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Gender Equality in Education – Increasing the Momentum for Change

Christopher Colclough

Abstract

All nations are committed, via their espousal of the Millennium Development Goals, to eliminate gender disparities in education over the next few years. This policy brief examines the major causes of existing inequalities in education, based upon an assessment of recent research results, and sets out lessons for policy change. Although the causes of inequality are complex, policy reforms to improve women's rights in the household and the market place, to reduce the direct costs of schooling to households, and to improve school quality in gender-aware ways can do much to encourage and sustain increased enrolments amongst both girls and boys. Although the 2005 target of achieving gender parity at primary and secondary levels has been missed, that for 2015 can be reached if carefully focussed reforms are employed.

The Setting

At the turn of the century, both the Millennium Declaration and the Dakar Framework for Action committed all nations to eliminating gender disparities in education over the short-term to 2005 and to achieving gender equality in education by the year 2015. These commitments reflected both a concern to promote the equal rights of women and men in all aspects of life – as had been affirmed in the human rights legislation enacted by most countries over the previous half century – and clear evidence that patterns of discrimination and inequality required purposive policy action if they were to be overturned.

At that time the educational gap was substantial. Some 60 per cent of the out-of-school population at primary level were girls, and almost two-thirds of the 860 million people estimated to be non-literate were women. As education systems expanded, so too the enrolment of girls had increased, with the proportion of girls to boys enrolled climbing from 88 per cent to 94 per cent over the 1990s. Further progress was made over the following five years, but not sufficiently so to achieve parity of enrolments by 2005. In that year some 76 countries failed to achieve parity at primary level, whilst some 130 countries had not achieved it at secondary or higher levels.

Looking towards 2015

It is now clear that the goal set for 2005 was overly ambitious. Gender parity at primary and secondary levels could not have been achieved within a five year period without large numbers of out-of-school girls enrolling in (or rejoining) classes at levels well beyond primary grade 1 (Colclough 2007)¹. Such 'mid-career' enrolment would also have been extensively required if secondary enrolment parity were to have been achieved within the five-year period – at least in those many school systems in which male pupils significantly outnumbered girls at all grade levels. This kind of enrolment behaviour would have been unsustainable over the medium term and, in most countries, it would not have been feasible in the first place. It should, therefore, have been predictable that the initial gender goals in education would not be achieved within the chosen five-year time-frame.

The experience to 2005 was disappointing mainly by consequence of the historical legacy rather than of policy mistakes. Furthermore, some countries have shown that, given the right policies and circumstances, rapid progress towards gender parity can indeed be made. The target for 2015 of achieving enrolment parity throughout education thus looks more tractable, even though the deeper goals of achieving equality in education, and in society more broadly, will remain challenging for most countries.

Priorities for policy change can best be informed by an understanding of the causes of existing inequalities, which are dependent on national contexts, history and social and economic conditions. Nevertheless, there are some important common circumstances shared by many countries, and a discussion of their nature and extent can help to inform strategies for tackling them. This is the task for the remainder of this paper². What then, is needed?

¹ The only other way of shifting rapidly to gender parity would have been by boys dropping out of school in much larger numbers than girls – a highly undesirable option which is obviously contrary to the spirit and intent of the MDGs.

² Comprehensive reviews of the evidence can be found in Colclough, Al-Samarrai, Rose and Tembon 2003, UNESCO 2003, and Subrahmanian 2007. These sources should be consulted for details of country experience, from which these lessons are drawn.

The social context

Educational discrimination is both a cause and a consequence of much wider discrimination against girls and women in society. The most marked gender inequalities are found in countries and regions where women's roles are constrained by patrilineal principles of inheritance and descent, by early marriage, by family resources being controlled by the senior male household member and sometimes by traditional restrictions preventing women participating in the public sphere. Such traditions are often stronger in the poorest countries, which are also farthest from achieving universal schooling. It is striking that, in countries where enrolments are low, boys tend to be given preference in access to schooling (Figure 1). Creating an environment where equality between women and men is a guiding principle is essential to improving girls' educational chances and outcomes. The agenda involves reforming family law, giving women property and inheritance rights and designing equal opportunities legislation. Such changes are usually controversial, but they provide a decisive counterweight to entrenched social norms that also affect whether or not children go to school.

Reducing the costs of school attendance

Despite the almost universal ratification of human rights treaties which commit nations to the provision of 'free and compulsory education' at primary level, school fees or other charges are still found in almost 100 countries – including in many of those that are farthest from achieving the enrolment and gender parity goals. The average parental contribution differs between countries, but it appears typically to amount to around one-third of total annual unit costs at primary level. This can represent a significant proportion of household income, especially for the poorest households, and leads to under-enrolment of school-age children, particularly amongst girls. Thus, abolishing school fees at the primary level can have a major positive impact on enrolments, as the recent experiences of Malawi, Uganda, Kenya and other African countries have demonstrated. Bilateral aid agencies can help to support such initiatives – by compensating governments, or schools, for the loss of fee revenues and by providing resources to support the quality of schooling during its subsequent expansion – in ways which can have a crucial role in ensuring the success of school-fee reforms³.

