

8. Girls' Education in Africa



Girls performing in their school cultural group, Zambezia, Mozambique

Sub-Saharan Africa has some huge problems to resolve if it is to achieve gender equality in education, and fulfil the Millennium Development Goals related to education and gender. Conversely, the region also has some of the most innovative and enterprising examples of initiatives that promote gender equality in education. This paper focuses on sub-Saharan Africa and considers some of the most significant obstacles that African girls face in achieving the education that is their right. The paper then reviews the most significant initiatives – those that are ‘gender-neutral’ and those that have a specific focus on gender equality – that have enabled African countries to overcome these obstacles.

How are African girls faring?

Neither boys nor girls are doing well in many sub-Saharan African countries, yet Africa has also some of the most innovative and dynamic examples of what works. For example, in the Forum for African Women's Education, FAWE, Africa has a dynamic and active network for working for change in girls' education. But even where there are favourable enrolment trends, these can hide problems related to how girls progress through school and complete their education. In Africa, girls attend school for an average of only 2.82 years before they reach the age of 16. This is less than anywhere else in the world. Only 46 per cent of girls enrolling in school in sub-Saharan Africa complete primary school.¹

At the current rate of progress, gender parity, that is equal numbers of boys and girls in primary education, in sub-Saharan Africa will not be reached until 2038. These figures do not tell us anything about gender equality more widely in schools or associated environments. The Beyond Access project developed the Gender Equality in Education Index (GEEI) in order to help measure wider progress in gender equality in education. The GEEI measures girls' attendance at primary school, their completion of five years of schooling, their enrolment in secondary school, and the levels of gender equality that girls will encounter as adults, in both health care and earnings.

Some countries in Africa, like Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa, currently have a relatively high GEEI score of over 60 (out of a possible score of 100). This is a considerable achievement, but the Beyond Access project estimates that a GEEI score of 95 would indicate that the Millennium Development Goals concerning universal primary education and gender equality were being met. Even the high-scoring countries in Africa will need a sustained effort over the next ten years if they are to reach 95. Another group of countries, including Uganda, Tanzania, and Ghana, have a GEEI score of less than 60, but have seen a steady rise in GEEI over the last ten years. This is associated with wide political mobilisation and the introduction of new approaches to learning and teaching. Some countries, including Kenya and Nigeria, which have the largest populations in Africa, saw a fall in their GEEI score between 1993 and 2003, and they are currently well below 60. They face a massive task to mobilise people and financial resources if they are to reach 95 by 2015.²

Africa is a diverse continent, comprising more than 50 countries, which includes a wide range of cultures, relatively wealthy countries, countries that are dependent on foreign aid, countries embroiled in civil wars, stable democracies, countries with relatively highly educated populations, and some with barely literate populations. When enrolment data are analysed by country, they reveal a wide

range of different experiences, with Niger enrolling only 30 per cent of its girls in primary school (and 40 per cent of boys), compared with Uganda, which enrolls well over 100 per cent of both girls and boys.³ Girls in Central and West Africa tend to have the widest gap in enrolment compared with boys. In Guinea Bissau, for example, just over 60 per cent of girls and 100 per cent of boys enrol in primary school.⁴ In more remote areas of Mali, for example, government statistics indicate that girls' gross enrolment rates are as low as 29 per cent. If primary school *enrolment* figures for rural girls are so low, one can presume that the number of girls who *complete* primary and secondary school is extremely low.

Generalising about the status of girls' education in even a single country is often misleading. Variations within each individual country are substantial. Girls' educational development in different parts of Mozambique, for instance, varies widely for cultural, economic, and geographic reasons. Religion, remoteness from urban centres, marriage practices, migration patterns, the burden of disease, seasonal labour requirements and cash flows, and other factors all contribute to the wide variety of reasons for girls' enrolment and retention differences within the same country.

There are more countries in conflict and 'low income countries under stress' in Africa than in any other region. These countries are characterised by a combination of weak policies, inadequate institutions, poor governance, and human-rights violations. Of the 17 sub-Saharan African countries in which enrolment rates declined in the 1990s, six experienced major armed conflict, in which girls were particularly vulnerable. Some estimates show that 50 per cent of out-of-school children live in conflict-affected environments. Countries with a low GEEI also have histories of conflict.

