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**INTERACTIVE EXPERT PANEL**

**Access and participation of women and girls to education, training,  
science and technology, including for the promotion of women's equal  
access to full employment and decent work**

**Remaining barriers to women's and girls' access to and participation in  
education and training\***

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\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

## Introduction

Fifteen years after the Beijing Platform for Action and ten years into the 2015 targets for Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), achievements towards furthering the gender-related goals of the global development agenda need to be recognized and celebrated. The mobilization and collective actions of countless stakeholders, ranging from national Governments, multi- and bilateral cooperation agencies, civil society and non-governmental organizations, philanthropic foundations, to community and youth groups have paid off in absolute and relative terms.

Regarding the specific gender-related goals of both EFA and the MDGs, tangible opportunities have opened up for large numbers of girls and women. Many countries in Latin America and Asia have reached parity in access at primary and secondary level, or achieved universal primary education (UPE). The countries that were furthest behind in 2000, such as Nepal, Burkina Faso, or Mali for instance, have made leaps towards parity with some of the highest growth rates in the world. All this needs to be acknowledged as the result of tremendous investments from all stakeholders.

The role of education in achieving gender equality cannot be underestimated. It is no longer a question of whether girls should be educated, but how and how much they should be educated; to what extent education empowers women and brings about gender equality in society; and in what way education allows women to meaningfully reap the benefits and opportunities associated with education.

### 1) **Barriers to women's access to, and retention in, formal and non-formal education**

Thanks to two decades of research and advocacy, there is increased knowledge and awareness of the benefits of female education for countries' economic growth, for families' health and financial stability, and for individuals' increased earning opportunities. Yet, obstacles related to poverty, conflict, the global financial crisis, culture-based gender biases, and a host of supply-side issues continue to dampen progress towards real gender equity and equality in the education sector of many countries. Despite some evidence from research and statistical data available at the international or regional levels (GMR,<sup>1</sup> UIS,<sup>2</sup> World Bank, OECD,<sup>3</sup> etc.), there is a need for research to identify the remaining barriers in the context in which they happen at national and local levels.

**Poverty** remains the single most overarching barrier to educational access for girls and women in Africa and elsewhere. The most vulnerable and marginalized children, those living in rural areas or urban slums, those with disabilities, those from minority ethnic and linguistic communities constitute the last mile to parity in access in Africa and Asia, primarily. School fees remain a challenge for many poor families and contribute to cheating girls and young women of educational opportunities, particularly at post-primary/post-basic level. In Kenya for instance,

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<sup>1</sup> EFA Global Monitoring Report

<sup>2</sup> UNESCO Institute of Statistics

<sup>3</sup> Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

despite the adoption of a “free” education policy at basic levels, families are still subjected to paying fees. Boy preference, often based on false expectations of higher returns by many poor families, increases the chances of girls being kept out of school (GMR 2010). This is also closely linked to the question of **transition into post-basic cycles**. It has been argued that primary education alone is not sufficient to equip girls with basic functional literacy and numeracy skills, which they need to enter the formal labour and economic markets. Yet transition and completion rates in most of Africa remain weak for girls and boys. Only 60 per cent of children in sub-Saharan Africa (55 per cent for girls) complete primary school!<sup>4</sup>

**Cultural barriers** persist and are compounded by attitudes and beliefs about girls’ and women’s right to education. Traditional value systems that perpetuate patriarchal expectations about men’s and women’s abilities and roles in society continue to limit women’s chances to access education and to thrive within the existing educational systems. For instance, research has shown that most girls are discouraged from taking up science and technical subjects, whether they are predisposed, gifted or interested in these areas. The caretaker role of women is emphasized. This certainly limits the career choices and earning opportunities of girls and women. In addition, **early marriages, teenage pregnancies, gender-based and sexually-motivated violence, HIV and AIDS**, all contribute to keeping education out of the reach of many girls and women.

**Conflict** has also dampened the progress made towards parity in access and has eroded gains made towards gender equality in war-torn countries. According to Save the Children (2007) 40 million of the 72 million children out of school live in conflict-affected states. The cases of Iraq, Afghanistan and Liberia are patent examples. Armed conflict disrupts the flow of financial and human resources into the education system, but also destroys what was already there. It is girls and women who are left to care for families; in addition, sexual assaults, illegal drafting into militia groups and destruction of physical public spaces exacerbate the denial of educational opportunities to them. Rebuilding efforts also tend to overlook the social sectors such as education.

