



**Importance of education for the creation of an enabling environment for gender equality  
and women's enhanced participation in development**

*Panel discussion during the Fiftieth Session of the Commission on the Status of Women on the  
theme "Enhancing participation of women in development: an enabling environment for  
achieving gender equality and the advancement of women, taking into account, inter alia, the  
fields of education, health and work"*

*28<sup>th</sup> February 2006, United Nations Headquarters, New York*

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## **Introduction**

Everybody has a right to education. This right has long been established by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).

From this rights-based perspective, it is argued that education has an intrinsic human value. It has the ability to add meaning and value to everyone's lives. It is also an indispensable means to unlocking and protecting other human rights such as the right to good health, liberty, security, economic well-being and participation in social and political activities. It is further argued that where the right to education is guaranteed, people's access to other rights is enhanced, thereby lessening imbalances in life chances.

From the human capabilities perspective, Amartya Sen argues that "development occurs when people are able to achieve what make their lives valuable" (Sen 1991). According to this argument, the objective of development should be to promote and expand the freedom that people love to enjoy as "valuable beings and doings" including such things as being free from illness, well nourished, able to read and write, having self-respect and enjoying relationships and work that matter.

The human capabilities perspective puts people at the heart of development; not income or

Those who advance the human capital theory argue that investment in human capital will accelerate economic growth and point to other types of benefits. They also noted that human capital is more than investment in education; it also embodies health, nutrition, fertility, mortality and the general welfare of the people.

The effects of education on economic growth, mortality, fertility, nutrition and health have also been observed and widely attested to.

According to Schultz (1989) and Smock (1981) access to education also increases parents urge to improve their economic and social standing in life as well as cultivate a positive attitude and image of themselves and overall development.

### ***Gender inequality in education***

Despite the fact that education is a fundamental right for all and also important in creating the enabling environment for participation in development, gender inequality exists and persists in education. Women are more likely to be illiterate than men, and girls are less likely to access schooling than boys.

Gender equality, including in education, is now viewed as a condition for development. As such there is growing awareness at the national and international levels of the need to take action to promote gender equality. Men and women are the two most valuable assets of any country. It is now the realization that no country or nation can develop if it fails to develop and tap women's talent for full participation in community life, society and work. It is therefore no surprise that gender equality has been re-affirmed in many global conferences such as the Fourth World Conference for Women in Beijing (1995), the World Summit for Children in New York (1990), the World Conference on Education For All in Jomtiem (1990) and the World Education Forum in Dakar (2000).

At the national level, many education-based non-governmental organisations (NGO) have sprung up, with the aim of empowering women and girls through education. Notable among such NGOs are the Forum for African Women Educationist (FAWE), with Branches in over 30 African Countries, including Sierra Leone, and the International Federation of University Women (IFUW), again with a branch in Sierra Leone (without the Sierra Leone Chapter of the IFUW, I would not have attained higher education). Gender equality became one of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) based on the goals agreed by Heads of State at the United Nations Millennium Summit in New York in 2000 and one of the six Education For All goals in Dakar in 2000.

### ***Why educate women?***

Why educate women? What are the returns to educating women to women themselves, their families, communities and nations? Several studies have pointed to the differential impact of educating men and women. It has been generally found out that the returns to educating women is higher than those of men; hence the adage "if you educate a man, you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate the nation".

According to Kwesiga (2002) educating women constitutes a crucial escape route from the poverty traps that place the African continent at the tail end of access to essential resources of modern development.

Conclusions reached by studies looking at the contribution of education to economic growth from a gender perspective found that those countries with higher levels of women's education experience rapid economic growth, long life expectancy, lower population growth and improved quality of life. For example, according to the Human Development Report 2005, data for 2003 shows that Spain had a female adult literacy rate of 96.8%, life expectancy at birth of 79.5 years, an annual population growth rate of 0.4 %, total fertility rate of 1.4 children, and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita of US\$20,404. In contrast, Chad had a female adult literacy rate of 34%, life expectancy at birth of 43.6 years, an annual population growth rate of 2.8 %, total fertility rate of 6.7 children and GDP of US\$304. Figures for Sierra Leone are 20.5%, 40.8years, 2.5%, 6.5 and US\$149 respectively.

Education also increases women's participation in paid employment through their positions and type of employment held. Evidence abounds, both empirically and from mere observations, that in families where women hold highly paid jobs or responsible positions or are engaged in entrepreneurial activities, such women have contributed significantly and sometimes disproportionately to the building of family houses, paying of children's school fees and medical bills and looking after the general welfare of the family. In fact women are said to spend more of their income on family than men do.