Educating girls in conflict-affected countries

Services (including education) established in the context of emergencies or disasters are often provided with no regard to the sex of the recipients, and they often inadvertently exclude girls. Girls' particular vulnerabilities in terms of physical security, and their exposure to physical violence, are intensified in conflict or emergency situations.

Countries emerging from armed conflict are extremely challenging environments in which to work. However, post-conflict countries can provide unique opportunities. Rwanda is an example of a country in which development agencies were able to provide tangible support to the new government and its commitment to equity and inclusion.

Countries where a conflict is just ending, such as Sudan, are often faced with ruined or poorly maintained social and physical infrastructure. Discussions about refining policies to include girls are rarely practical when the vast majority of children are not receiving any formal schooling, but there are still important opportunities for promoting girls' education. Support for new schools, for example, can include design considerations that are beneficial to girls, such as separate latrines, school walls, and teacher accommodation appropriate for women. Curriculum development should entail including an understanding of gender issues in all subjects, including a more determined attempt to ensure that all teaching and learning materials take into account the needs of girls and boys.⁵

However, we can identify broad areas that need attention and support:

- The provision of education, such as schools, desks, books, and teaching and learning materials.
- The ability to determine the different needs of girls and boys, and a political commitment to girls' education.
- Administrative capacity, in ministries of education and in the wider civil service.
- Pay, conditions, and teacher deployment, as well as school management and regional supervision, data collection and analysis.

Across sub-Saharan Africa, with some countries excepted, donors dominate education funding, and tend to have more influence on education policy and practice than in other regions. There are high population-growth rates, with a higher percentage of the population under 15 years of age than in any other region. The burden of HIV, malaria, and TB in Africa is higher than in any other region, with substantial implications both for many countries' education systems, and also for school-age girls. Nevertheless, locally specific analysis of the differences experienced by girls and by boys, combined with sustained commitment and sufficient resources, produces the ideas and momentum to attract and keep girls in school.

Gender-equality initiatives have been hampered by policy makers underestimating the full range of economic costs to families and communities (especially non-fee and opportunity costs), as well as by ignoring relations and practices in the household and the community that are conditioned by the ways in which women and men interact. Developing 'islands of excellence' that do not take into account conditions elsewhere in the country (including financial constraints), and expecting single strategies to resolve complex problems, along with poor planning and implementation, and the lack of a clear relationship between strategies and objectives have also impeded attempts to ensure that girls and boys have equal opportunities.⁶

A dual approach to achieving girls' right to education

A dual approach involving two types of interventions is required in order to get girls in school and keep them there. First, getting the education system to perform for boys *and* girls is an essential step towards dramatic improvements in girls' opportunities and results, particularly at the primary level. But while this is a necessary step, by itself it is not enough. The second intervention, to get more girls in school and ensure that they complete their education, requires an approach that specifically targets girls.

Education systems accessible to boys and girls

Uganda's commitment to expanding access to education for everyone is illustrated by the increased primary intake after Universal Primary Education was introduced in 1997, rising to 93 per cent for boys and 90 per cent for girls.⁷

Select examples of other interventions that are 'gender-neutral',⁸ but have been shown to be more beneficial for girls than for boys, include reducing the distance that pupils have to travel to school (for example, in Niger and Ghana); initial literacy being taught in the mother tongue (as has happened in Zambia); and introducing a sustainable feeding programme in schools (as in Kenya).

Gender analysis and focused interventions

However, 'gender-neutral' interventions are not sufficient to introduce gender equality into education. The second part of a approach to enrol and retain more girls in school is to use interventions that specifically targets girls. High-quality analyses of the local and national situations for girls' education, linked to a focused intervention and budget allocation, are critical. These actions may be focused on *girls themselves* (for example, providing more places for girls in secondary schools), or on changing the '*gender relations*' that affect girls' attendance and performance (for example, expectations by the girls' community of early marriage, or teaching styles that discourage girls' participation in the classroom). Even where equity is a prominent government concern – as in Rwanda – a common hazard is that gender equality is understood as a specialised *girls' issue*, not as a wider group of social relationships involving the distribution of authority between men and women.