Educational **quality** and **relevance** remain a great challenge to progress. This has led to the **gender parity paradox**: as more children enter the system, quality declines in countries with limited resources and without political will to heavily invest in education and other social sectors. Yet, it has been demonstrated that promoting girls’ education with targeted school-based interventions also contributes to overall educational quality.

The absence of **relevant curricula** and up-to-date learning materials, the provision of **cut-rate training for teachers**, the shortage and low status of teachers, especially female teachers, all contribute to lowering quality and relevance of education. In many parts of Africa, for instance, rote memory is preferred over **critical thinking** and learning and acquisition of **pragmatic competencies**. The fact that schooling does not always equip young women with life skills that empower them to increase their livelihood chances, has an adverse effect on girls’ retention and persistence in the system. When parents and girls themselves do not see the point of education or schooling, when they perceive girls’ further studies as a waste of precious family resources, they are more likely to reject formal education since the lost opportunities outweigh the costs of

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<sup>4</sup> Learning for all: DFID’s Education Strategy 2010-2015.

investment. Hence, there is a need for education which empowers women socially and economically so that they can contribute to the positive transformation of their societies, communities and families, with **gender equality and equity** as an end goal.

Acute limitations in **alternatives to the formal education system**, the restricted choices facing girls and young women in secondary and higher education environments (Mulugeta 2010), and the severe trend towards **privatization** of post-basic education, contribute to preventing quality educational expansion for girls and women (Sarr-Sow, 2010). As unemployment rises across the globe, even girls from the middle classes will be affected. Economists such as Moser (1993) have shown that in times of economic recession, women tend to bear the brunt of the family's survival, and rural women even more so.

With the current **global financial crisis**, the tendency to divest from education and health and to divert funds toward the productive sectors poses a risk to protecting gains made over the past 20 years. The World Bank (2009) warns about the risks of not reaching the MDGs and EFA goals if national Governments and development cooperation agencies move to remove education as a priority and reduce or withdraw their support to lesser-endowed countries. The GMR 2010 points out that most countries in the South finance their education system to the tune of 80 per cent, yet with the recession, it is likely that many countries in Sub-Saharan African countries may slash their education budgets by 10 per cent per primary level students, amounting to a total of USD 4.6 billion a year for the region. This could seriously jeopardize all the gains made thus far.

## 2) **Measures to improve the quality of education for women and girls**

If Governments around the world are to fulfill the right of their citizens to acquire education that is enabling and empowering, educational quality must be at the center of their endeavours. This would require tackling the issue from various angles and at multiple levels. This work should not be left to cooperation agencies, the private sector or civil society. National Ministries of Education must provide leadership to promote girls' education in close collaboration with these partners.

First, **policies** must prioritize quality and move the focus away from just gender parity in access. Engendering education policies and turning these policies into actionable plans that are periodically reviewed and adjusted is critical. This requires that ministry staff inspectors and school administrators receive in-depth gender training in order to appropriate the policies and plans.

Second, the debate on quality education must address head on the issue of **teacher education, status and professional development**. More female teachers need to be recruited to bridge the current teacher gap estimated at 18 million around the world, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia Pacific. Not only must ALL teachers be qualified and treated as professionals, it is also imperative that they practice gender-responsive pedagogy in their classrooms. This would be valid for both pre-service and in-service training. The integration of gender awareness training and gender-informed teaching and learning at teacher training institution must be made mandatory and continuous. This should also be supplemented by continuous in-service training.

Third, there is a need to develop **mechanisms to monitor gender equality in the education system**. It is not enough to bring in women and girls, count them and leave them to their own devices in an unfriendly, male-biased environment. There is a need to know what happens to women once they are in the system and where they go within the system and outside the system, and why. Only then would we be able to adopt specific measures to address their specific issues. As it currently stands, very few countries have such mechanisms in place and these are usually set up by NGOs and multilateral organizations.

