

girls' education

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Improving gender equality in education in Mali

Although Mali has made impressive progress in getting more children into school, the gender gap is still wide. In pastoral communities in northern Mali less than a third of girls attend school. Local women are helping to raise girls' enrolments, but schools are failing to challenge assumptions about roles for women and girls.

Oxfam GB reports on the work of 'animatrices' – female community helpers – working against the discrimination that girls experience in the Gao region of north-east Mali. In this remote area of semi-desert many communities move regularly in search of pasture in a region plagued by droughts and locusts.

Oxfam has tried to work towards achieving gender equality and quality education by developing a flexible approach that aims to increase the number of girls who go to school and stay in school. It also ensures that they acquire relevant and long-term basic skills in mathematics, literacy, health and nutrition.

Animatrices are local women, most of whom have completed six years of primary education. They work with parents, telling them about the importance and value of schooling for both girls and boys. They monitor girls' attendance and work with teachers to ensure a safe and friendly school environment. When girls drop out of school, the animatrices talk with families to find out the reasons why and try to encourage the girls to return.

The programme has used a rights-based approach which has begun to transform beliefs about schooling for girls. However, the animatrice model has shortcomings:

- The women often have to put up with hostility from male school directors.
- Animatrices have had limited training in gender issues and some hold attitudes which reinforce gender inequalities.
- Their promotion of classrooms that are friendly for girls can lead to increased work loads for the girls: cleaning, fetching water, and washing dishes reinforce stereotypes of women's work.
- Targeting only women and girls with messages about hygiene and sanitation sends the wrong signal to men and boys.
- Animatrices are not sufficiently addressing questions about the quality or relevance of the education that girls are receiving.

Looking to the future, Oxfam suggests it is important to:

- continue working with teachers, parents, and policymakers to provide more schools and curricula that are safe and relevant for girls
- encourage animatrices to challenge pastoral male-dominated relations and those of wider Malian society
- tackle gender inequalities inside and outside the school and at both local and national levels
- learn more about why parents send girls to school in order to encourage more enrolments
- ensure that gender issues are introduced into national legal frameworks and reflected in decentralisation and education reforms.

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Lower school enrolment for Chinese girls

Although the Chinese government is committed in principle to equality between the sexes, more boys attend school in rural China than girls. School enrolment in China is far higher than in economically similar countries, in part because the first nine years of schooling are compulsory. Why, then, are fewer girls enrolled in school?

This study by the University of Nottingham and the University of Oxford explores gender inequalities in education in rural China. It looks at the different impacts of socio-economic factors such as household income on girls' and boys' schooling. In particular, it focuses on how the education of parents affects the gender gap in school enrolments and whether it has a stronger effect on the schooling of girls.

As female labour contributes significantly to developing economies, low female education is considered an obstacle to economic growth. It also has important

social costs: the education of girls contributes to reduced population growth and improves child health and general household investments in children.

Compared to other Asian countries, the gender gap in education in China is moderate and a relatively high number of women are employed. Yet despite the government's commitment to gender equality, in reality women and girls hold a lower status in society than men, especially in peasant households.

The research made the following findings:

- As the first nine years of schooling in China are compulsory, it is only after the age of 14 that the high enrolment rates begin to drop and the gender gap becomes evident.
- Discrimination in spending on education for girls also becomes evident from the age of 14.
- The gender gap in school enrolment is larger among poorer households.
- Household income has little effect on school enrolment except for a negative effect for girls aged 15 to 18 years.
- Maternal education and higher proportions of women in the household are related to higher school enrolment and household spending on education.

- It appears that maternal education increases spending on girls' education, whereas paternal education does not, while the reverse is true for boys aged 13 to 15 years.

The study also suggests there is evidence that the opportunity costs for schooling young women are considered greater than that for young men. Male education is associated with significantly higher household income. In contrast, there is no apparent return from female education.

If the gender gap in school enrolment is partly due to household economic considerations, then the government could address this gender inequality effectively by subsidising female education. For instance, schooling could be free for girls or they could be given bursaries.

