

GIRLS'

EDUCATION,

EMPOWERMENT,

AND

**TRANSITIONS
TO ADULTHOOD**

THE CASE FOR A SHARED AGENDA

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1

Overview

Decades of empirical evidence and practical experience support the robust associations between women's educational attainment and positive development outcomes. It is now conventional wisdom in development discourse that where education levels are higher among women, fertility rates are lower, family size is smaller, and women's health and economic status are stronger.¹ There is even evidence to suggest that in settings where education is more gender equitable, economic growth is more robust.² What is less understood is how the education of girls and young women translates into positive development outcomes. We argue that it is the healthier, safer transition of adolescent girls to adulthood and their empowerment during this process that are, in fact, the linchpins between education and improved outcomes at the individual, community and societal levels.

Education is essential to prepare adolescent girls for healthy, safe and productive transitions to adulthood. However, adolescent girls in much of the developing world are underserved by the education sector – too many are not in school, or are not receiving a quality, relevant education in a safe and supportive environment. At the same time, programs that emphasize girls' healthy and productive transitions to adulthood are not adequately linking with the education sector. Despite the common goals held by sectors that serve adolescent girls –from education to reproductive health to economic development – their strategies are fragmented, and they do not reach girls at an adequate scale.

This paper makes a case for why leveraging education to facilitate girls' transitions to healthy, safe and productive adulthood is the single most important development investment that can be made. We provide guidance on how we can build on past progress, forge more productive alliances and redouble our efforts to ensure that all girls in the developing world have the opportunity to obtain a quality, relevant education. In order to do this, development practice must shift to accommodate and facilitate cross-sectoral collaboration for girls' healthy transitions to adulthood. With a shared vision, and coordinated strategies to achieve that vision, sectors ranging from education to health to economic development can contribute to a whole that is greater than the sum of their parts.

2

Why Adolescent Girls?

ADOLESCENT GIRLS ARE A LARGE AND IMPORTANT DEMOGRAPHIC IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD

Girls are a critical demographic for social change and global development, representing a large and underserved population in the developing world. People under the age of 25 make up 43 percent of the world population,³ and 60 percent of the population in the world's least developed countries.⁴ The current cohort of adolescent girls is the largest in human history, and the number is expected to peak over the next decade. Nevertheless, adolescent girls fall through the cracks of many development programs and services. Working with and for adolescent girls is increasingly recognized as a human rights and development imperative. According to a recent multi-country analysis, closing the gender gap during adolescence in education, economic activity, and health would significantly increase national economic growth and well-being.⁵

ADOLESCENCE IS A CRITICAL DEVELOPMENTAL PERIOD, AND IT IS OFTEN FRAUGHT WITH CHALLENGES FOR GIRLS

Adolescence is a critical developmental period for both boys and girls; yet, in many settings, girls face particular challenges during this period. While boys and girls are relatively equal in health and developmental outcomes during their early childhood, disadvantages mount for girls during adolescence.⁶ Girls experience a "density of transitions" during adolescence, in that biological and social changes tend to occur within a shorter period of time for girls than for boys.⁷ Girls reach puberty at a younger age than boys, which means that they face developmental and social challenges related to sexual maturation earlier in life. Girls have less access to sexual health information and are less likely than boys to use contraception. Girls are also more likely to marry and begin childbearing during adolescence: one-third of girls in the developing world are married before age 18, and one-third of women in the developing world give birth before age 20.⁸ Even if they are not married as adolescents, girls usually bear the burden of domestic responsibilities – often having to care for siblings, parents and extended family members, or spending significant amounts of their time on domestic chores.

Such conflating events curtail childhood and have direct consequences for girls' health, educational and economic opportunities. Early marriage is associated with social isolation, domestic violence, increased vulnerability to HIV and other

