

14. Education

The universal right to education is such a crucial one that if it were fulfilled it would go a significant way towards reducing many of the other problems highlighted in this report. Not only does it bring learning, self-confidence, earning power, a sense of personal potential, social and negotiation skills but, education is the key to alleviating poverty and bringing about sustainable development. It improves health, and helps young people to protect themselves from AIDS, exploitation and child labour. It is probably the single most pressing development issue.

This is why governments have made so many declarations about it. In 1990 at the World Conference on Education for All at Jomtien in Thailand, 155 governments promised education for all by 2000. At the 1995 UN World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, governments and international organisations committed themselves to removing discrimination against girls in education by 2005, and to make primary education universal by 2015. The Millennium Development Goals of 2000 promised that as many girls as boys would be in education by 2015, and reaffirmed the goal of universal primary education by 2015.

But promises made at world conferences do not always materialise. On current trends, girls' enrolment will not catch up with boys until 2025, and all African boys and girls will not be in school until 2100¹. The most frequently cited figures for the number of children out of school are between 100 and 120 million worldwide. But this refers only to children of primary school age. There are probably another 100 to 150 million adolescents aged 12 to 14 not in school. And that's not counting the further 50 to 150 million who are enrolled in school but are attending fewer than half of their classes, and the additional 50 to 150 million who may be sitting at their desks but are not learning enough, so are not really getting an education. This means a potential 300 million to 500 million children who are not being educated².

It is particularly concerning that so many girls are not in school – about 65 million girls worldwide, which is as many as all of the school age girls in North America and Europe³. Globally, young women are more than 60 per cent likely to be illiterate than young men⁴. There are many reasons for this imbalance, most of them connected to the social position of girls. When it comes to allocation of resources, boys come first. The factor that stops most parents from sending their children to school is money. If family budgets do not permit all of the children to go to school, it is the girls who will stay at home. The heavy domestic workload of girls means that even if they do go to school their studies may be interrupted; but many are kept at home to help out.

Collecting water, for example, can take up a large proportion of the day and it is a task done by girls across Africa and Asia. In Tanzania, a project which brought water to within 15 minutes' walk rather than an hour, as previously, resulted in an increase of 12 per cent in school enrolment⁵.

Taklitin Walet Farati, a non-governmental organisation fieldworker in Mali who tries to persuade girls' parents to let them go to school, told Oxfam that the opportunity costs are a significant barrier to girls' education. "I'd go and check why girls weren't attending school, to be told by their mothers, 'We can't let our daughters go to school. We need them in the home. They are our hands and feet!'"⁶

Pregnancy and early marriage prevent adolescent girls from continuing with school. If there is a long journey to school, parents may be reluctant to allow daughters to attend because of the risks to their safety. And although physical violence such as bullying affects both boys and girls, for girls there is the added risk of

sexual abuse. A survey in Malawi, Ghana and Zimbabwe found that sexual aggression against girls at school was going unpunished, and a study in Ecuador found that 22 per cent of girls experienced sexual abuse in an educational setting⁷. A lack of female teachers can make girls feel less secure at school. The majority of children who lack birth certificates are girls, and this can prevent access to schools or to examinations⁸.

Yet the price to pay for girls not being educated is huge. Babies born to mothers who do not have formal education are twice as likely to die from malnutrition or to not reach their fifth birthdays, than babies born to mothers who finished primary school. Even if mothers have only two years of formal education, it cuts child deaths by 15 per cent⁹. Educated mothers know that children can be protected from avoidable illnesses with regular check-ups, immunisations and a good diet.

“There is no tool for development more effective than the education of girls,” said Kofi Annan¹⁰. Education is not only vital to prevent child mortality, but is also one of the most effective weapons in the fight against the spread of HIV. If every child completed primary school, 700,000 new cases of HIV in young adults could be prevented each year (about 30 per cent of all new infections in this age group). This would add up to seven million fewer infections over the next decade.

Literate women are three times more likely than illiterate women to know that a healthy looking person can have HIV, and four times more likely to know the main ways to avoid contracting HIV¹¹. In 17 countries in Africa and four in Latin America, better educated girls are more likely to delay having sex, and to use a condom. Given that young women in Africa are five times as vulnerable to contracting HIV as young men are, education quite literally saves lives¹².

