

Girls can't wait

Why girls' education matters, and how to make it happen now

Briefing paper for the UN Beijing +10 Review and Appraisal

This is the year that the world will miss the first, and most critical of all the Millennium Development Goals – gender parity in education by 2005. Over the next decade, unless world leaders take drastic action now, unacceptably slow progress on girls' education will account for over 10 million unnecessary child and maternal deaths, will cost poor countries as much as 3 percentage points in lost economic growth, and lead to at least 3.5 million avoidable cases of HIV/AIDS. In response to this unacknowledged emergency, this paper proposes a new action plan to get every girl in school and learning.

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About the GCE

The Global Campaign for Education is a coalition of NGOs and trade unions working in over 100 countries for the right to free, good quality education for all. GCE is a member of the UN Girls' Education Initiative, the Global Call to Action Against Poverty and the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS. This paper benefited from the invaluable input of Elaine Unterhalter (Beyond Access Project and University of London).

Regional and international members

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**Without achieving gender equality for girls in education, the world has no chance of achieving many of the ambitious health, social and development targets it has set for itself.
United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, March 3, 2005.**

Introduction

The continuing denial of education to an estimated 60 million girls is a global emergency, even though the international community is refusing to acknowledge it as such.

- This year alone, failure to reach the 2005 UN girls' education goal will result in over 1 million unnecessary child and maternal deaths; 10 million over a decade.¹
- HIV/AIDS infection rates are doubled among young people who do not finish primary school. If every girl and boy received a complete primary education, at least 7 million new cases of HIV could be prevented in a decade.²
- Education is a key economic asset for individuals and for nations. Every year of schooling lost represents a 10 to 20 per cent reduction in girls' future incomes. Countries could raise per capita economic growth by about 0.3% percentage points per year – or 3 percentage points in the next decade – if they simply attained parity in girls' and boys' enrolments.³
- Failure to educate girls and women perpetuates needless hunger. Gains in women's education contributed most to reducing malnutrition between 1970-1995, playing a more important role than increased food availability.⁴
- Women with education are better able to successfully resist debilitating practices such as female genital cutting, early marriage and domestic abuse by male partners.⁵

When 189 heads of state signed the Millennium Declaration in 2000, they recognised that educating girls is a powerful and necessary first step towards ending poverty and achieving human rights. They made gender parity in primary and secondary education the very first of all the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) targets they set themselves, promising to get as many girls as boys into school by 2005. Yet even this preliminary step, to the shame of the world, will not be achieved on time in a majority of countries.

World leaders must not be allowed to hide their failure to meet the first of all the MDG targets behind complacent statements that 'more girls are going to primary school than ever before.' True enough, girls' -- and boys' -- access to education has been inching slowly upwards for the past 50 years. In the late 1990s, developing countries began to recover some of the educational ground lost in the 1980s, when enrolments stagnated or even declined in much of Africa and South Asia. But the rate of progress remains far too slow to achieve the MDGs. Without a dramatic acceleration, 40% of countries will still not attain gender equality in enrolments even by 2015. ⁶ Some 86 countries are not on track to achieve MDG2, which calls for universal primary education by 2015.⁷

Although boys' educational advantage over girls declined slightly at primary level in the 1990s, this apparent 'gain' for girls had almost as much to do with sharp increases in the number of boys out of school in some regions, as with increases in the number of girls in school. In fact, net enrolment among primary school aged girls in developing countries actually fell slightly in the 1990s, from 86% to 85%.⁸

At secondary level, the gap between girls and boys in secondary school has barely budged since 1998; in sub-Saharan Africa, only one in five girls are enrolled in secondary school, a figure that has hardly changed since 1990 and in some cases, since independence.⁹ At these rates of

‘progress’, it will take more than 100 years before all girls in Africa go to primary school, and hundreds more before they get a chance at secondary education. Is this really the kind of progress for which our governments believe they deserve congratulation?

Education is not a silver bullet. On its own, it is not enough to overcome the multiple causes of women’s deprivation and oppression. Women, even those who do get an education, face embedded disadvantage in labour markets, property ownership and sexual and reproductive choices. Bolder action is needed on all of these fronts. However, amidst persistent discrimination, education equips girls and women with a basic confidence in their abilities and rights, an ability to acquire and process information, and increased earning power. It costs as little as US\$100 per year to provide this critical asset, and in the 21st century there can be no excuse for 60 million girls to be denied it.