No single approach will resolve everything. A variety of interventions and initiatives are needed to improve education for girls so that they achieve success in both primary and secondary school. All development partners require both creativity and discipline if they are to undertake a variety of interventions that focus on process, and they need to bring these interventions together within one plan for the education sector. A wide range of development and government workers, at different levels of the aid system, need to allocate the thinking, time, and money required to promote girls' education (from projects to Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers and budget support; from local government to ministry headquarters).

Long-term commitment to the *process* of improving girls' educational results is essential, as no single plan, intervention, or approach will resolve the complex issues underlying girls' lack of achievement. Commitment to the long-term goal of increasing girls' participation at all levels of the education system will require adjustments to policies, such as changing the school day to accommodate girls' chores in the short term, but also changes to attitudes, such as encouraging

communities to rethink how much domestic work should be expected of school-age girls.

Costs

Reducing the costs of education has significant benefits for both girls and boys. Costs may take four forms:

- direct school fees (such as those abolished in Free Primary Education policies);
- indirect fees (such as Parent Teacher Association fees, teachers' levies, and construction fees);
- indirect costs (for example the prices of shoes and uniforms);
- opportunity costs.

However, education costs impact differently on girls, and changes in costs have disproportionate effects on girls' ability to access school. Abolition of direct fees often leads to an even greater increase in girls' enrolment than in boys'. Indirect costs, such as clothing, safety, and transport, are generally higher for girls, thus making it even harder for girls to access school than for boys.

The effects of opportunity costs on education are particularly powerful for girls. Opportunity costs relate to the 'services' lost by a family when their child attends school. Opportunity costs are particularly important to understand once the initial 'gateway obstacles' of direct and indirect fees are successfully overcome. The education of African girls incurs particularly high opportunity costs, because fuel and water collection, which are time-consuming and labour intensive, are jobs usually allocated to school-age girls. Girls also provide care for younger siblings when parents work and community child care is not available. Girls often work as traders in local markets and engage in a range of money-making activities. Girls are particularly badly affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Not only are they at greater risk of contracting the disease than are boys, but they are also much more likely to miss school in order to care for sick family members. Girls are also vulnerable to abuse on the way to school, as well as at school. Early marriage and bride price are important factors in the social life of many African communities. In much of Sudan, for example, the more education a girl has, the lower her bride price, which creates significant opportunity costs for parents.⁹

Addressing the underlying causes of these high opportunity costs of sending girls to school is complex, because they arise from deeply embedded relationships between females and males, which are specific to both the local community and also the wider economy. Interventions are needed that are not only diverse and far reaching, but driven by community participation and inclusion.

Some examples of successful efforts include community schools, which provide education within a short school day that is organised around girls' domestic responsibilities, and which are combined with intensive lobbying of the community on the value of girls' education; the provision of early childhood education programmes, crèches, and other programmes that lift the burden of child care from school-age girls; the provision of water and fuel sources that do not require many hours of work for girls; plus other labour-saving or money-making initiatives. In the long term, it is necessary to change the conditions of the formal and informal labour markets, establish equal wages and conditions of work, and thus demonstrate that educated girls do have improved incomes and quality of life.

Improving the quality of education for girls in Africa

Improving girls' initial access to primary and secondary schooling – most obviously through reducing the costs of attending school – is an important step in the right direction. Many countries in Africa are still trying to work out how to make access to education affordable to all. The question of keeping girls in school through completion of primary and secondary school is another matter. School completion is very often closely related to school quality. The concept of quality encompasses a range of issues, including teaching methods and styles, infrastructure and school materials, school governance and community involvement, and curriculum.¹⁰

There are initiatives that have improved school quality and contributed to an increase in girls' completion rates in some countries (though without more systematic analysis one cannot generalise about their effectiveness, affordability, and relevance in different contexts).

