a strong negative reaction. However, where they are involved in the process, traditional and religious leaders are often crucial advocates for reform. In Guinea and Mauritania, religious leaders were called upon to help to create public awareness of the importance of educating girls. The success of this strategy showed that gaining the trust and support of prominent community members ought to be the starting point for any initiative to change negative attitudes towards girls' schooling.<sup>6</sup>

### **Responsiveness**

A third facet of political will is responsiveness. To achieve gender equality, decision makers and education providers must be responsive to the needs, rights, and ambitions of women and girls; to the organisations and individuals acting as their advocates; and to the evidence that demonstrates the value and benefits of gender equality.

Ultimately, political responsiveness entails relationships of **accountability** between citizens (especially women and girls), their government, and education providers. In some cases, as highlighted above, leaders already are responsive and act as champions for girls' education. In many cases, however, such positive developments will not take place unless demand for progress is both loud enough and articulate enough to require a response from decision makers and service providers. Advocates of gender parity and equality must therefore have a way to influence and call to account politicians and other leaders, administrators, and educators.

The recent prominence of school fees as election issues in Malawi, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya shows that education can win votes. This is a promising development. However, the likelihood of elections being won or lost on the basis of gender parity and equality in education remains remote.

Civil-society organisations and social movements can use another, less direct, mechanism for amplifying demands for change and holding officials and service providers to account. Where civil society is a strong and vociferous advocate for gender equality, it is more likely that the empowerment of women will remain at the top of the political agenda. Much of the progress made towards increased girls' enrolment in Bangladesh and parts of India and Sri Lanka in the 1990s can be attributed to the combination of a receptive national government and effective campaigning and advocacy by civil-society organisations. These constituencies for change are often spearheaded by educated urban elites which have a strong commitment to education for the masses for instrumental reasons (i.e. to transform behaviour and attitudes of the poor in ways which are likely to have broader benefits). These organisations, therefore, may or may not give 'voice' to poor women in rural areas.

It is often suggested that accountability and responsiveness can be enhanced through **decentralisation** and **community participation**. School management committees (SMCs) and parent-teacher associations (PTAs) in particular have been promoted as mechanisms to strengthen local accountability, although ensuring women's representation on these bodies is often fraught with difficulty. The extent to which PTAs and SMCs are active and operate in the interests of girls' education varies. Evidence suggests that parents themselves often favour boys' education over that of girls where choices have to be made, because the economic returns are perceived to be higher. In such cases, there is no reason to believe that parents, SMCs, PTAs, or communities more generally will prioritise girls' education without strong advocates within the community.

**Non-State providers** (including the private sector, NGOs, and faith-based organisations) often share the responsibility for meeting the gender parity and equality targets set by national governments. These providers may or may not be committed to the government's agenda. It is often suggested that accountability is stronger where non-State providers are delivering education, because they have to be responsive to their clients. However, this is not the only, or most appropriate, route to ensuring accountability. Encouraging community participation within government schools is another possible route. Even where non-State provision does improve accountability, this may not result in support for gender equality where the clients themselves have preferences for educating sons.

There are some examples of successful collaboration between non-State providers and communities to ensure improvements in girls' education. A good example is that of the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC). BRAC has pioneered the development of village schools which are managed by parents and teachers who are recruited from the local community, offering a curriculum and timetable that are relevant to local needs, and an education which qualifies children to enter the formal system on graduation.

#### **Replication of the BRAC model in Malawi**

Experience of attempts to replicate the BRAC model in Malawi, where the international NGO (Save the Children-US) established the programme, has shown that once the INGO began its planned withdrawal, community support was not sustained. This was in part because of the demands placed on poor communities, but was also because the INGO had not fostered the development of local NGOs to take over the programme, as intended. As a result, the encouragement of community participation as a means of ensuring local demand and accountability was not maintained. In addition, the programme did not pay sufficient attention to building national commitment to its work, through identifying a champion within the Ministry of Education, for example. So the Ministry of Education did not take over responsibility for the programme as the plan had envisaged. This highlights the importance of paying attention to the local and national contexts when designing such programmes.<sup>7</sup>

Private providers operating for profit range from those supplying better-quality services to those who can afford it, to ones offering 'last-chance' opportunities where insufficient school places are available. The implications for gender equality vary according to the context. In Nepal, parents overwhelmingly prefer to send their sons to better-quality private schools, while girls are sent off to stay with relatives to attend a government-run school. If the policies and practice of non-State providers are insensitive to the needs of girls, the government may bring them to account through regulation. However, non-State provision of education is most evident in developing countries where the government itself is failing to provide. In such cases, government capacity is too weak to regulate the non-state sector, even if regulation were to include gender-specific concerns.

## Development partners

In many countries the strongest advocates of gender equality have been donors, rather than domestic stakeholders. This external pressure for commitments to gender equality has helped to put girls' education on the political agenda and has led to incremental changes in existing policy and legislation. It has not, however, fostered ownership of and commitment to this agenda by domestic politicians and administrators.

## Recommendations

Generating and sustaining political will is crucial to achieving gender equality in education, and it requires sustained commitment, leadership, and responsiveness on the part of decision makers. Political will and State capacity go hand in hand, and those countries in which political will has been joined with capacity to deliver have made the greatest progress towards gender equality in education. But without the capacity of a government to make and implement policy, the most well-intended political commitments will remain unrealised. Moreover, without on-going pressure from communities and civil society organisations, gains in gender equality are unlikely to be sustained.

### **What can governments do to achieve gender equality in education?**

- Ensure the implementation and enforcement of legal commitments to gender equality.
- Make gender equality a national priority within a broad and strong commitment to social inclusion.

- Create opportunities for women leaders within government, and ensure the sustainability of these positions.
- Play a stronger role in monitoring and regulating the activities of alternative providers.

#### **What can donors do?**

- Continue to be strong advocates for gender parity and to put girls' education on the agenda.
- Foster ownership of and commitment to this agenda by domestic politicians and administrators.
- Encourage and assist NGOs to create the kind of central leadership and grassroots support that can sustain effective campaigning.

#### **What can NGOs do?**

- Maximise the kind of central leadership and grassroots support that can sustain effective campaigning and advocacy for gender equality over time.
- Promote women's leadership within civil society to demand sustained change.
- Work to gain the support of traditional and religious leaders in promoting girls' education at both national and local levels.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Political will and capacity development go hand in hand. The role of capacity development is discussed in paper 6 in this series: 'Developing Capacity to Achieve Gender Equality in Education', Education and Gender Equality Series, Programme Insights, (Oxfam GB, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> L. Semu (2003) 'Malawi Country Study', background paper for the Global Campaign for Education.

<sup>3</sup> K. Hyde, A. Ekatan, P. Kiage, and C. Basara (2001), 'The Impact of HIV/AIDS on Formal Schooling in Uganda', Brighton: Centre for International Education, University of Sussex.

<sup>4</sup> Paper 6, op. cit. This paper discusses the ways in which institutions, practices, and priorities within organisations may be 'gendered' in a way that is disadvantageous to women and girls.

<sup>5</sup> Adapted from K. Hyde and S. Miske (2000), 'Girls' Education', background report for Dakar World Conference on Education for All, Paris: UNESCO.

<sup>6</sup> E. Kane (2004) *Girls' Education in Africa: What Do We Know About Strategies that Work?* Africa Region Human Development Working Paper Series, Washington, DC: World Bank.

<sup>7</sup> E. Kadzamira and P. Rose (2005) 'Non-State Provision of Basic Services: Education in Malawi'. Paper prepared for the Non-State Provision of Basic Services Programme, DFID.

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