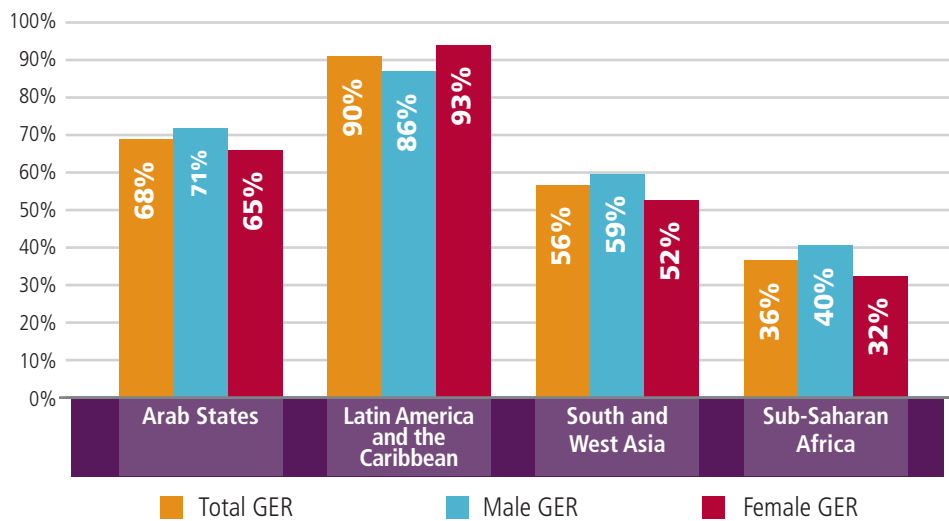
sexual health infections, and early pregnancy. Pregnancy is the leading cause of death for girls in developing countries ages 15 to 19.⁹ Whether they are married or not, girls are more likely to be socially isolated and excluded from educational or social opportunities.¹⁰ Girls have fewer economic opportunities in every region of the world except for East Asia, and there is a particularly wide gender gap in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia.¹¹ Girls are also more likely to suffer from violence – both within the home and in the community, including in school or en route to school. A recent nationwide study in Tanzania reported that 3 of every 10 Tanzanian females aged 13 to 24 had been victims of sexual violence; of these, almost 1 in 4 reported an incident occurred while travelling to or from school and 15 percent reported that at least one incident occurred at school or on school grounds.¹² A recent study among students in Bangladesh illustrated that 12 percent of girls rarely felt safe in school.¹³ Parents, too, may see school as dangerous, especially if the distance from home to school is great, and therefore see keeping girls at home as the best option for their protection.

ADOLESCENT GIRLS CONTINUE TO LAG BEHIND BOYS IN EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT IN MANY AREAS

Over the last three decades, there have been significant gains around the world in girls' enrollment in schools. Many regions and countries have reached gender parity in primary education. Globally, girls are now just over half of the out-of-school population (53 percent in 2009),¹⁴ compared to 57 percent at the beginning of the millennium.¹⁵ But as a consequence of some of the factors mentioned above, gender-based inequities do persist. Where overall enrollment rates are lower, gender gaps also tend to be higher. For example, in West and Central Africa, where overall enrollment figures are among the lowest in the world, the gender gap is also wide: the net primary enrollment ratio from 2003 to 2008 was 71 percent for boys, compared to 64 percent for girls.¹⁶

While parity in education at the primary level has increased significantly in most parts of the world, girls' participation rates decline at the secondary level in many regions. The share of girls in total secondary enrollment has increased from 43 percent to 48 percent since 1990, and in most countries, girls who have completed primary education are just as likely as boys to make the transition to secondary education.¹⁷ However, key regions in the developing world continue to experience gender disparities in secondary school enrollment. Figure 1 shows gross enrollment ratios (GER) at the secondary level in select regions in the developing world. In the Arab States, South and West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, the male GER is significantly higher than the female GER. Total enrollment in secondary school in Sub-Saharan

FIGURE 1: Regional Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) at the Secondary Level



Source: UNESCO Global Education Digest, 2011

Africa has grown nine-fold since 1970, but overall levels of participation in secondary school are the lowest in the world, and the gender disparities are the widest.¹⁸ Latin America and the Caribbean stand out for having a gender gap that favors girls over boys.

The gendered patterns of secondary school completion are mixed: in some countries and regions, girls complete at similar or higher rates than boys, and in other countries and regions, boys complete at similar or higher rates than girls.¹⁹ However, girls are more likely than boys to drop out. In most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, boys are more likely than girls to graduate from lower secondary school.²⁰

Gender interacts with other factors, such as household wealth and geographic location, to affect educational attainment. The gender gap in educational access is much wider between girls and boys from the poorest households, as compared to girls and boys from the richest households. There is also a wider gap between girls and boys in rural areas, as compared to urban areas. For example, in Nigeria, there is more than a 60 percent gap between secondary school enrollment among the richest males and the poorest females.²¹ Overall, girls and women are more likely than boys and men to have their education cut short due to adverse circumstances such as poverty, conflict, natural disasters, or economic downturn. And girls who belong to religious, ethnic, linguistic, racial or other minorities are more likely than other girls to be excluded from school.²²