The Beijing +10 review and the MDG +5 review later this year are probably the last chance before 2015 to mobilise genuine political will and resources behind a robust plan and timetable to get every girl in school and learning. Attempts to whitewash failure as success will get us nowhere. What is needed at B+10 is a full and fearless accounting for why progress has fallen so far short of the goals, and what more governments and international agencies can, must and *will* do, now, to educate the world’s girls.

Is the goal achievable?

Rapid progress on girls’ education, on the scale needed to achieve gender parity worldwide within the next few years, is eminently possible. Many of the poorest countries have made remarkable progress in a short period of time. Mauritania, which made a commitment to free and compulsory primary education, increased the ratio of girls to boys from 67% to 93% between 1990 and 1996. Mali cut a steep gender gap by more than 10 percentage points in the 1990s, at the same time raising primary completion rates among both boys and girls by more than 20 percentage points. The achievements of Bangladesh and Uganda, among several other success stories that could be cited, are highlighted below.

What made these countries different? They were not satisfied with a string of small-scale projects and pilot programmes. They embarked on a massive expansion and upgrading of the public school system, while also investing in measures to help poor girls and other excluded groups get an education. Their stories show us that massive progress on girls’ education *can* happen when government takes the lead to deliver education for the many and not the few.

Overwhelmingly, girls are not in school because of poverty. The more expensive education is, the less likely families are to invest in education for girls. In Kenya, for example, before school fees were abolished, girls were more than twice as likely as boys to be withdrawn from school on cost grounds.¹⁰ ‘Opportunity costs’ are also a real deterrent for poor households: children’s labour, paid or unpaid, is often an important part of household survival, and sending girls to school may mean less food on the table at the end of every day. In Bangladesh and Nepal “it is not uncommon for girls to work an average of 10 hours a day;” and in countries hard-hit by HIV/AIDS, girls are shouldering much of the burden of caring for the sick and looking after younger children.¹¹

But neither poverty nor HIV/AIDS need deny any child her right to education. Among the pro-girl steps taken by ‘success story’ countries, some of the most effective have been abolishing fees and charges; making primary education compulsory as well as free; prohibiting the worst forms of child work; and providing extra incentives to help compensate poor families for girls’ labour.¹²

- After Uganda abolished fees, girls' enrolment increased by 20 percentage points almost overnight; among the poorest fifth of girls, it went from 46 percent to 82 percent.¹³
- When the government of Bangladesh introduced cash stipends for female pupils, girls' enrolments in areas covered by the stipend programme rose to double the national average.¹⁴
- In India, girls living in villages where schools offer a free meal are 30% more likely to complete primary education than other girls.¹⁵
- A few years ago, AIDS was causing a mass exodus from Lesotho's schools. But in some schools, free education combined with school feeding is bringing orphans back in droves.¹⁶

Measures to eradicate the educational disadvantage facing poor girls cannot stop at the door of primary school, however. To learn and acquire real skills, girls need reasonable class sizes, adequate hours of instruction, adequate supplies of learning materials that are gender-sensitive, and probably most important, better trained and supported teachers – including more female teachers.¹⁷ They need to be freed from the threat of sexual harassment and abuse, and from gender-biased assumptions of what and how children should learn. They need equitable opportunities to advance up the educational ladder, to secondary and even tertiary level. Schools need to support girls to acquire knowledge and skills that society generally denies to women: whether this means maths and science, or sexual and reproductive health instruction and life skills programmes to build self-confidence and negotiating skills.

Making it happen NOW

The country success stories cited above, along with a few other shining examples, prove that the 2005 girls' education target was neither unrealistic nor unaffordable. Rather, it has not been met because both the international community and national governments have given insufficient political attention and woefully inadequate money to meet it.

Most countries that have abolished fees and opened the doors of learning to all are spending 20% or more of their budgets on education. Since Kenya's introduction of free primary education in 2003, for example, education spending has gone up to 40% of the government budget.¹⁸ However, despite longstanding commitments to increase education spending to 6% of GDP, countries in Africa and South and West Asia countries still devote an average of less than 3.5% of GDP to spending on all levels of education.¹⁹ Primary education receives less of their GDP, on average, than military spending. And over 100 countries still levy fees and charges of various kinds for primary education.²⁰ Very few countries have a comprehensive national scheme of cash stipends, free school meals or other incentives to support attendance by girls and the poorest pupils.

