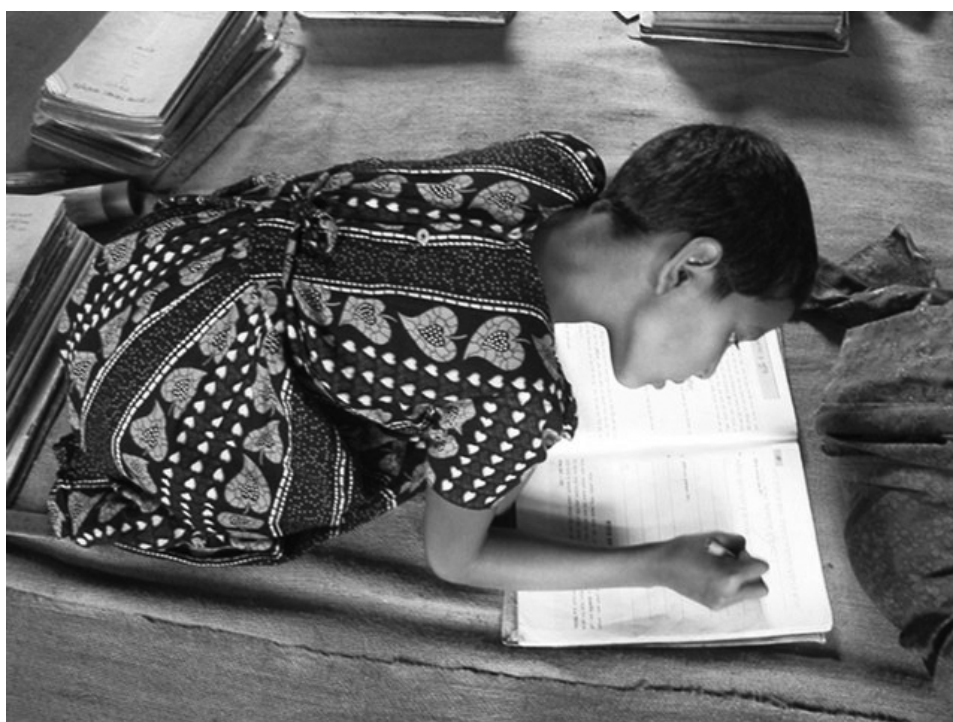


## 9. Girls' Education in South Asia



*Girl at school in Bangladesh*

Because of deep-rooted gender inequalities, and because of the large population of South Asia, the region has the highest number of out-of-school girls in the world. This paper outlines some of the issues confronting practitioners, policy makers, and researchers in girls' education in South Asia, and explores what they can do to move towards high-quality and gender-equitable education for all.

This is the ninth paper in the Education and Gender Equality series, and it should be read in conjunction with the other papers in the series. This paper focuses on South Asia, providing a brief overview of the region. It considers commonalities and diversities across the region, and looks at how girls are faring in the education systems. It notes that while there has been marked progress within the region, and improvements in most countries, much more effort is needed to reach internationally agreed targets. The final section provides some positive recommendations for girls' education.

## South Asia at a glance

The South Asia region comprises 10 per cent of the Asian continent, but its population accounts for about 40 per cent of Asian peoples. The SAARC, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, consists of Afghanistan,<sup>1</sup> Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, the Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Although the SAARC countries have political and economic links, South Asia is a diverse region. Geographical and geological factors, as well as population and poverty, affect education systems in general, and the education of girls in particular. While there are gender issues in education in South Asia that have negative impacts on boys rather than girls – such as boys being more likely to be subjected to physical punishment, or being ineligible for benefits designed specifically to get girls into school – the focus of this paper is on girls. This is because where there is poverty, or exclusion, or some other form of disadvantage, girls are far more likely to be adversely affected than boys. In terms of national development, a country cannot flourish if half of the population is left out of the development process.