Removing the Need for Child Labour

The provision of paid and unpaid child labour is a leading cause of under-enrolment and drop-out, particularly amongst girls. Recent estimates suggest that more than 200 million children aged 5–14 years are in some form of paid work in developing countries, about half of whom are girls (ILO 2002; UNESCO 2003:120). In addition, there are many more children – mainly girls – who spend considerable time each week in unpaid domestic work, in ways that affect their access to, or progress in, schooling. Parents are the main employers of

these children – whether in the household or in the informal economy. Legislation can help to tackle this problem but, in many cases, incentives are needed to persuade households to forego the income benefits they derive from their school-age children. In Latin America, income support schemes that provide cash to poor families, conditional on school attendance by their children, have been successful in reducing the incidence of child labour. Food incentives, provided as meals at school or as dry food rations, can help to boost enrolments. Scholarships and bursaries can also strongly influence whether girls stay in school to the higher primary and secondary levels. The Food for Education Programme in Bangladesh has had a marked impact upon girls' enrolments. Scholarships at secondary level have also been shown to have major effects upon school attendance amongst girls in Bangladesh, Zambia, Zimbabwe and elsewhere in Africa.

Reforming Classroom Practice

Designing a gender-sensitive curriculum and training teachers to be 'gender-aware' is not a simple process. The fact that girls are still underrepresented in science subjects in industrialised countries at secondary and tertiary levels points to enduring biases. In the developing world, although progress has often been made in removing the portrayal of women in stereotypical activities from school texts, in many countries, regular gender auditing of curricular materials is needed if the barriers are to be broken down.

Irrespective of curriculum design, the way in which it is interpreted by teachers has a crucial influence on students. Teachers can provide role models, and a sense of direction and encouragement to both boys and girls. However, they cannot be expected to separate themselves easily from the powerful cultural and social norms with which they themselves have grown up. In strongly patriarchal environments, female teachers face powerful obstacles in choosing their own careers and activities, and in such circumstances, gender sensitisation courses are seldom a standard part of teacher training programmes.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, hiring more female teachers and training them well are top priorities for countries where gender disparities remain high. In Sub-Saharan Africa, women hold only one-third, or less, of teaching posts, and in some countries their numbers are extremely small. There are strong correlations between girls' enrolments at

³ During the period 1994–2002, tuition fees at primary level were abolished in Malawi, Uganda and Tanzania. In each of these countries primary enrolments, net enrolment ratios and the proportion of public spending allocated to education more than doubled. In these same countries between 40 and 60% of primary education budgets were covered by support from aid agencies, following the reforms (UNESCO 2003:220).

primary level and the presence of female teachers (Figure 2) and, where the female/male teacher ratio is low, deliberate policy measures to increase it should be a leading component of any gendered strategy. There are initiatives to lead the way: in a number of sub-Saharan African countries, the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) has established 'centres of excellence' to build the capacity of teachers through courses on gender sensitisation and awareness, the teaching of science, maths and technology, and training in gender-responsive methodologies.

Promoting Safety and Women's Empowerment

Schools are often not safe places for learning: violence against girls by other pupils and even by teachers helps to perpetuate the gender gap in education. A number of studies from Africa suggest that much gender violence in schools goes unreported because students fear victimisation, punishment or ridicule. Placing schools closer to homes is also important in many countries – where the distance to school is large, the safety of children during the journey to school is particularly influential in affecting parental decisions to send their girls to school.

Girls have a much higher chance of attending school if their mothers are educated – even if such education was acquired at a mature age. Literacy programmes tied to income-generating activities, and to health and human rights awareness campaigns have shown considerable potential to empower women. Linking such programmes to

early childhood care and education generates strong benefits, often at low cost. Because of the strong links between attendance by children at pre-school programmes and their subsequent enrolment in primary school, an effective recognition of the links between different generations of learners paves the way towards greater equality, in education and beyond.

Conclusion

There is no single cause of inequality in education, and many reforms are at hand which are capable of addressing it. The state has a critical role to play in creating an environment that is promotive of greater equality through legislative and policy reform. There is a need to target resources for female education, and to introduce deliberate measures to reduce inequities. The necessary political commitment, expertise and resources need to be mobilised, so as to respond to the urgency of the task. Arguments that equality cannot be afforded, or that such policy shifts would generate pressures that conflict with other, more pressing, development priorities, are largely misguided. On the contrary, a committed shift towards the creation of gender equality in education would stimulate a range of personal, economic and social benefits that well exceed their costs. It would provide the cornerstone to allow women and men to enjoy the rights and freedoms spelt out in the UN Charter on Human Rights more than half a century ago, and which the world has recommitted itself to achieve over the years to 2015.

