

Benefits of Investing in Girl Education

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ABSTRACT

Educating girls is pivotal to the development of society. Despite many global declarations and development goals, and significant effort by the international community, gender disparity in education continues to exist. There is a significant correlation between gender equality and the level of economic and social development of a country. Gender inequities have been found to influence the way members of the family spend their time and resources. Evidence suggests that women with more control over resources will spend more money on basic living needs (e.g., food and health) and education. Investment in women, and more specifically women's education, has numerous positive effects on not only the women but also her children and family. These outcomes not only improve the quality of life of women and families but also combat poverty and foster economic growth. At the heart of achieving gender equality is the education of girls and women and the removal of barriers to education and opportunities for their advancement. The economic benefits of addressing and reducing barriers to women's education and engagement in the workforce can be substantial. A growing number of organizations and governments recognize that focusing on women and girls is the most effective way to fight global poverty and extremism. This article reviews the commitments that have been made to ensure girl education and the benefits of investing in girl education in the society.

Keywords: Girls' education, Gender equality, Awareness, Impact, Human capabilities, Sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

A growing body of research and a growing number of organizations and governments recognize that focusing on women and girls is the most effective way to fight global poverty and extremism. This includes organizations, such as World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and the U.S. military Joint Chiefs of Staff, which are not normally associated with advocating for women's rights. This is why foreign aid is increasingly directed to women. The world is awakening to powerful truths that not only are women and girls not the problem, but they may, in fact, very well be the solution.

No country can fully develop economically and socially if it fails to tap and fully utilize the talent of its citizens [1]. The development and competitiveness of a village, state or nation depends on efficiently and effectively utilizing its resources. Human talent is a critical

resource and women are half of that resource. Economic success depends on the development and effective utilization of the skills, education and productivity of all of its workforce. A growing body of work shows a correlation between gender equality and the level of development of countries.² Studies show that reducing gender inequalities enhances productivity and economic growth.³ Former United States Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues [2] said, —We know that no country can prosper if half its people are left behind The truth of the matter is that countries that repress women also tend to be backward economically, and are more likely to be failed states [3] [4]. Gender inequities influence the way members of the family spend their time and resources.

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money on basic living needs (e.g., food and health) and education. Research demonstrates that investment in women, and more specifically women's education, has numerous positive effects, including:

- 1) Reduction in female fertility rates
- 2) Lower infant and child mortality rates
- 3) Lower maternal mortality rates
- 4) Increase in women's labor force participation
- 5) Fosters educational investment in children.

These outcomes not only improve the quality of life of women and families but also foster economic growth. Economic benefits of addressing and reducing barriers to women's education and engagement in the workforce can be substantial [5]. A report by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific Countries found the cost to the region of restricting job opportunities for women is between \$42 and \$46 billion (USD) a year. Similar research by the World Bank also determined huge costs in the Middle East where only about one-third of women participate in the workforce [6]. In Europe, a reduction in the male-female employment gap has been an important driver of the economic growth over the last decade [7] [8]. It is estimated that closing the gender gap could boost the United States Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by as much as 9%, the Eurozone GDP by as much as 13% and Japanese GDP by as much as 16%.⁸

President Obama in his June 4, 2009, address at Cairo University underscored the wisdom of investing in women's education and acknowledged the importance of the advancement of women as a global issue. He then recognized that women's rights are a central part of the foreign policy of his administration. And it is no coincidence that countries where women are well educated are far more likely to be prosperous. Our common prosperity will be advanced by allowing all humanity men and women to reach their full potential. We must recognize that education and innovation will be the currency of the 21st century [9] [10] [11]. Striving for gender equality is not only a

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wise strategy; it also is a critical investment for the future. To maximize its competitiveness and development potential, countries must work to provide women with the same rights, responsibilities and opportunities as men [12]. There is the need to invest in the women of a country in order to achieve development and growth and to address issues of social justice. Focused investment in women can achieve greater good than other investments.

International Commitments and Declarations on Girl Education

United Nations (UN) organizations aim to enforce basic human rights including education for all. Article 26 (1) of the Universal Nations Declaration of Human Rights stated that Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit [13].

Ever since, declarations and treaties have been promulgated to transform these ambitions into reality. The International Bill of Human Rights contains provisions on compulsory and free primary education and on nondiscrimination in education (UN General Assembly, 1948). The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (UN General Assembly, 1979) and Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, 1989) contain the most comprehensive set of legally enforceable commitments concerning both rights to education and to gender equality. The Jomtien Declaration [14], Dakar Framework for Action [15], and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs; UN, 2000) go substantially beyond the human rights treaties in their coverage. They call for early childhood care and education, learning programs for all young people and adults, and improvement in the quality of education, while the Dakar Framework for Action and MDGs also include time-bound targets [16].

The commitment to gender equality in the Dakar framework for action included Goal 2: ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls have access to, and complete, free and compulsory education of good quality; Goal 4: achieving a 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women; Goal 5: eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to, and achievement, in basic education. [17] The commitment to gender equality in MDG [18] included (a) Goal 2: achieving universal primary education - Target 3: ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling and (b) Goal 3: promote gender equality and empower women - Target 4: eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and to all levels of education no later than 2015.