## How girls in South Asia are progressing

Although all members of the SAARC have signed the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Association has been slow to turn its attention to the gender inequalities so prevalent in all its member states. The autonomous Women's Advocacy Group was formed only at the eleventh summit, in Kathmandu in January 2002, with the task of 'getting gender on the agenda'. The group's first meeting was in Islamabad in June 2004, where various studies were commissioned, including one on female education and literacy. While that study is not yet available, the commitment to a sustained focus on gender issues was reiterated at the summit held in Dhaka in November 2005.<sup>2</sup> In the meantime, UNESCO estimates that nearly 24 million girls of primary-school age are not receiving education in South Asia.<sup>3</sup>

1 **9.Girls' Education in South Asia**, Education and Gender Equality Series, Programme Insights, Oxfam GB. February 2006

## **Indications of progress**

There are no consistent links between overall human development, wealth, gender, or education in the SAARC countries. In each country, there are many interlinked factors that affect each indicator, and while we may be able to detect tendencies, we cannot say firmly that, for example, increased wealth means that a girl is more likely to be able to go to school. Bhutan, which spends more on education as a percentage of its total budget than any other SAARC country, has the lowest overall enrolment rate. However, overall in the region the average annual rate of increase in enrolment in primary education has been more than twice as high for girls as for boys during the period 1980 to 2001.

A measure of gender equality in education, developed by the Beyond Access project,<sup>4</sup> indicates that, while most countries in the region have shown an improvement over the past ten years, with Sri Lanka and the Maldives significantly ahead of the others, in Pakistan equality gaps have widened. The situation in Afghanistan will almost certainly have worsened too since 1990, but even in 2005 there are still no reliable data available. Bhutan is also likely to be a low scorer. Bangladesh stands out as the country that has made the greatest progress over the period 1990–2005, relative to other SAARC countries. It increased girls' secondary school enrolment from 13 per cent to 56 per cent in ten years – a remarkable achievement for such a poor country – but a closer analysis of the figures behind the score show that the progress is attributable to enrolment at primary and lower secondary levels, and that many other inequalities remain. Gender parity of enrolment does not tell us about parity or disparity in other areas of education.

## **Internationally agreed goals and targets**

Some ambiguous features of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Education For All (EFA) goals are apparent in South Asia. While Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and surprisingly India have achieved the 2005 target of gender parity in primary education, Pakistan and Afghanistan are woefully lagging. Yet, while Bangladesh may have achieved parity of enrolment at primary and lower secondary levels, there is certainly not equality of achievement. The 2005 results for the Secondary School Certificate show that girls are less likely than boys to be entered for the final examination, and less likely to pass, and that these imbalances combine to make a 12 per cent gender gap in pass rates. There are similar disparities in terms of subject and school choice, and even bigger gaps at tertiary level. A focus on enrolment figures alone can lead to questionable conclusions. A quick look at the closing of the gender gap in enrolment in Bangladesh can lead to misleading assumptions that boys are now at a disadvantage. Overall, this is most definitely not the case, at least not in relation to girls.

India has recently introduced incentives similar to the Bangladesh secondary stipend programme, in which every family with a single girl child will be eligible for free education from Class 6. The motivation seems to be less of an EFA strategy than an attempt to control population (by keeping girls in school longer) and to redress the alarming population imbalance caused by son-preference.<sup>5</sup> However, as happened in Bangladesh, the secondary stipend will probably have a very positive indirect effect on primary enrolment for girls.

NGOs and community initiatives continue to play a role because, at present, agreed targets cannot be reached through the state system alone. Non-formal education schemes need to work with government to achieve EFA goals by targeting areas of high poverty, working children, children in geographically remote areas, and other hard-to-reach groups. In Bhutan, for example, with many children living in remote and inaccessible locations, communities are trying to provide equitable access by building their own schools, and providing hostel facilities for those girls and boys who live at a distance. An example is the Sengdhen Community Primary School, designed to serve disadvantaged children in seven villages in a remote part of the country that has been isolated for centuries. The most disadvantaged children also receive a scholarship of Nu (Ngultrum) 1,500 (approximately \$34) a year.<sup>6</sup>

## Common issues and challenges

In this section, the main issues and challenges relating to girls' education in South Asia are divided into two categories: those that apply to both boys and girls but where the impact on girls might be more marked, and those that are issues for girls alone. The lists are not exhaustive.