Even if all developing countries substantially increased their own education investments, they would still need additional support from rich countries in order to achieve the MDGs. Rich countries recognised this when they pledged in 2000 that 'no country seriously committed to education for all will be allowed to fail for lack of resources.' Fine words, but despite the huge wealth amassed in the world since 2000, rich countries have directed very small amounts to the hidden emergency of girls out of school. Donor countries give only a fifth of the aid that would be needed to achieve universal primary education by 2015. Total G8 aid to basic education amounts to about half the cost of one Stealth bomber.

In 2001 the Education for All Fast Track Initiative (FTI) was established with G8 and EU backing to accelerate aid to countries that measure up to tough criteria for good policies on the education goals. It should be the international driving force behind a massive and coordinated expansion of girls' education throughout the developing world. But the FTI is failing, because the donor community has pledged only paltry sums of money:

- Yemen would like to build more schools in rural areas and expand a programme of stipends that has proven very successful in attracting poor girls to school. However - despite receiving FTI endorsement, the donor equivalent of an education 'AAA' rating - it is still short of some \$96 million per year to go ahead with its plans.
- Mauritania, whose spectacular track record on increasing girls' enrolment was mentioned above, needs almost twice as much aid as it is currently getting to implement the education plans that FTI donors have approved.
- Lack of donor financing limits the FTI to partnerships with only 13 countries, but there are many more countries that urgently need more resources in order to sustain and expand progress. For example, by abolishing fees Kenya has already brought 1.5 million more children, most of them girls, into school; but class sizes have risen to over 100 in urban areas, and the government has not been able to increase teacher numbers since 1998.²¹

Conclusion and recommendations

This day and every day, over 50 million girls under the age of 15 will labour in the harshest and most hazardous conditions, instead of going to school.²² This day and every day, over 2700 children under the age of five will die needlessly because their mothers were denied an education earlier in life. Nearly 200 more young people will become infected with HIV/AIDS, who would have stayed safe if they had gotten a primary school education. This day, and every day that goes by without concerted action to achieve the 2005 and 2015 education goals, 60 million girls will be denied the chance to open their minds and change their future through learning.

Girls cannot wait any longer. GCE calls on governments and the international community to agree a new action plan to ensure full completion of primary school by every girl and boy, with gender equality in learning achievements, by 2015:

1. By the end of 2005, cancel the unpayable debt of poor countries, and increase donor aid to basic education to US\$7bn per year. Expand the Fast Track Initiative to provide full, predictable and long-term funding by the end of 2005 to at least 30 countries that are ready to accelerate progress on girls' education. Establish a timetable and resource mobilisation plan to expand the FTI to all remaining low-income countries with good plans.
2. By the end of 2005, take immediate and effective measures to eradicate the worst forms of child labour, as governments promised when they ratified ILO Convention 182 in 1999.
3. By 2006, increase government spending on basic education to at least 3% of GDP.
4. By 2006, abolish fees and charges for primary education, and make education free and compulsory for at least 6 years. Establish a time-bound plan for the progressive expansion of free and compulsory education to at least 9 years.
5. By 2007, introduce comprehensive national programmes to provide extra support (such as cash transfers conditional on school attendance, or free school meals) to the poorest families to help compensate for the opportunity cost of sending children to school.

Guarantee adult learning opportunities for every illiterate woman, since mothers' literacy helps to support girls' enrolment and achievements in school.

6. By 2008, ensure that every girl has access to a safe and welcoming place to learn, for example building more schools closer to communities, providing private and secure latrines, ensuring every school has female teachers, including gender training modules in teacher training, and acting decisively to stamp out violence against girl pupils.
7. While working hard to expand access and completion, ensure that progress is also made towards gender equality in and through education. Introduce gender-disaggregated monitoring of learning achievements and outcomes. Promote respect for a range of learning styles. Integrate life skills education and sexual and reproductive health information into the curriculum. Improve women's participation in education decision-making and ensure female teachers enjoy equal conditions of service and career development opportunities.