These initiatives include:

- making girls' enrolment and progression rates a part of performance criteria (for both schools and their staff members);
- including gender awareness as an integral part of teacher training for both pre-service and in-service training *and* performance review;
- adopting education curricula and materials that recognise the needs of both girls and boys;
- providing separate latrines and other appropriate infrastructure;
- tackling gender-based violence and sexual harassment and reforming policy on the admissibility of pregnant girls.
- employing more female teachers in rural areas;

- allowing preferential access and allowing automatic progression for girls.

Recommendations

There is no one-size fits-all answer to the problem of getting girls in school and keeping them there. Strategies will vary from country to country depending on whether the country has reached universal primary education, has a strong political commitment to women's equality, and/or has a relatively robust administrative capacity. At the most general level, however, a dual approach to promoting girls' education is needed in all countries which involves improving access and quality for all children as well as targeted programmes.

Countries need to also improve the education system overall, including evidence-based planning, good financing systems and healthy budgets, minimal barriers to access, and attention to quality.

Governments need to address issues of both access and quality, and:

- ensure sufficient spending on primary and secondary education;
- free basic education at the point of delivery and removal of costs (direct/indirect fees, indirect/ opportunity costs).
- provide sufficient numbers of physically accessible schools;
- ensure reasonable class sizes and teacher salaries;
- support and promote targeted initiatives for girls from the poorest families and those from rural areas;
- consider gender equality as an integral dimension of teaching and learning.

NGOs can promote government strategies by:

- ensuring that targeted initiatives are not 'islands of excellence' but are integrated into education plans;
- providing good-quality monitoring and information gathering at the local level, for the development of good-quality education policies and practices that treat girls and boys equally;
- campaigning for a variety of approaches that focus on process and that are realistically priced;
- allocating the thinking, time, and money required to promote girls education;
- monitoring government progress using specific tools, for example budgeting that reflects the different needs of girls and boys, or GEEI at district level.

Notes

¹ E. Kane, May (2004) *Girls' Education in Africa: What Do We Know about Strategies that Work?*. Africa Region Human Development Working Paper Series. Washington, DC: World Bank.

² E. Unterhalter, E. Kioko-Echessa, R. Pattman, R. Rajagopalan, N'Jai, Fatmatta (2005) 'Scaling up Girls' Education: Towards a Scorecard on Girls' Education in the Commonwealth'. London: Beyond Access Project.

³ These rates are 'gross enrolment rates'. Gross enrolment rates can exceed 100 per cent as they include students over formal school-going age who are still attending primary school. Net enrolment rates include only students of formal school going age and do not exceed 100 per cent.

⁴ UNESCO (2003) *Gender and Education for All – The Leap to Equality*, EFA Global Monitoring Report 2003/4. Paris: UNESCO.

⁵ See N. Diop, (2004) 'Gender Budgeting in Education Ministries: Case study of the Rwandan Ministry of Education', Beyond Access Seminar 3 [Hwww.ioe.ac.uk/efps/beyondaccessH](http://www.ioe.ac.uk/efps/beyondaccessH); J. Kirk, (2004) 'Teachers Creating Change: Working for Girls' Education and Gender Equity in South Sudan', *Equals* Newsetter 8, September; D. Mazurana, 2004, 'Reintegrating Girls from Fighting Forces in Africa' ID21 *Insights*, Issue 3.

⁶ E. Kane, *Ibid*.

⁷ See Paper 7 in this series, 'Gender-Responsive Budgeting in Education'. Oxford: Oxfam GB.

⁸ 'Gender-neutral' is the term most commonly used in the literature when referring to interventions that do not make explicit provisions for boys and girls. However, 'gender-blind' is a more accurate term for interventions that are not targeted.

⁹ In contrast, in much of southern Africa, a more educated girl commands a higher bride price than a girl with less education.

¹⁰ See Paper 1 in this series, 'Beyond Access for Girls: How to Achieve Good-Quality Gender-Equitable Education'. Oxford: Oxfam GB.

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