### **Issues affecting girls and boys but with greater impact on girls**

#### **Quality of education**

In 2000, at the E9 EFA forum in Recife, Brazil, the then Minister of Education for Bangladesh was able to report great progress in enrolment figures, but admitted: 'In our rush for numbers [after the 1990 agreements at Jomtien, Thailand], quality missed out'. This is true of many countries, not just Bangladesh, and across the region educational expansion often has been achieved at the expense of quality, with overcrowded classrooms, untrained or under-trained teachers brought in to deal with the increased numbers, and in some cases large proportions of the education budget being spent on financial incentives to get children into school. The struggle for universal access to education is fundamental to achieving gender equality, but complementary measures are also needed relating to the quality of educational provision, such as curriculum change, removal

of prejudicial assumptions from textbooks, gender-sensitive training of teachers, and improvements to the learning environment.

The well known Bangladesh NGO, BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), addresses quality in its programmes in a variety of ways. Working closely with communities, BRAC offers a parallel and enhanced version of the primary curriculum, targeting poor families, illiterate parents, areas where child marriage is common, remote areas, and girls. The majority of BRAC teachers are local women. Beyond primary education, BRAC offers the Adolescent Development Programme (through *Kishori Kendro*), which was initially designed to ensure that adolescent girls did not lose their literacy skills on leaving school, but now is much more closely focused on life-skills and livelihood training. Empowerment is addressed in many ways, such as teaching girls about their bodies, or about laws that might affect their lives, but most impressively by handing the running of the centres over to the adolescent girls themselves.

### **Resources**

Across the region, there are high levels of poverty, and inadequate resources. In the Maldives, there is no constitutionally guaranteed free education, and in Bhutan and Nepal fees are charged by primary schools, despite legally guaranteed free education. In other South Asian countries education is theoretically free, but parents are faced with unmanageable secondary financial demands. The call on limited financial resources can take on gender-based dimensions, with parents being more willing to invest scarce resources in sons than in daughters. For example, in many countries in the region, private tuition is needed to make up for the inadequacies of the education system, but such tuition is more often given to boys than to girls, thus lowering girls' chances of academic success.

### **Corruption**

This issue is linked to resources, but is important enough to warrant separate attention. In the Framework of Action adopted by the World Education Forum, meeting in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000, corruption in education was identified as a major drain on development. A recent study shows that the most common forms of corruption in education are parents being 'recommended' to buy materials written by the child's teacher; parents being 'advised' to pay for private tuition provided by the child's teacher; and parents being asked to contribute 'voluntary' donations for school infrastructure or extra-curricular activities<sup>7</sup>. As with resources in general, such demands are likely to have a more negative impact on girls than on boys.

### **Child labour**

South Asia has the largest number of child labourers in the world. Children in 'day jobs' have problems attending school, and children

who have to work before and/or after school are often too tired to get the maximum benefit from their schooling. Boys are more likely to be engaged in paid labour, but girls are increasingly being employed, because they can be paid even less than boys. In India, estimates for Andhra Pradesh alone indicate that there are 150,000 children aged 7–14 engaged in seasonal agricultural work, 90 per cent of whom are girls. Although they are formally enrolled in school, they are withdrawn for six to eight weeks at a time. Girls have the added burden of extra unpaid labour within the household, especially childcare responsibilities towards younger siblings, and a study in Bangladesh and Nepal found that girls as young as ten often worked an average of ten hours a day. The more children have to work, the lower the likelihood of their getting a good education.

### **War and conflict**

Three of the SAARC countries – Afghanistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka – have been in long-term conflicts, and there have been recent periods of ‘unrest’ in other South Asian countries. The Beyond Access scorecards on gender equality and girls’ education clearly demonstrate the negative effect of conflict on education in general, and on girls’ education in particular. In Nepal, because of frequent kidnappings and raids, parents fear for their daughters’ safety, and are withdrawing them from school. Thus the conflict threatens to undermine progress made in girls’ enrolment. But in some countries, girls’ education is not just a casualty in the conflict, but an actual target. Afghanistan is the most obvious example here, with recent reports of a head teacher being decapitated, a teacher being shot for teaching girls, and parents being warned not to send their daughters to school.<sup>8</sup>

### **Natural disasters**

The geological features of the region make it susceptible to natural disasters, such as the December 2004 tsunami that severely affected Sri Lanka, India, and the Maldives. The South Asia earthquake of October 2005 had devastating effects in Pakistan and India. Bangladesh is prone to regular and severe flooding. There are gender dimensions to such disasters. One is that women are more likely to lose their lives. For example, women’s clothing makes them more likely to drown and they are less likely to have learned to swim or climb trees.