Enrollment and completion rates tell only part of the story of the progress and limitations of educational attainment. Simply attending school does not equate to learning or gaining skills required to live healthier and more productive lives. There is abundant data from global learning assessments showing that too many children are leaving schools without having acquired even basic knowledge, skills and competencies, amounting to what has been coined a “global learning crisis.”²³ The gender gap in learning is inconsistent, with girls outperforming boys in some regions and boys outperforming girls in others. Some research has looked at gendered aspects of school quality, including teachers’ attitudes toward female students, gender-responsive textbooks and materials, and supportive and empowering classrooms and school environments (including appropriate sanitation facilities for girls).²⁴ Research from Kenya and Bangladesh indicates that the quality of teaching and the gender sensitivity of the school environment influence demand for education for girls even more than boys.^{25, 26} However, school-level factors are not the only contributors to learning outcomes; recent data from Malawi indicates that household-level variables have a bigger effect on learning outcomes than do school-level variables.²⁷

Finally, at the tertiary level, young women currently outperform men in tertiary enrollment in many regions, suggesting that there may be good value and return to investing in girls’ education at lower levels. However, segregation persists in the fields of study in tertiary education, with young women being overrepresented in the health and education sectors, and underrepresented in engineering, manufacturing, construction and sciences.²⁸ This has important implications for women’s earning potential, since there is a strong association between math and science skills and increased earnings.²⁹

Similarly, appropriate technological knowledge and skills are essential for participation in the 21st century workforce. As technologies are incorporated into business and everyday life in developing countries, it is increasingly important that students gain advanced technological skills in order to compete in the modern job market. However, there is currently a significant gap in access to and use of technology between women and men. Studies have found that women in low and middle-income countries are 21 percent less likely to own cell phones.³⁰ Additionally, women represent a small fraction of internet users in many developing countries: 16 percent in Ethiopia, 31 percent in Venezuela, and 27 percent in India in 2000.³¹ High quality, advanced educational programs, which incorporate technologies in their instruction, provide an opportunity to equip girls with the necessary skills to engage with technologies and narrow the gender digital divide.³²

3 Making the Connection between Education, Girls' Transitions to Adulthood and Positive Development Outcomes

While most of the available empirical evidence has substantiated population-level associations between educational attainment and positive development outcomes – such as economic growth, reduced fertility, improved maternal health – there has been insufficient understanding of the pathways that individuals follow that lead to these macro-level outcomes.³³ How exactly do these investments become the channel for progress in development indicators? We argue that the pathway between interventions for relevant, quality education and positive development outcomes needs to be “telescoped” to draw out the linkages and the particularly important role played by girls’ transitions to adulthood. Education enhances both individual resources and individual agency, which are the essential components for empowerment (see Box 1).

Figure 2 illustrates how education provides the ingredients for more positive transitions to adulthood, which are the essential precursors to a range of positive, macro-level development outcomes. There are multiple ways that being in school can delay and improve transitions to adulthood. First of all, school-going tends to be incompatible with marriage or pregnancy because social norms, social policy, or restrictions on time make it difficult for girls to go to school and be wives and mothers at once.^{34,35} Furthermore, when girls are exposed to a quality education, they acquire information and skills, which can yield literacy, numeracy, and cognitive skills. With more skills, they are better-equipped to compete in the labor market and to secure higher-paying jobs. By reducing their social isolation and getting exposure to peers, mentors, and an enhanced sense of services and opportunities in their community, girls can gain social capital. Finally, a quality education can also enhance girls’ aspirations, autonomy and decision-making ability, all of which contribute to their capacity to envision and plan for their futures.^{36,37,38}