Fourth, **approaches and interventions must be strategic in nature** to bring about **lasting transformation** in the education system, both formal and non-formal. While the provision of scholarships is necessary for the most vulnerable and the poor to offset the other costs of education, it is more strategic for stakeholders to lobby for the **complete abolition of tuition fees** and other costs of basic education. Son preference is still prevalent in many conservative communities when parental means are also limited. Advocacy for adoption and **enforcement of school fee abolition** should be part of a comprehensive national plan that provides adequate budgetary allocations to learning institutions to offset direct and indirect costs of schooling for poor children.

It goes without saying that **addressing these issues simultaneously and in a comprehensive manner** will result in tangible improvements in girls' and women's life opportunities. A multi-dimensional approach combining advocacy with demonstrative interventions is necessary in order to generalize the replication and mainstreaming of best practices. Tackling quality cannot be done at the expense of equity. Furthermore, there is a need to consolidate interventions in order to avoid dispersion, duplication and short-term interventions or projects. That is why working in **partnerships** and through **networks** will ensure that advocacy efforts are more efficient, thanks to the power of numbers and of multiple voices. The United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI), the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), the Africa Network Campaign on Education for All (ANCEFA) and Global Campaign for Education are patent examples.

### 3) **Differences in skills between girls and boys in accessing better employment opportunities: What strategies are needed to address the issue?**

The role of technical and vocational training in providing a base of skilled workers that can contribute to developing a country is well documented. Its role in buttressing the rebuilding of countries that are emerging from conflict cannot be underestimated. Yet, it is also a well-known fact that in most countries struggling to reach gender parity in education, girls are at a disadvantage over boys in these areas. This is even more pronounced in the areas of math, science, technology, and the medical fields, which in many countries, especially in Africa, are considered a male bastion. Until recently, the caretaker role of women in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) was emphasized. The goal was to produce good household managers (home economics, sewing, cooking, etc.), nurses, and store attendants. This is exacerbated by the fact that TVET policies are gender blind in most countries.

Many girls are still exposed to long-standing societal attitudes that perpetuate stereotypes about what careers girls should or should not enter. In recent years, however, there has been a re-

emerging interest in TVET and employment readiness, as well as math, science and technology for girls. That is why there is a need for gender-responsive policies and programmes that target girls and women specifically, especially in light of the enormous pressures on the post-primary level of education in many countries. There is also a need for non-formal education targeting female teenage dropouts and young adults who leave the system early. This includes literacy and life skills training. It is also important to make linkages between this kind of training and issues that affect women and girls such as health and sanitation, HIV and AIDS education and prevention, and income generation activities.

Additionally, the infrastructure and resources required to support the learning process, such as equipment, laboratories, workshops, libraries, buildings and learning materials, are inadequate. The absence of up-to-date technical equipment and difficulties in giving learners access to consumable materials limit the choices of courses offered. Furthermore, existing cultural practices and gender bias make it even more difficult for women to enter non-traditional fields such as electronics, mechanics, carpentry or plumbing. Women also easily get the short end of the stick in these areas because of changing job skills requirements and gender bias. They are either pushed out or pushed down. There is therefore a need for continuous in-service training and upgrading of skills.

Once women get trained, increasing safety in the workplace should be one of the action points. The social conditioning of girls and parents is such that a self-venture for girls is often unthinkable. Girls are either not entitled to receiving financial aid, or the procedural requirements are far too complicated. Girls often cannot hold collateral to land or property and so cannot extend surety for the finance being sought. Even parents are reluctant to stand guarantee for them because of the impending departure of their daughters after marriage. Simpler procedures of inducting girls in self-employment should therefore be laid down and practiced. On the matter of providing employment opportunity protection for girls and women, several countries such as India, Mexico, Republic of Korea, Spain, Sweden, Turkey and United Arab Emirates have legislation as well as national policies. South Africa is developing legislation and national policies to provide employment opportunity protection for girls and women.

#### **4) Recommendations to increase women's participation in education, including literacy and job-training**

- Eliminating school fees to fulfill girls and women's right to education
- Providing bursaries which mitigate the effects of poverty
- Building boarding facilities to address the issue of distance from school, especially at post-primary level
- Building gender-sensitive sanitation facilities for the protection of girls
- Re-entry policy for pregnant school girls and teenage mothers
- School-feeding programs for poor girls

- Making schools and surrounding communities harassment-free zones
- Mobilizing communities to support girls' education and abandon harmful practices that keep girls out of school
- In rural areas, entrepreneurship training is paramount to empower girls for self-employment.