### **Emergency education response in Sri Lanka**

After the tsunami hit Sri Lanka, an Emergency Education Desk was set up at the Centre for National Operations, and a Task Force was established to support the return of children to school by the end of January 2005. UNICEF provided major support, not only for the repairing and cleaning of damaged school buildings, but also for rebuilding child-friendly facilities which prioritised girls' needs, based on the following criteria:

- Children of primary-school age should have a school within walking distance.
- Learning spaces should include room for extra-curricular activities, project-based learning spaces, and individual learning spaces. Internal and external learning areas should be linked by verandas or decking.
- Communities (including children) should be involved in the locating, planning, and management of schools.
- Teachers should be supported to build links with the community and community-development initiatives. Teachers should receive training in providing psychosocial support for children and their families, and receive support themselves to cope with the trauma that they have undergone.<sup>9</sup>

### **Other issues**

There is not space in this paper to cover all the gender-based dimensions of educational issues, but there are other challenges present to a greater or lesser extent in South Asia. Large cities in South Asia have many street children, most of whom have no access to education; the girls among them are even more vulnerable than the boys. HIV/AIDS is a growing concern, most notably in India, where 38 per cent of those affected are women; most formal education systems have yet to educate young people about the risks or prevention strategies, and girls are not taught that they have the right, for example, to insist that a husband use a condom.

### **Gender-specific issues**

There are challenges that are linked simply to the biological fact of being female, with all the socially constructed gender values that surround that fact.

### **Missing girls and women**

There are 50 million fewer women in South Asia today than there should be. Girl babies are killed before birth through sex-selective abortions, or they die prematurely through violence and neglect. According to the 2001 census, India has only 927 women per thousand men. States such as the Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, and Gujarat have between 79.3 and 87.8 girls for every 100 boys.<sup>10</sup> In theory, sex-selective abortion is illegal; in practice, it is widespread. If India succeeds in providing education for all, it will be impossible to achieve parity of enrolment in the near future because of these artificial disparities in the demographic profile. However achieving quality education for all will in itself be a strong move towards eliminating the societal prejudices against women.

## Marriage

Despite laws against the practice, child marriage is common throughout South Asia, and it effectively puts a stop to the educational progress of many girls. In Nepal, an estimated 40 per cent of girls are married by the time they reach the age of 15, having a husband being seen as more important than being educated. The giving or taking of dowry, also illegal, is common in South Asia, and, in general, lower dowry demands are made for younger brides, which adds to the temptation for parents to marry off their daughters while they are still young.

## Bodily integrity

The issue of bodily integrity or sexual harassment becomes more urgent and oppressive the older a girl gets. In South Asia, sexual harassment is often referred to by the innocuous-sounding term 'Eve teasing', and it is widely reported in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. A girl runs the risk of being harassed, assaulted, abducted, or even murdered on the way to or from school, and she is by no means free from risk within the school. For this reason, many girls are withdrawn from school when they reach puberty. Girls who live at some distance from the school are particularly vulnerable; the further they have to travel to school, the more remote the area, the greater the potential risk. Some parents compromise by sending their daughters to a nearby school, even if it is known to be of poor quality, or it does not offer the full range of subjects. The girls' brothers are allowed to go farther afield to find a better-quality education. In Madhya Pradesh, India, the Education Guarantee Scheme has initiated the practice of para-teachers or helpers collecting girl children from their homes and dropping them off each day at school to ensure enrolment and security. Schools are constructed within a 1km radius from homesteads on demand and the emphasis is on enrolment of all children.

### Learning about menstruation

While girls and teachers in India are aware of the taboos and sanctions pertaining to menstruation, which is seen as a polluting factor, they have little knowledge of the menstruation process itself. The Vacha Women's Resource Centre, in Mumbai, developed a teaching module for girls in western India based on a body chart made of cloth, layered with body parts attached with Velcro, which could be pulled apart and stuck back together. With these aids, and through discussions of girls' physical and social experiences, girls learned to distinguish socio-religious ideas about menstruation from biological processes. The girls raised many questions and shared the knowledge with their mothers.