Figure 1 Gender Inequality and Enrolments at primary level in developing countries

Where enrolment rates are low, boys are given preference in most countries and most regions

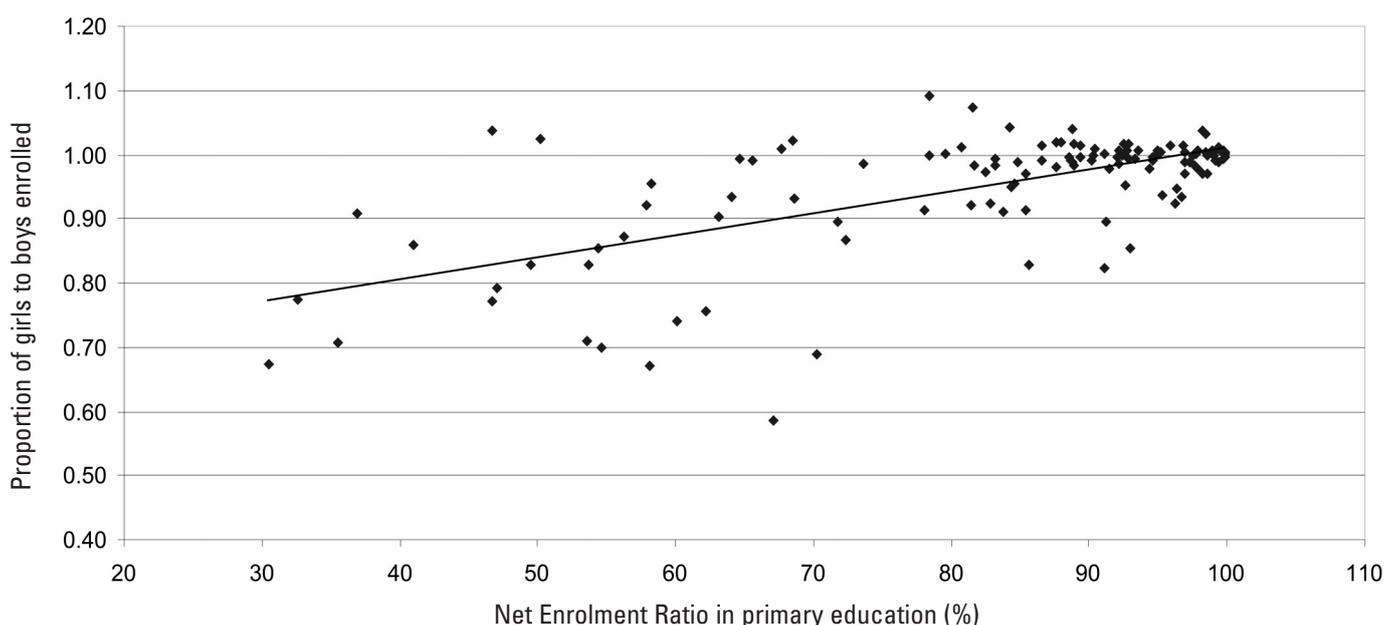
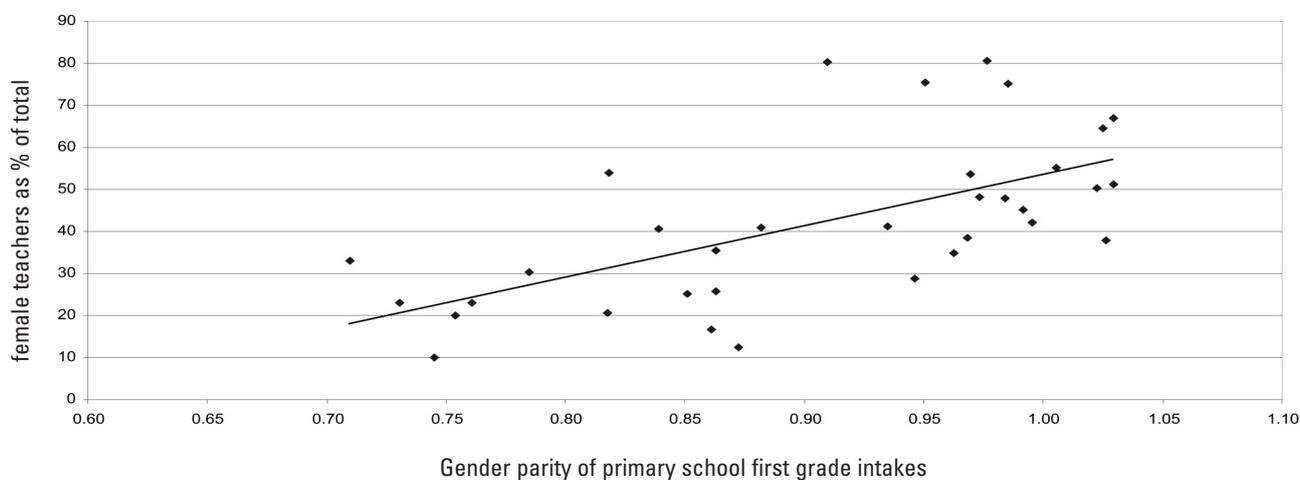


Figure 2 **Sub-Saharan Africa: The proportion of female teachers at primary level, and the gender balance of first grade intakes (a value of 1.00 indicates gender parity in enrolments)**

Where female teachers are a small proportion of the total, many fewer girls than boys enrol in school.



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