BOX 1

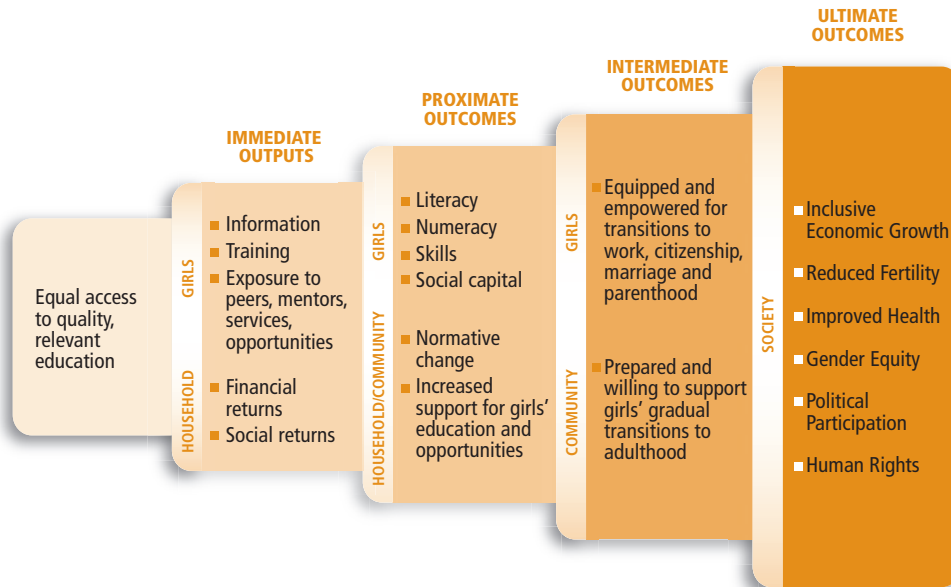
Empowerment has two primary components:

- Resources, including not only financial and productive assets, but opportunities, capabilities, social networks and other environmental factors; and
- Agency, or the ability to act in one’s own best interest.

Malhotra, A. & Schuler, S. R. 2005, “Women’s Empowerment as a Variable in International Development,” in *Measuring Empowerment: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives*, D. Narayan, ed., The World Bank, Washington, D.C., pp. 71-88.

Kabeer, N. 1999, “Resources, Agency, Achievement: Reflections on the Measurement of Women’s Empowerment,” in *Development and Change* Vol. 30, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, pp. 435-464.

FIGURE 2: Telescoping the Pathway from Education to Adolescent Transitions to Development



In summary, education offers many of the ingredients for a successful transition to adulthood, namely “the acquisition of relevant *capacities*, including cognitive competencies, marketable skills, social capital, and complementary *values and motivations*, that enable individuals to function effectively in a range of adult roles, including worker, household provider, parent, spouse, family caretaker, citizen, and community participant.”³⁹

These individual-level changes are accompanied by changes at the household and community level. When girls are in school, households may gain financial returns – either directly, through subsidies or incentives for school enrollment and attendance, or indirectly, through perceived and actual returns to the household through girls’ enhanced financial literacy skills and preparation for work. Family members may also gain non-economic opportunities through girls’ schooling, such as access to other social services and resources. As more girls go to school, their social status is enhanced, and community perceptions and norms regarding what is acceptable and expected from girls begin to change.⁴⁰ Adolescence becomes an extension of childhood, a period for learning, playing, growing, and investing in the future, rather than a period of premature adulthood, in which marriage, childbearing and domestic work are the central focus.

It is no accident, therefore, that research focusing on transitions to adulthood finds that girls' attendance in school during adolescence is correlated with delayed sexual initiation, later marriage and childbearing, lower rates of HIV/AIDS and other reproductive morbidities, fewer hours of domestic work, higher wages and greater gender equality.⁴¹ Girls' acquisition of knowledge, skills and experience, along with enhanced familial and community support, prepares them to be more informed and able workers, citizens, spouses and parents. These benefits yield inter-generational dividends, as these women will have fewer, healthier and more highly educated children. In short, empowered girls who become healthy, productive and empowered adults are a force for positive social, economic, and political change.

The relationship between education and transformation at the individual and societal level is not necessarily linear or automatic. Household-level characteristics, the external environment, and the level and quality of education matter greatly. In a global literature review of the benefits of education to women, Malhotra *et al.* found that empowerment-related returns on investment in education are often realized more fully in secondary levels or higher. Furthermore, the economic, social, legal and political environment surrounding the education system and the individuals within it is critical: girls and women are best able to take advantage of the platform of education where the environment is safe and secure, where the labor market is robust, where the normative environment is supportive of women's and girls' empowerment, and where the legal and regulatory environment supports women's and girls' equal rights.⁴² Therefore, it is equally critical to address the enabling environment in which girls live.

4

Building on Opportunities and Momentum to Coordinate, Collaborate and Leverage across Sectors

Understanding this pathway is the just a first step. Ensuring that the connection between education, learning, transitions to adulthood, girls' empowerment and broader change is realized and maximized in settings where the need and opportunities are most compelling will require strategic dialogue and coordination across sectors. There are some promising shifts already underway that can position the education sector as a platform for empowerment, social change, and gender equality.

