



Impact of 12 Years of Quality Education on Girls

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Introduction

A growing number of experts argue that girls education “is the world’s best investment with the widest-ranging returns.”¹ There are a variety of economic, social, and political benefits from investing in girls education, including reducing poverty, reducing rates of HIV/AIDS, and empowering women.² Considering these advantages, it is encouraging to note that more girls are educated today than ever before.³ Around the world, nine-in-ten girls complete their primary education (although this is less than two-thirds of girls in low-income countries).⁴ But is this progress enough? Despite the high rate of primary school enrollment, globally only three-in-four girls complete their lower secondary education, and only one-in-three in low-income countries.⁵ *In Missed Opportunities: The High Cost of Not Educating Girls*, scholars argue that primary school is necessary but not sufficient:

“For many indicators, having a primary education does not make a large difference versus having no education at all. The gains associated with educational attainment tend to be substantial only with a secondary education. This is likely in part a reflection of the failure of schools to deliver learning of basic skills in the early grades, thus hindering the progression of girls to higher educational attainment. But the implication is that while primary schooling lays the foundation for future learning, it is essential to enable girls to pursue their education through the secondary level and to ensure that learning occurs in order to reap the benefits from more education.”⁶

¹ Sperling & Winthrop, 2015, p. 4

² Sperling & Winthrop, 2015, p. 4

³ Kattan & Khan, 2022

⁴ Wodon et al., 2018, p. 2

⁵ Wodon et al., 2018, p. 2

⁶ Wodon et al., 2018, p. 3

In light of this perspective, this paper addresses in detail the significance, challenges, and productive impacts of 12 years of quality and safe education on girls.

Why 12 Years?

In the words of United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan: “*When women thrive, all of society benefits.*”⁷ And this proves statistically true when we talk about 12 years of quality education and its massive, transformative impact on generations. These benefits are not just limited to girls themselves but to their families and communities. Let's have a look at some facts and figures deciphering the impact of 12 years of education on girls.

Higher Income and Quality of Life

The contribution of women and girls to the economy stimulates an innumerable and wide range of benefits to society. The loss in human capital due to lower earnings because many adult women did not benefit from 12 years of schooling is a whopping \$15 to \$30 trillion.⁸ Women with primary education earn 14 to 19% more than women with no education at all, but those with secondary education earn almost twice as much.⁹ Higher wages help secure a better future for women and their dependents. It also determines the quality of life and a healthy family structure for a woman by impacting the outcomes like age of getting married, access to education and other resources, whether their children grow up in households with two parents, and even how long they will live.

Health and Wellbeing

Education is key to a healthy physical and mental lifestyle for women. It paves the way to knowledge and understanding of themselves and their surroundings. Secondary education is essential to reducing malnutrition. When women in low and lower middle-income countries finish secondary school, the number of stunted children, those who are too short for their age, is reduced by 26%.¹⁰ Research shows that higher levels of education contribute to declining rates of contraction of several diseases including sexually transmitted ones and unplanned pregnancies.

⁷ Annan, 2003

⁸ Wodon et al., 2018, p. 8

⁹ Malala Fund, 2018

¹⁰ UNESCO, 2014, p. 167

For instance, around 70% of new HIV cases worldwide are recorded in sub-Saharan Africa, where women ages 15-24 have HIV rates higher than their male peers.¹¹ Thankfully, education plays a powerful role in the fight against HIV and AIDS. In Botswana, every additional year of secondary schooling has been shown to reduce the risk of HIV infection by 11.6% among girls.¹² Studies also suggest that women with greater influence in decision-making are more likely to have safer sex negotiation that determines multiple health outcomes in their life.¹³

Fertility and Population Growth

The health and wellbeing of a woman are directly related to how informed and learned she is about the consequences of practicing certain ideas and traditions. Therefore, education that conforms to the standards of quality clearly determines the fertility rates in society. It has been observed that “women who are given primary education and especially women who are given secondary education have a lower total fertility rate than women who have not received any formal schooling.”¹⁴ Educated women are less likely to get married early and thus get higher control over their fertility. For instance, the likelihood of a girl marrying as a child is six percentage points less for every additional year she stays in secondary education.¹⁵ Universal secondary education would almost eliminate child marriage, which is considered one of the leading causes of the uncontrolled birth rate.¹⁶

In addition, maternal education may contribute to reducing maternal and infant mortality. A study by the World Health Organization found that women with no education had 2.7 times and those with between one and six years of education had twice the risk of maternal mortality as women with more than 12 years of education.¹⁷

Social Impact: Agency and Decision-Making

Marriage, fertility, access to education, careers, and ownership of property are some of the biggest issues that concern and shape a woman’s life by and large. However, there is a huge

¹¹ Kharsany & Karim, 2016, p. 35

¹² De Neve et al., 2015, p. e470

¹³ Seidu et al., 2021, p. 1

¹⁴ Cornett, 2020, p. 2

¹⁵ Wodon et al., 2018, p. 4

¹⁶ Cornett, 2022, p. 2

¹⁷ Karlsen et al., 2011, p. 1

gender gap between women's access to decision-making and leadership roles in sub-Saharan Africa. The only way to battle this stigma is quality and informed education. The visibility of young girls and women in policy and decision-making bodies across the region as well as within their households is directly impacted by their resourcefulness and education. Women “with secondary education make better health care decisions for themselves and their families and are more likely to engage in their communities, identifying needed improvements to public services and institutions.”¹⁸