In Africa, women constitute a larger proportion of smallholder farmers and almost a third of rural households are headed by women. African women's labour force participation has been estimated at 60%; that for food crop production at 80% and rearing of cattle at 50%. Farm productivity has been known to increase on average by 8.7% as a result of a farmer completing four years of elementary education. (Kwesiga, 2002). Like employment, it has been found that education of women has higher positive effects on agricultural productivity than that of men (Lockheed, 1987). For this reason many agricultural and community development projects are increasingly targeting women directly for improved household well-being and sustainable agriculture, through the provision of agricultural inputs and on-farm training.

Education is also important for women's access to the much needed extension services and credit/loans for agricultural and entrepreneurial purposes. The complex lending processes, especially of formal financial institutions, discourage uneducated women from seeking credit/loans.

The benefits on health and demography of a nation resulting from educating women have also been widely recorded. Women's education has been positively related to low maternal and child mortality, low fertility and good nutrition. A UNICEF study found that each additional year of maternal schooling reduced child mortality by 3.4%. Also mothers' education had a downward slope on the probability of children dying before age two in Latin America. In Nigeria, mothers with primary education experience 42% less child mortality than mothers without any formal education. Education also helps to delay age at marriage and increase age at first child birth,



For instance, Pakistan has adopted the a co-education policy for all primary schools as well as the requirements that all new primary schools should have ratios of 60% girls and 40% boys and proportions of 70% female teachers to 30% male. Where the number of female teachers is inadequate, age and qualification requirements for them have been relaxed. To attract and retain more women teachers in rural areas and under-served regions, special incentives, including monetary, have been used (EFA 2000 Assessment Report).

within a five-mile radius of most villages. As a result very young children cannot access school since they cannot withstand a long-distance journey to and from the nearest school, with an average distance of 3 miles. Girls may be particularly in danger and even risk sexual harassment and rape. Communities are addressing this problem by establishing feeder schools in their villages up to class 4 levels, by which time children are strong enough to withstand long-distance travel to access schooling.

In Sierra Leone, girls lag behind boys in terms of enrolment and performance. On a regional basis, girls from the Eastern and Northern Provinces lag behind their counterparts in the Western and Southern Provinces in terms of access to schooling. To correct both these gender and regional imbalances, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST) adopted the “Girl Child Support in Education” policy in 2003. The policy stipulates that for every girl child who passes the National Primary School Examination (NPSE) in the Eastern and Northern Provinces for three years will receive free school fees, core textbooks, pencils, pens, geometry set, two sets of uniform and one pair of games tunic to the total sum of Le300,000 (\$US120) per child. This is in addition to the payment of all public examination fees by the Government for all pupils, including girls, in national examination classes. This policy offers girls, who would otherwise drop out of school due to poverty, the unique opportunity to access and remain in school. Consequently, the gender and regional disparity in education is gradually narrowing.

Similarly, the Sierra Leone Chapter of the Forum for African Women Educationist (FAWE), concerned with the increased drop-out rate for girls due to pregnancy and poverty, has established technical vocational schools, with day-care centres, in almost .568i (Gires,) Tj 0 rvery gi

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In 1996, the government of Sierra Leone established the Ministry of Social Welfare and Gender and Children's Affairs (MSWGCA) as the national machinery responsible for the advancement of women. In 2000, Cabinet approved, and Parliament adopted, policies on "Advancement of Women" and "Gender Mainstreaming" developed by MSWGCA. However, limited resources, inadequate human capacity and a lack of authority render this ministry less effective.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

Despite all the above enumerated direct and indirect benefits which accrue from educating women, and the strategies adopted to address these imbalances, women and girls continue to enjoy less attention in development compared to men. For example, there are more illiterate women than men; there are more girls of school-going age not in school than boys; women form only 38% of the total labour force in Africa; they are less visited by agricultural extension workers; they access only 10% of credit earmarked for smallholders and only 1% of available agricultural credit; they still represent negligible numbers in money and finance fields, and are under-represented in science and technology. Their contribution in trade is not recorded in social accounts and they are virtually absent in better-paying sectors such as construction, transport, power and manufacturing fields. Several factors account for the low level of women and girls education, ranging from socio-cultural, economic, pedagogical, political, institutional and biological factors.

More effort and money needs to be injected into education in general, and for women and girls in particular, to redress gender imbalance in education. Education should be examined using a gendered lens. In this way, disparities in education can be identified and addressed.

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