BUILDING ON EXISTING MOMENTUM

The opportunity for girls to be agents of change is increasingly recognized by not only non-governmental organizations, but also by multilateral and bilateral institutions, corporations, governments and the private sector. Over the last five to seven years there has been a groundswell of support for girls' empowerment and more commitment to integrated approaches to address girls' multiple needs. Two sectors that have prioritized adolescent girls during the last decade are education and reproductive health. Both sectors are currently in the process of reviewing and refining strategies for the next decade, timing that is ideally suited for assessing points of mutual interest missed in the past.

For the education sector, it is evident that in most countries, schools are now the largest public institution reaching young people, and as such, they have enormous potential to promote the overall well-being of individuals and communities. Education of young people has been a development priority for decades, and education is featured prominently in international commitments, such as the Millennium Development Goals (see Box 2), the Dakar Framework for Action and the Education for All (EFA) movement. The "first-generation" global policy goals of the education sector were to increase primary school enrollment; therefore, they focused primarily on younger children. To a large degree these

BOX 2

Education-Focused Millennium Development Goals

GOAL 2: ACHIEVE UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION

TARGET: Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.

GOAL 3: PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWER WOMEN

TARGET: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015.

goals have been realized as national governments have introduced free and compulsory education at the primary level. In recognition of the discrimination that girls suffered in school attendance and enrollment, global policy and development strategies also set targets to achieve gender parity by eliminating gender disparities at all levels of education.

In the second generation of education policy, there is greater focus on facilitating transitions to secondary and tertiary levels and to ensuring learning and equity at all levels. The most recent education strategies of the World Bank and the United States Agency on International Development focus on quality and learning. The Center for Universal Education at Brookings has spearheaded a “global compact on learning” to drive investments in education toward “learning for all.”⁴³ The Department for International Development⁴⁴ and the EFA Fast Track Initiative⁴⁵ are expanding their emphasis on secondary education. The World Bank’s Education Strategy 2020 recognizes that “growth, development and poverty reduction depend on the knowledge and skills that people acquire, not the number of years that they sit in a classroom” and that “learning for all means ensuring that *all* students... acquire the knowledge and skills that they need. This goal will require lowering the barriers that keep girls, people with disabilities, and ethno-linguistic minorities from attaining as much education as other population groups.”⁴⁶ While a broader approach to equity is valuable and important, it is critical that the unique gender-based vulnerabilities of adolescent girls not be overlooked. Nearly reaching gender parity at the primary level is a significant achievement, but girls continue to encounter persistent obstacles to their full educational attainment.

A sharpening focus on equity and adolescent girls has emerged in the population and reproductive health field, but along a different trajectory. During much of the latter half of the 20th century, “first-generation” policy goals focused primarily on reducing fertility among adult women as a means of limiting population growth. Since the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994 and the World Conference on Human Rights in Beijing in 1995, the focus has shifted to reproductive health and rights. Newer strategies emphasize the empowerment of women, and an acknowledgment that services, programs and interventions must reach women when they are younger, and especially vulnerable. Moreover,

given demographic shifts where young people in developing countries not only comprise a large part of the population, but also possess the potential for realizing a “demographic dividend” in terms of economic growth if equipped with adequate human capital, adolescents – and girls especially – have emerged as an increasing priority. Thus, during the last decade, population and reproductive health has been at the forefront among sectors engaged in undertaking and championing programs and policies on girls’ empowerment.

SYNCHRONIZING STRATEGIES AND DRAWING ON GOOD PRACTICE AT THE PROGRAM LEVEL

There is convergence between these two sectors toward adolescent girls as a key focus and constituency, but there is not a full understanding of the systems, strategies, and approaches being used across sectors to maximize resources and impact. Table 1 outlines some of the differences and similarities between the two sectors. The education sector has approached “transitions” primarily through the levels and stages of the formal education system, while the population and reproductive health sectors have approached transitions through the “life cycle” or “transitions to adulthood” lens, which encompasses biological, developmental and social changes that occur in an individual’s life. The education sector has primarily focused on the formal school setting, while the reproductive health sector has used more non-formal education strategies, emphasizing life skills, mentoring, and reintegration opportunities for girls who are not in school.