Climate Change

According to UNESCO, the percentage of people concerned about the environment increases with education, from 25% in countries with primary education only to 37% in countries providing secondary education.¹⁹ This translates into positive environmental action, such as using energy and water more efficiently and recycling household waste. Furthermore, secondary education is considered one of the most cost-efficient climate change solutions. It reduces carbon emissions and promotes environmental sustainability. It is estimated that together with family planning, girls’ education has the potential of avoiding nearly 85 gigatons of carbon emissions by 2050.²⁰ Furthermore, by fostering girls’ leadership skills, secondary education can also advance their pro-environmental decision-making.²¹

Why Quality and Safe?

Girls education goes deeper than simply putting girls in school for 12 years. Girls and boys around the world are facing a learning crisis, even those enrolled in school. UNESCO estimates that “six out of ten children and adolescents are not achieving minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics.”²² The statistics highlight large regional discrepancies. For instance, “one out of five (21%) children and adolescents of primary and lower secondary school age lives in sub-Saharan Africa...yet the region is home to one out of three (33%) of all children and adolescents unable to read proficiently.”²³

¹⁸ Malala Fund, 2018

¹⁹ UNESCO, 2013, p. 22

²⁰ Kwauk, 2021

²¹ Kwauk, 2021

²² UNESCO, 2017, p. 2

²³ UNESCO, 2017, p. 5

How does gender play a role? Notwithstanding the growing number of girls attending school worldwide, there are still gender gaps between boys and girls at both the primary and secondary levels. A survey of 27,000 marginalized girls across twelve countries showed that “literacy levels for fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds were equivalent to the expected reading proficiency levels for seven year-olds. Additionally, nine to eleven-year-old girls’ average reading proficiency levels are below the expected levels for seven-year-olds, and they are about three years of schooling behind international norms.”²⁴ This information highlights the need not only for girls to receive an education, but a quality and safe education.

What is Quality and Safe Education?

Girls Education Collaborative (GEC) defines **Quality and Safe Education** as:

an educational approach that helps children reach their full academic and communal potential, following inclusivity, eliminating the fear of harassment, judgment, or discrimination along with providing a healthy, resourceful environment considering gender-specific needs.

Contributing Factors

A study of senior secondary schools in Ghana revealed that the main factors affecting the standard of female education include “distance of students’ home from school, residential status, parents’ attitude/concern towards female students, parents’ level of education, parents occupation status, poverty, lack of qualified teachers, lack of scholarship for female students, and lack of parental care and the activities of the girl-child education in the district.”²⁵

EGER’s Girls Education Roadmap outlines the most effective interventions that work to improve school enrollment and enhance educational attainment for girls:

- Addressing the cost of schooling (e.g. through conditional cash transfers, scholarships, provision of school materials/uniforms)²⁶

²⁴ Coffey International Development, 2015 as cited in Sperling & Winthrop, 2015, p. 77

²⁵ Adetunde & Akensina, 2008, p. 341

²⁶ Psaki et al., 2021, p. 10

- Improving access to school (e.g. through construction, community schools, transportation, access to remote learning)²⁷
- Providing proper sanitation facilities in schools, especially sex-specific toilets²⁸
- Providing food in school or as take-home rations²⁹
- Improving pedagogy (i.e. structured pedagogy and competency grouping)³⁰
- Remedial education or tutoring for girls who are falling behind in school³¹
- Improving school governance/accountability³²
- Ongoing teacher training or coaching³³
- Teacher contracts³⁴

As one can see, a multi-pronged approach is necessary to ensure a quality education for girls.

Conclusion

In the words of the youngest Nobel Laureate and the brightest face of education activist Malala Yousufzai:

“The world can no longer accept that a basic education is enough. Why do leaders accept that for children in developing countries, only basic literacy is sufficient, when their own children do homework in algebra, mathematics, science, and physics?”³⁵

This statement summarizes the idea of Quality and Safe Education for Girls. We need to accept the fact that providing basic education isn't enough as our girls aim for higher ambitions in life. Education should enlighten women with a stronger sense of agency, make them objective-driven, give them the right to choose, to say NO, and to grow themselves as an individual. Inclusive and equitable education that makes a girl feel secure and encouraged is what we are aiming to achieve. We are not only hoping to increase enrollment rates with such an education, but also create lifelong opportunities, chances for development and growth, and a legacy to pass down to

²⁷ Psaki et al., 2021, p. 10

²⁸ Psaki et al., 2021, p. 10

²⁹ Psaki et al., 2021, p. 10

³⁰ Psaki et al., 2021, p. 11

³¹ Psaki et al., 2021, p. 11

³² Psaki et al., 2021, p. 11

³³ Psaki et al., 2021, p. 11

³⁴ Psaki et al., 2021, p. 11

³⁵ Yousufzai, 2014

future generations of girls. And if the provision of 12 years of quality and safe education can be a reality for girls everywhere, there is no doubt this world will be a secure, stronger, and sustainable place to live in.

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