Helping girls and women to change their perceptions of their bodies as being polluting agents will require multi-faceted strategies and long-term commitment, as these beliefs are supported by men, family members, caste, and religious systems.<sup>11</sup>



Innovative approaches to ensuring girls have greater and safer access to schools are extremely important, as are increasing the conditions for girls and boys to participate equally in learning. This means that gender equality needs to be a central part of the development of the school curriculum and ways of teaching (see paper 2: 'Gender Equality in Schools')

### **Nutrition**

In many parts of South Asia, women and girls are expected to eat least and to eat last. That is, they get what is left over after the men and boys in the household have finished eating. This often results in a very poorly balanced diet, with little in the way of protein or vitamins. Malnutrition of course affects attentiveness and performance in school. In addition, many children leave school without learning enough about nutrition, and so traditions such as not eating 'rich' food during menstruation prevail, contributing to widespread anaemia. In India, it was found that girls living in villages where schools offer a free meal are 30 per cent more likely to complete primary education than other girls. To combat very high rates of malnutrition, the Indian government has now initiated a programme of universal midday school meals.

### **Teachers**

It is generally assumed that women teachers provide good role models for girls in school; they allay parents' fears of security issues within the school, and their presence shows that the teaching profession is a suitable aspiration for girls currently in school. For some, the proportion of women teachers in the system is an indicator of progress, and there are fewer women teachers in countries with high gender disparities. In India, almost all single-teacher schools (about 20 per cent of all schools) are staffed by men, and over 70 per cent of two-teacher schools have no women teachers. However, a feminisation of the teaching profession – as can be seen in Sri Lanka and the Maldives, at least at primary level – may reinforce the impression of women as nurturers and carers.

## **Improving the quality of education for girls in Asia**

This section provides some positive recommendations for the improvement of girls' education in South Asia, although there are many other examples. It should be stressed that while each example can have positive impact, all interventions are much more effective within a unified approach to gender and education. Concentrating on enrolment alone will not achieve the MDG target of a complete primary education for all by 2015. Clearly there is no one approach that suits all contexts, but at the very least there is a need for strategies which improve the overall access to and quality of the

system for all children, and also a need for programmes that specifically target girls. What is needed, therefore, are multiple interventions developed and conceived within the framework of an overall education-sector plan, with clear linkages between all levels and types of education.

## **Recommendations**

### **Governments should:**

- Develop coherent policy frameworks based on strong political commitment to gender equality and the mainstreaming of gender issues at all levels (see also papers 5 and 6 in this series).
- Ensure that all educational data is gender-disaggregated, so that inequities can be quantified and appropriate strategies devised to minimise imbalances and to target qualitative change.
- Implement legislation to make education free and compulsory and abolish fees and user charges for primary education.
- Introduce national programmes of extra support, such as cash transfers, stipends conditional on school attendance, free school meals and scholarships.
- Ensure that such incentives are part of a comprehensive package for improving the quality and gender equality of education through the training of teachers, and the reform of the curriculum to provide meaningful and positive learning, ensuring that there are adequate resources in schools to meet increased enrolment.

### **Civil society and NGOs need to:**

- Keep gender on the agenda of government at all levels through campaigning for strong political commitment to gender equality.
- Establish strong partnerships with government to support gender sensitive programmes and policies in education.
- Document good innovative practices that improve gender equality in education for dissemination and advocacy, and document and learn from what does not work so well.
- Maintain attention on the gender dimensions of national and international goals and targets.
- Lobby for flexibility of educational provision to meet the special needs of girls.

### **Schools should:**

- Incorporate attention to gender issues in all teacher-education programmes
- Focus on improving educational outcomes for girls – provide what is needed to enable them to stay in school, to learn what will be meaningful and empowering, to prepare them for paid

employment, and for education to be seen as a suitable alternative to dowry

- Remember that 'gender' is not just about girls and women, and ensure that boys in school today become the gender-sensitive husbands and fathers of tomorrow.
- Examine and remove gender stereotyping from school materials.
- Confront sexual harassment around and within places of education. (See also paper 2 in this series.)