The Asia and Pacific Regional Framework for Action, adopted by the Asia-Pacific Conference on Education for All 2000 Assessment (held in Bangkok on January 17-20, 2000) stated, It is essential to eliminate systemic gender disparities, where they persist, amongst girls and boys, throughout the education system - in enrolment, achievement and completion; in teacher training and career development; in curriculum, and learning practices and learning processes. This requires better appreciation of the role of education as an instrument of women's equality and empowerment. [19]. The recently adopted sustainable development goals reaffirm the world's commitment to achieving equitable quality education for all, gender equality, and empowerment of women and girls by 2030 (UN Development Programme, 2015). The achievement of these goals will require substantial resources, political will, and persistent and coordinated efforts by all stakeholders.

Current State of Gender Equality in Education

There has been some progress, and girls' proportion of primary school-age children

out of school has reduced from 58% in 2000 to 52% in 2015. However, girls are still at a disadvantage, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab States, and South and West Asia (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2016). Despite improvements in school enrollment rates for girls in developing countries, they continue to be excluded from the education system (United Nations Children's Fund [20].

Despite growing evidence of the impact and importance of educating girls, a large segment of our society, particularly in developing countries, takes little to no action to educate the critical population. Two thirds of the illiterate adult population in the world are women; over 63 million girls around the world are out of school (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2016), and 47% of the out-of-school girls are never expected to enroll as compared to 35% of boys [11]. About 69% of low-income countries are still to achieve gender parity in primary education, 91% in lower secondary education, and 95% in upper secondary education (UNESCO, 2016). In most societies, women do not enjoy the same opportunities as men. Their life choices and chances are more restricted than those of men. Girls' unequal access to and performance in education is both a cause and a consequence of these disparities. Educational inequality is a major contravention of girls'/women's rights and an impediment to social and economic development.

Importance and Impact of Educating Girls

Educating a girl not only improves her life, but also the lives of her family, community and society at large. Denying girls their right to education, keeps many societies in the dark and at a disadvantage. A female expert said, "No country succeeds without educating its women." According to a male educator, "We no longer live in an era where the intellectual contributions of women and girls can be ignored or underrated." A male expert said, "Women have a particular way of looking at the world, which men cannot have. Then not educating them is impoverishing the

society." Not having an education greatly limits girls from participating in many activities which could benefit wider society; education enables her to contribute innovative ideas. A female expert said, Girls' reduced access to education creates a cycle of reduced development across a society and across generations. Without equal access to education, a woman is denied a path towards her full potential. This then ripples beyond her personally, whereby families and communities are similarly deprived of their full capacity - economically and socially.

Additionally, a male educator stated, "Girls' education is a powerful tool to change perceptions and belief systems. Families with educated girls have a broader outlook towards society. Secondly, since girls are better communicators, they can easily influence and inspire the wider community." Education enables girls to be confident, independent, earn self-respect in the society, and unleash their full potential. It allows them the ability to pursue their desired dreams and professional careers, and be recognized through what they do. It increases the work force and maximizes productivity, given the fact that girls constitute half of the world's population—although this only represent 10%-12% of the entire work force. A male expert explained, If they are educated, they will have a profession. If they bring home some income, the whole family, particularly the joint families of South Asia and Africa, will respect this woman much more than if she was just a housewife and taking care of her family and children.

Education provides relevant knowledge and skills for girls to better understand and deal with life challenges. Education involves social interaction, which not only

allows girls to feel that they are not alone, but also to feel well-supported by their peers and teachers/educators. Educated girls tend to marry at an appropriate age, eventually decreasing the number of child marriages and health problems. With increased health education, they are able to take better care of their families' health and well-being. As expressed by a male expert, "If you educate a female who becomes a mother, you educate an entire household, you lower the child mortality rates and you raise the economic earning potential too with healthier and more (economically) productive family members." A female development professional said, "If they (girls) are educated, they will have better understanding of nutrition, hygiene, and upbringing of their children. A child born to an educated mother is much more likely to survive past the age of five." Many parents and teachers/educators claim that a mother is a child's first teacher and that an educated mother will be able to raise better educated children. If a girl is educated, she will transfer that knowledge and values to all those around her resulting in a positive ripple effect. As described by a male student, "Educating a girl is similar to educating an entire nation." Educated girls tend to become role models and inspire others to pursue education. Education gives them the ability to positively influence their lives and the lives of their families and wider communities. Educated women tend to take leadership roles, especially within the community and focus on societal development. Education enables them to use sound judgement, empowers them, and strengthens their voice in society. A female expert said, "As they grow in confidence they can become community leaders and play an active role in the development of society."

CONCLUSION

Educating girls is critical for the development of communities and broadly for society as a whole. Education is the most sustainable way to address global challenges like poverty, health issues, ignorance, lack of tolerance and conflicts, among others. Therefore, it is absolutely

important to educate girls. Eastern philosophy says—while with one hand a woman will shake the cradle, with the other hand she would change the world! It is widely acknowledged that investments in the health, education and employment of young people, particularly adolescent

girls, are among the most cost-effective development expenditures that may be

undertaken.

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