These steps, taken together, would transform the lives and futures of tens of millions of women in the next ten years. But they will not happen unless groups working on gender and groups working on development and education issues form a new alliance to push governments to act. At grassroots level we must work together to ensure that fees are not charged, parents' anxieties are allayed, and all children are treated well. We must advocate multi-sectoral approaches, and demand clear remedies when barriers outside the school system prevent educated women from fully translating their skills and qualifications into a better life. At all levels, we must work together for the MDG gender goal, understood not simply as a means to gender parity in education, but as part of a fuller pursuit of gender equality and human rights in all sectors – health, politics, economics and culture.

Education is a critical asset for women and a fundamental human right for all. The silent emergency that has denied so many children, the majority of them girls, this right, is a scandal that can and must be ended by the actions of all of us during 2005.

End Notes

- ¹ D. Abu-Ghaida and S. Klasen, 'The Economic and Human Development Costs of Missing the Millennium Development Goal on Gender Equity', World Bank Discussion Paper 29710 (Washington: World Bank, 2004).
- ² GCE, *Learning to Survive: How education for all would save millions of young people from HIV/AIDS* (London: GCE, 2004).
- ³ G. Psacharopoulos and H. Patrinos, 'Returns to Investment in Education: A further update', World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 2881 (Washington: World Bank, 2002); Abu-Ghaida and Klasen, 'Economic and Human Development Costs'.
- ⁴ L. Smith and L. Haddad, 'Explaining Child Malnutrition in Developing Countries,' International Food Policy Research Institute Research Report No. 111 (Washington DC: International Food Policy Research Institute).
- ⁵ B. Herz and G. Sperling, *What Works in Girls' Education* (Washington: Council on Foreign Relations, 2004).
- ⁶ UNESCO, *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2003/4* (Paris: UNESCO, 2004), p. 18.
- ⁷ B. Bruns et al., *A Chance for Every Child: Achieving universal primary education by 2015* (Washington, World Bank, 2003), p. 5.
- ⁸ UNESCO, *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2003/4*, Table 2.9, p. 50.
- ⁹ GCE, *A Fair Chance: Attaining gender equality in basic education by 2005* (London: GCE, 2003), p. 17.
- ¹⁰ GCE, *A Fair Chance*, p. 23.
- ¹¹ UNESCO, *EFA Global Monitoring Report*, p. 127, 166.
- ¹² On the prevalence of early marriage and child labour as barriers to girls' education, see UNESCO, *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2003/4*, pp 120-124. On the role of compulsory education laws in fighting these practices, see K. Tomasevski, *Education Denied: Costs and remedies* (London: Zed Books, 2003); and GCE, *Fair Chance*.
- ¹³ K. Deininger, 'Does Cost of Schooling Affect Enrollment by the Poor? Universal primary education in Uganda', *Economics of Education Review* 22(3): 291-305, 2003.
- ¹⁴ World Bank, 'Pioneering Support for Girls' Secondary Education: The Bangladesh Female Secondary School Assistance Project' (Washington: World Bank, 2001).
- ¹⁵ J. Dreze and G. Kingdon, 'School Participation in Rural India', Development Economics Discussion Paper No 18, London School of Economics, 1999.
- ¹⁶ GCE, *Learning to Survive*, p. 16.
- ¹⁷ Across the developing world, less than one-quarter of primary teachers are women (GCE, *Fair Chance*, p. 26). "Girls' enrolments rise relative to boys' as the proportion of female teachers rises from low levels," says UNESCO, *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2003/4*, p. 60. Although the direction of causality is hard to determine, there is "strong suggestive evidence" that more female teachers will encourage more girls into schools.
- ¹⁸ First Joint Review Mission of Kenya Free Primary Education Achievements and Kenya Education Sector Support Program Design, 'Aide Memoire', Sept. 16 – Oct 1 2004 (processed).
- ¹⁹ UNESCO, *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005*, Table 14, p. 368.
- ²⁰ UNESCO, *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2003/4*, Table 3.3, p. 136.
- ²¹ First Joint Review Mission of Kenya Free Primary Education, 'Aide Memoire'.
- ²² ILO figures for 2000 estimate 111 million children aged 5-14 in hazardous work; no gender breakdown is provided, but it is reasonable to assume at least 45% of these to be girls.