**Communities and parents should:**

- Be involved in any plans for education provision. There should be extensive consultation on what are seen to be the prevailing needs, and what are considered acceptable solutions. All consultations should include women and girls.
- Ensure that all community members are aware of the relevant laws, such as free or compulsory education, the age at which girls can be legally married, or the banning of dowry. Mobilise community members to support the enforcement of such laws.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> At the summit held in Dhaka in November 2005, Afghanistan was admitted into the SAARC, with formal induction to take place at the next summit, to be hosted by India in early 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Source: [www.saarc-sec.org/main.php?t=2.8.1](http://www.saarc-sec.org/main.php?t=2.8.1)

<sup>3</sup> UNESCO (2005) *Global Monitoring Report 2006: Literacy for Life*, UNESCO, Paris.

<sup>4</sup> For details of the measure see: E. Unterhalter, R. Rajagopalan, and C. Challender, (2004), *A scorecard on girls' education in Asia, 1990–2000*. Bangkok: UNESCO.  
<http://k1.ioe.ac.uk/schools/efps/GenderEducDev/Asia%20Scorecard%20final.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Raynor, J. (2005) 'Narrowness of reporting on progress towards MDGs', on Siyanda.  
[www.siyanda.org/forum/xviewthread.cfm?Thread=120050907071224&FullMSG=220051016025429](http://www.siyanda.org/forum/xviewthread.cfm?Thread=120050907071224&FullMSG=220051016025429), 21 September 2005

<sup>6</sup> Powdye, T. S. (2006), *Schoolwise in Sengdhen*, on Kuensalonline.  
[www.kuensalonline.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=6373](http://www.kuensalonline.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=6373), 06 January 2006

<sup>7</sup> See Meier, B. and Griffin, M. (2005), *Stealing the future: corruption in the classroom* [http://www.transparency.org/global\\_priorities/education.html](http://www.transparency.org/global_priorities/education.html). Berlin: Transparency International.

<sup>8</sup> See Walsh, D. (2006, 05.01.06) 'Headteacher decapitated by Taliban', London. *The Guardian*; and Swainson, N. (2005) 'Attaining Gender Equality in Primary and Secondary Schooling in Asia: progress to date and future priorities', a background paper for *Girls' Education: Towards a Better Future for All*, DFID, London.

<sup>9</sup> Adapted from an article by Chloe Challender in *Equals* Issue 10, [www.ioe.ac.uk/efps/beyondaccess](http://www.ioe.ac.uk/efps/beyondaccess).

<sup>10</sup> Oxfam International (2004) 'Towards Ending Violence Against Women in South Asia', Oxfam Briefing Paper 66, Oxford: Oxfam GB.

<sup>11</sup> Adapted from an article by Sonal Shukla in *Equals*. Issue 15, 2005 (ibid).

Cover Photograph: © Janet Raynor, Institute of Education, University of London.

© Oxfam GB, January 2006

This paper was developed by the Beyond Access Project and was adapted by Nicola Swainson from 'Attaining Gender Equality in Primary and Secondary Education in Asia: progress to date and future priorities', a background paper for *Girls' Education: Towards a Better Future for All*, DFID 2005 and from commissioned work by Janet Raynor. It is part of a series of papers written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues. The text may be used free of charge for the purposes of advocacy, campaigning, education and research provided that the source is acknowledged in full. The copyright holder requests that all such use be registered with them for impact assessment purposes. For copying in any other circumstances, or for re-use in other publications, or for translation or adaptation, permission must be secured and a fee may be charged. E-mail: [mailpublish@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:mailpublish@oxfam.org.uk).

For further information about the Beyond Access Project, see:  
[www.ioe.ac.uk/efps/beyondaccess](http://www.ioe.ac.uk/efps/beyondaccess)

For comments on issues raised in this paper, please email:  
[beyondaccess@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:beyondaccess@oxfam.org.uk)

Other papers in this series can be found at:  
[www.oxfam.org.uk/what\\_we\\_do/issues/education/gender\\_education.htm](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/what_we_do/issues/education/gender_education.htm)

## Oxfam GB

Oxfam GB is a development, relief, and campaigning organisation that works with others to find lasting solutions to poverty and suffering around the world. Oxfam GB is a member of Oxfam International.

Oxfam House  
John Smith Drive  
Cowley  
Oxford  
OX4 2JY

Tel: +44.(0)1865.473727  
E-mail: [enquiries@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@oxfam.org.uk)  
[www.oxfam.org.uk](http://www.oxfam.org.uk)