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'Why Do Girls in Rural China Have Lower School Enrolment?' *World Development* Vol 34 (9), pages 1639-1653, by Lina Song, Simon Appleton and John Knight, 2006

Educating girls as a 'social vaccine' against HIV

The global AIDS epidemic is increasingly affecting women. In sub-Saharan Africa, which has been hit the hardest by the disease, 57 percent of those infected are women. Research has shown that in the early stages of the epidemic, highly educated women were more vulnerable to HIV infection than the less educated. Is this still the case?

HIV campaigns often fail to address the increased vulnerability of girls and women to infection as they do not take into account their relative lack of power to decide who they have sex with, when and how. One of the best methods for empowering girls and women to make these choices is to ensure they receive an education. However, research into whether education helps to empower girls and women to reduce HIV infection among them has had mixed results.

A study by ActionAid reviews all the evidence to date from research published between 1990 and 2006 on the impact of girls' education on sexual behaviour and HIV. It asks what difference primary and

secondary education makes to women's vulnerability to HIV.

The research found that:

- Prior to 1995, educated women were more vulnerable to HIV infection, probably as they had better economic prospects, influencing their mobility and number of sexual partners.
 - After 1995, highly educated girls and women were more likely to negotiate safer sex, thereby reducing their HIV infection risk.
 - Girls who had completed secondary school had a lower risk of HIV infection and practiced safer sex than those who had completed primary school only.
 - More educated adults had a positive influence on young women's use of condoms, while more education also empowered boys and men to practice safer sex, reducing HIV infection.
 - However, many children, especially girls, were excluded from education as most children in Africa had to pay primary school fees.
- The education of girls and women would be a large step towards turning around the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Africa. The study made a number of policy recommendations, including:
- HIV prevention campaigns must tackle gender and power dynamics in sexual relationships to help girls and boys

cope with peer pressure and negative stereotyping.

- The education system's response to HIV must be prioritised, with all schools giving sexual health education focusing on HIV and promoting the use of condoms.
- Schools must promote gender equality and challenge negative gender stereotyping. Sexual violence and sexual relations between teachers and girls must not be tolerated.
- Primary school fees must be abolished so that more girls can get an education. However, quality of education must not suffer.

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Modernising women's roles in Eritrea

Eritrea was born from a revolutionary struggle in which women played a prominent part. For Eritrea's leaders education is a weapon to fight 'backwardness' and promote 'modernity', a key element of which is gender equality. However, the ambitions of Eritrean secondary schoolgirls remain shaped by the state's expectations and by tradition.

An article from the University of Manchester looks at the personal experiences of young women in Eritrean secondary schools.

During the 30-year liberation struggle the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front (EPLF) provided education for girls and women for the first time in historically disadvantaged areas. The EPLF developed a new curriculum and created a group of skilled women to act as role models both inside the movement and within the general population. Now in power, the EPLF is trying to maintain the gender equality which existed within the liberation movement and transport it into wider Eritrean society via education.

Most teachers outwardly express support for the need to engage girls to build up their confidence. However, the majority of teachers at secondary level are male and share the perception that older girls will not have a future in education and are primarily interested in marriage. So, they ask themselves, why bother to help them?

Interviews with schoolgirls and observations of classes show:

- the strength of cultural expectations of female 'shyness'
 - widespread realisation that it will take generations before young women can find economic security through employment: it may therefore make more sense to seek a wealthy husband, preferably one with prospects of living abroad
 - few older schoolgirls ever raise their hands in response to teachers' questions and their voices are rarely heard in group participation
 - male students treat female classmates as less able academically
 - few schoolgirls protest, accepting stereotyping as inevitable
 - most girls dream of going to university, however unrealistic these hopes may be.
- Ambitions often lead to frustrations among young women in a political environment where the personal is expected to take second place behind the national interest.

To have ambition does not necessarily mean seeking a life beyond the traditional: it could equally well encompass striving for an arranged marriage to a wealthy husband, raising children and living comfortably – but there seems little room for such ambitions within the Eritrean revolution.

Education authorities need to realise that:

- there is no clear division between traditional 'backwardness' and 'modernity'
- getting married can be a rational choice when weighing the options for the future as it allows exemption from compulsory military service and escape from a future of poorly-paid civil service employment
- Eritrea has much to do to put theory into practice: there has been little progress in increasing the number of female secondary students, secondary teachers and university students.

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