Boys and girls are more likely to drop out of school if what they are being taught is not relevant to their lives. As well as literacy and numeracy they need life skills and information: on rights, health, gender equality, nutrition, HIV, and peace. School materials currently tend to reinforce gender stereotypes, with women, if present at all, portrayed in traditional roles¹³.

Economically, education has obvious benefits. It has been estimated that raising the average education of the labour force by one year increases overall Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by nine per cent, and increases individual farmers’ productivity by three to 14 per cent¹⁴. As well as offering a better economic future, education can protect children from the economic exploitation while they are still young. Being in school is one of the best protections from being trafficked into exploitation, and being a child labourer. A study by the International Labour Organisation into child domestic service found that children regularly cited lack of access to education as a ‘push’ factor¹⁵.

Yet despite the close link between the goals of universal education and elimination of child labour, many countries fail to synchronise the school leaving age and the minimum age of employment; in 36 countries the minimum age for employment is lower than the age for compulsory education¹⁶.

In order to get all children into school, it needs to be free. This is an obligation under Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which says that primary education needs to be compulsory and free for all, and that secondary education should be ‘available and accessible’ to all. But in at least 101 countries, fees are charged for primary schooling¹⁷. And in 25 countries there is no compulsory age for children to be in school¹⁸.

In order to meet the Millennium Development Goals, governments need to stop talking and start doing. Education

needs to be free, and the poorest families need to be compensated for allowing girls to school because the opportunity costs are so high for them. Schools need to be near communities or girls will lose out, and their condition needs to be improved in rural and slum areas, with motivated and trained teachers, the safety and dignity of pupils guaranteed, and functioning systems of sanction against sexual harassment and abuse.



Michelle Gilbert

There are a few positive examples of what can be achieved with some political will and an increased education budget. Over the past decade, Bangladesh has raised the proportion of girls in school from 13 per cent to 56 per cent. It did this by making primary education compulsory, abolishing fees for girls in rural areas, and increasing government spending on primary education¹⁹.

On the international scale, the Global Campaign for Education was founded in 1999. Teachers and non-government organisations in 150 countries are working together to demand free primary education, more government spending on all levels of education, investment in disadvantaged areas, an increase in aid and debt relief from the north, and for civil society to hold governments and international institutions to account.



Liba Taylor

Plan's response

In Rajasthan in India, Plan supports non-residential education camps for adolescent girls who have not been to school, to provide intensive education and try to change the community's attitudes to educating girls.

Pushpa, a teenage girl narrating a film made by children about one of these camps, says: "One of the main reasons why most parents don't educate their daughters is the practice of child marriage in the area. I got married four years ago. I will go to my husband's house when I attain puberty. There are a lot of girls in this camp who are married."²⁰

Girls attend for six or seven months, and achieve up to fifth grade. There was an overwhelming response to the first camp when it opened in October 2002, with enrolments going over the planned target on just the first day. As well as following the basic curriculum, sessions on disease and reproductive health are taught. Teachers and committee members visit parents to try to persuade them to enrol their other children in the camp. "I am now educated. No one can take advantage of me," said one pupil²¹.

Plan runs a similar camp for boys who are too old to go to regular primary school but who have not yet had any education.

"I was not sent to school because I was the eldest child and had to look after my brothers and sisters. I was 10 years old when my mother died. I got married when I was 14. In my husband's house everyone is educated. I really felt out of place. I would wish that I too were educated, that I too could read letters and newspaper. I became a mother at an early age. I was really ashamed of the fact that I was unlettered... [Now] I will not stay behind in any field. I can now do anything." Bhanwari, who learnt to read at a Plan education camp for adolescent girls who had not been to school²².

Plan has been supporting basic education programs for several decades. It is currently working on education in 45 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean with a wide range of interventions in secondary education as well as early childhood care and development, formal and non-formal primary education.

Plan also works towards the goal of universal birth registration. In some countries, such as Cameroon, Sudan and Burkina Faso, a birth certificate is required in order to enrol in school²³. Even in countries where a birth certificate is not required to enrol in school, it may be needed later on when children take national examinations, such as in Sri Lanka, or when enrolling in university, such as in Tanzania²⁴.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 28

1. States Parties recognise the right of the child to education and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular

- (a) Make primary education compulsory and available free to all
- (b) Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child, and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need
- (c) Make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means
- (d) Make educational and vocational information and guidance available and accessible to all children
- (e) Take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates