

# EDUCATION POLICY AND GENDER ISSUES: A SUSTAINABILITY PERSPECTIVE

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## Summary

In the past, educating the boy child was a priority for many societies; however, today's leaders realize that educating girls strengthens our families, communities, societies, economies, and governments. The roots of male-female disparity in education are complex, and the causes change from society to society. Governmental policies, cultural traditions, familial expectations, and immediate economic pressures thwart the

education of girls and women at every level of education. Fortunately, gender inequity in education is amenable to change through public policy. Changes in governmental policy can dramatically increase educational opportunities for females of all ages.

Investment in education, especially for females, has been shown to have positive short- and long-term benefits for economies and societies. The connection between increased education of females and declining population growth has been well-documented. Education is one of the most effective as well as acceptable means of intervention available to decision-makers with regard to the population problem, which is perceived as a major threat to sustainability. Unfortunately, higher education levels are associated with increases in resource consumption, which also is perceived as a major threat to sustainability.

In many countries, the current level of basic education is low, severely hindering national short- and long-term plans for a sustainable future. Many countries are investing more in primary, secondary and adult literacy education. Many lessons have been learned from these efforts, especially in reducing barriers to education. Education gives the promise of a brighter, more prosperous world, in which people can contribute to the sustainability of their societies. It is with this realization that many governments are working to change educational policy and practices to enroll and retain females at all levels of education.

## **1. Introduction**

*“Once all the benefits are recognized, investments in the education of girls may well be the highest-return investment available in the developing world.”*

Lawrence H. Summers, Chief Economist of the World Bank

Educating females, especially female children, is one of the most important challenges of this decade. The benefits to families, societies, and economies are high and well understood; however, many barriers remain. In many societies, male children have traditionally received more educational opportunities than females at every level of education. Around the world, local school boards and national ministries of education are now attempting to enroll more female children and retain them in school from kindergarten through university. Although many barriers remain, great progress has been made in the last ten years toward enrolling females and enhancing their education opportunities. This article will: describe the exclusion of groups of children, especially girls, from education; examine the potential of policy change to ameliorate the problem; examine the benefits of educating girls and women; describe the link between education and sustainability; describe education for sustainability; identify common barriers to educating females; and describe the progressive measures that governments have used in recent years to enroll more girls in school.

## **2. Exclusion from Education**

*"Exclusion from education is part of an intricate web of human rights violations. It reflects a complex, progressive and sustained process of 'being excluded'."*

Anonymous

Exclusion from education touches all aspects of a child's life. Children who are excluded from education are probably also living in conditions of poverty, marginalization, geographic isolation, racial discrimination, or gender bias. These children often live with additional burdens of disease, disability, sexual exploitation, unfair labor, or involvement in military conflict. And so the web of human rights violations expands. The outcome is tragic; without access to relevant, good-quality education, children cannot acquire knowledge, skills, and self-confidence to act in their own behalf later in life to change the circumstances that excluded them in the first place.

Unfortunately, exclusion happens at all points within educational systems. Exclusion is expressed through: non-enrollment, passivity, absenteeism, failure, repetition, and dropping out. Exclusion is a process as well as an event. It is also part of a larger social, economic, and political context that excludes children and their parents from many aspects of life. Therefore, to remedy exclusion, policy changes cannot focus on schools alone. Exclusion can be countered by efforts of inclusion at all points that contribute to it.

## **2.1 Gender and exclusion from education**

Unfortunately, exclusion from education is a pervasive problem in cultures around the world, and exclusion affects females entering every level of education. In many countries, schools enroll a smaller percentage of girls than boys. Girls tend to stay in school for fewer years than boys, receive lower marks on standard assessments, progress to the next level of education in smaller numbers, and graduate less frequently than males. This disparity in access, achievement, attainment, and completion exists at every level of education from primary to university or professional education. The resulting gender gap demonstrates an evident disregard for the underlying causes of discrimination and disadvantage against women and girls.

The roots of such disparity in education are complex, and the causes change from society to society. Governmental policies, cultural traditions, familial expectations, and immediate economic pressures, for example, thwart the education of girls and women.

## **3. Policy**

Fortunately, educational issues, such as gender inequity, are amenable to change through public policy. Education policy can take many forms, including, but not limited to: mandating school attendance for all children, providing literacy programs for adults, building more or better schools, investing in libraries, funding public television and radio, and educating teachers at both the pre-service and inservice levels. In fact, investment in education has been shown to have positive short- and long-term benefits for the economy and society as a whole. Changes in policy can dramatically increase educational opportunities for females of all ages.

Creation of education policy occurs on many levels: international, national, regional, state/provincial, municipal, school district, and individual school levels. Each of these levels interprets and implements policies in many ways, resulting in either favorable or unfavorable outcomes. When evaluating national policies for gender equity or other

issues, the analysis should consider that more than one policy may be present in a political jurisdiction and that the policy of the central government may not be embraced by the majority of citizens. Conflict between policies or lack of acceptance by the public muddies the intent and hinders progress.

Governments basically use four methods for creating and implementing policy: legislation, special agencies, public education (to increase awareness and underlying understanding), and promotion of research. If a special agency is created, public education and research often are included within the agency's responsibilities. With complex crosscutting issues, such as sustainability and gender, governments must decide which ministries, departments, or agencies should be involved. In addition, they face the decision to write one overall policy or writing policy for each facet of the issue.

Of course, the success of policy is often based on the willingness of governments to provide funding for the policies they mandate. Policy with neither funding nor social acceptance will inevitably fail.

#### **4. History of International Conferences and Conventions related to Education**

To recognize the importance of education policy in sustainability, the public must also understand that educating females is critical to the well-being of families, communities, and economies. A number of international conferences and conventions have underscored the importance of educating women and the importance of education for sustainability.

The following international conventions have delineated people's rights regarding education:

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) contains Article 26: "(1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. (2) Education shall be directed towards the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace. (3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children."
- The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979) became an international treaty on September 3, 1981. Article 10 addresses the aims for education. Member states ensure that women have equal rights with men in the field of education. The eight aims are to:
  1. Provide the same conditions for career and vocational guidance with equal attention in rural and urban areas.

2. Provide access to the same curriculum, examinations, teaching staff, and qualifications standard; provide access to school premises and equipment of equal quality.
  3. Eliminate any stereotyped concept of the roles of men and women at all levels and in all forms of education by encouraging co-education and other types of education that will help to achieve this aim and, in particular, by revising textbooks, school programs, and teaching methods.
  4. Provide equal opportunities to benefit from scholarships and other study grants.
  5. Provide the same opportunities for access to programs of continuing education, including adult and functional literacy programs—particularly those aimed at reducing, at the earliest possible time, any gender gap in education.
  6. Reduce female drop-out rates and encourage the organization of programs for girls and women.
  7. Provide equal opportunities to participate in sports and physical education.
  8. Provide specific educational information to help ensure the health and well-being of families, including information and advice on family planning.
- The Convention on the Rights of the Child, formulated in 1989, claimed the right to a relevant and good-quality education for all children—girls and boys. Article 28 states that education is a right, which must be achieved on the basis of equal opportunity.

In the 1990s, a number of world conferences were sponsored by the United Nations, which expanded the understanding of sustainable development. Each conference advanced understanding of issues that cause much suffering and threaten global sustainability. Each conference also developed a series of goals, priorities, and action items. In each of the conferences education, public awareness, and understanding were mentioned as a component for progress.

- Perhaps, the conference that moved education forward the most was the World Conference on Education For All (WCEFA) held in Jontiem, Thailand, in 1990. The WCEFA Declaration and Framework for Action designed targets and objectives for education. The major targets were: (1) universal access to and completion of basic education by the year 2000, and (2) reduction of the adult illiteracy rate to one-half of its 1990 level by the year 2000 with sufficient emphasis on female literacy to significantly reduce the current disparity between male and female illiteracy rates.
- The World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) reasserted that no sustainable development on a national basis could occur unless all women were given an equal right to education.
- The World Education Forum held in Dakar, Senegal, also known as Education for All 2000 and Jontiem + 10, emphasized that education must enhance the potential of children and young people to respect themselves and others, participate in the decisions of society, live in peace and dignity, and earn a living.

The Jontiem Declaration and other UN declarations have concentrated on education for women for several reasons. From a human-rights perspective, girls comprise almost

two-thirds of the children excluded from a basic education. Educating girls means that, as women, they will be able to exercise their rights to participate in economic and political decision making in the household and the community. In addition, targeting girls' and women's education is a key strategy for increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of school systems. Not only do girls benefit from this strategy, but boys also benefit from the efforts that lead to higher female enrollment and achievement. From a development perspective, one of the most important and effective investments that any developing country can make is in education because education permeates and changes for the better not only personal lives, but also families, community, and society as well.

## **5. Education and Development**

In many countries, the current level of basic education is too low, severely hindering national plans for a sustainable future. In Latin America and the Caribbean, many countries have six to eight years of compulsory education with approximately five to 15 percent of the students repeating one or more years. In parts of Asia, especially Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India, many children only attend school for an average of five years. A complicating factor in this region is that many girls receive fewer years of schooling than boys to create that average. In parts of Africa where life is disturbed by drought or war, the average attendance in public education is measured in months not years. Unfortunately, the lowest quality of education is often found in the poorest regions or communities. The impact of little and/or poor-quality education severely limits the options available to communities and nations for developing short- and long-term sustainability plans.

Education directly affects sustainability plans in the following three areas:

- **Implementation.** An educated citizenry is vital to implementing informed and sustainable development. In fact, a national sustainability plan can be enhanced or limited by the level of education attained by the nation's citizens. Nations with high illiteracy rates and unskilled work forces have fewer development options. For the most part, these nations are forced to buy energy and manufactured goods on the international market with hard currency. To acquire hard currency, these countries need international trade; usually this leads to exploiting natural resources or converting lands from self-sufficient family-based farming to cash-crop agriculture. An educated work force is key to moving beyond an extractive and agricultural economy. As nations enter into global competition, it does not make sense to eliminate half of the nation's economic potential and workforce by not educating females. It is a strategic economic measure to educate all of the potential workforce and thereby be poised to use the human resource potential of both men and women.
- **Decision making.** Good community-based decisions—which will affect the social, economic, and environmental well-being—also depend on educated citizens. Development options, especially "greener" development options expand as education increases. For example, a community with an abundance of skilled labor and technically trained people can persuade a corporation to locate a new software development site nearby. Also citizens can act to protect their communities.

Citizens can analyze reports and data around community issues and help shape community response. For example, citizens that were concerned about water pollution reported in a nearby watershed, started monitoring the water quality of local streams. Based on their data and information found on the World Wide Web, they made recommendations against the development of a new golf-course, which would use much fertilizer and herbicide in maintenance of the grounds.

- **Quality of Life.** Education is also central to improving quality of life. Education raises the economic status of families; it improves life conditions, lowers infant mortality, and improves the educational attainment of the next generation, thereby raising the next generation's chances for economic and social well-being. Improved education holds both individual and national implications.

## 6. Gender and Education

According to past studies, countries that invest in the education of women do better in a variety of development indicators. In fact, educating girls is one of the wisest investments any developing country can make.

Education benefits a woman in life-altering ways. An educated woman gains higher status and an enhanced sense of efficacy. She tends to marry later and have greater bargaining power and success in the "marriage market." She also has greater bargaining power in the household after marriage. An educated woman tends to desire a smaller family size and seek the health care necessary to do so. She has fewer and healthier children. An educated woman has high educational and career expectations of her children, both boys and girls.

The following sections offer a closer look at the impact of the education of girls and women on the development process.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Rosalyn McKeown, Ph.D.**, recently retired as the Director of the Center for Geography and Environmental Education (CGEE) at the University of Tennessee. She is currently a high school geography and earth science teacher. Rosalyn's current research focuses on teacher education related to sustainability and on environmental literacy. Rosalyn has published over two dozen articles in scholarly journals and magazines. She has presented approximately 50 talks internationally related to her research. She was named outstanding environmental educator of the year by the Tennessee Environmental Education Association.

Rosalyn is Secretariat for the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chair on Reorienting Teacher Education to Address Sustainability. The Chair and associated International Network are looking at ways of creating locally relevant and culturally appropriate education that addresses issues inherent in sustainability through changes in program, practices, and policy.

Rosalyn has taught science teacher preparation courses for six years at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, the University of Tennessee, and York University. She earned a bachelor's degree in geography from the University of California, Los Angeles and Masters' and Doctoral degrees in geography from the University of Oregon.