TABLE 1: Sectoral Strategies with a Focus on Adolescent Girls: Overlap and Differences

	Education	Population and Reproductive Health
SYSTEMS ORIENTATION	Education System	Life Cycle
APPROACH TO EDUCATION	Formal Education – focused on numeracy, literacy and other cognitive skills Technical and vocational education and training	Non-formal education - focused on life skills, mentoring, reintegration into formal schools
SUPPLY-SIDE APPROACHES	Building schools, recruiting and training teachers, improving curricula and materials	Building health centers and schools, training community workers, making reproductive health services and technologies available; Livelihood programs; Safe spaces
DEMAND-SIDE APPROACHES	Community mobilization and awareness campaigns for girls to attend school; Information, incentives or subsidies for school attendance and performance (including conditional cash transfers, stipends or scholarships)	Community mobilization and awareness campaigns for empowerment and equality; Information, incentives and subsidies for risk reduction (e.g. pregnancy, violence, or sexually transmitted diseases)

Supply-side approaches within the education system have included building schools, recruiting and training teachers, providing mentors and peer support, improving curricula and materials, and changing the policy and regulatory framework to make school enrollment mandatory and/or more accessible. On the demand side, strategies have included providing incentives, subsidies or scholarships to reduce the cost of attendance, improving transportation and/or boarding opportunities, improving school infrastructure, and mobilizing communities to improve girls' attendance in school.⁴⁷ Supply-side approaches within population and reproductive health programs have emphasized "youth-friendly" services, laws and policies to make sexual and reproductive health services and technologies more accessible and affordable. On the demand side, reproductive health programs have utilized information and awareness campaigns, emphasizing sexual and reproductive health, violence prevention, personal empowerment and community mobilization for girls' empowerment and gender equality. Incentives and subsidies for behavior change are also being used within the sector.

Despite the generalizations provided above, there are already emerging examples of collaboration in designing and implementing interventions across sectors. More educational programs (whether in the formal or non-formal sector) are being used as a platform for not only educational outcomes, but also better life outcomes. We provide a few examples below.

Cash transfers and stipends are being increasingly used as a strategy to reduce the financial barriers to school enrollment and attendance. With robust monitoring and evaluation systems, these programs can often look at multiple impacts of a single intervention. For example, the **Zomba Cash Transfer Program** in Malawi was a two-year randomized intervention that provided cash transfers to young women to stay in or return to school. The evaluation looked at the effect of these transfers not only on girls' school enrollment, attendance, and learning, but also on their sexual risk behavior. Among the many findings, a study published in 2009 shows that girls who were offered conditional cash transfers to return to school were 38 percent less likely to initiate sexual activity during a one-year follow-up period.⁴⁸ A 2011 study of the same program found mixed results comparing the effects of a conditional and unconditional cash transfer on school enrollment and sexual risk behavior.⁴⁹ In Bangladesh, a national stipend program for female students has been evaluated to see if it enhanced school enrollment of adolescent girls, improved school quality and affected other demographic outcomes, such as age of marriage. Evaluations have shown that the program has effectively closed the gender gap in enrollment; however, the effects on school quality or age of marriage are negligible.⁵⁰

To address these gaps in the formal education sector, non-governmental organizations in Bangladesh such as BRAC and Save the Children have developed programs that reach girls who have dropped out of school or who need additional support outside of school. These programs have the multiple aims of filling a schooling gap and improving adolescents' transitions to adulthood. BRAC's **Social and Financial Empowerment of Adolescents (SoFEA)** program provides girls aged 11 to 21 with safe spaces, life skills training, livelihood training, financial literacy, and works to sensitize the community on the importance of girls' education.⁵¹ Save the Children's **Kishoree Kontha** program is an after school, community-based learning program that stresses health and well-being among adolescent girls, creates opportunities for girls' development through gaining assets and strengthens social support for girls' inclusion in community events and decision-making. Both of these are examples of how expertise and resources from outside the education sector can help create "girl friendly" programs, which engage and empower hard-to-reach girls (see Box 3).⁵²

A number of programs over the years have tried to integrate reproductive health and HIV risk reduction education within the formal school sector. The **Mema kwa Vijana** program, implemented by government workers, the African Medical and Research Foundation, and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, is a school-based HIV risk reduction program in Tanzania. The intervention included primary school sexual health education; "youth-friendly" sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services; community activities; and youth based condom promotion for 12 to 19 year-olds. The evaluation found an increase in SRH knowledge and attitudes with some evidence of increasing benefits with more years of intervention exposure, and significant benefits in knowledge still present more than eight years after implementation. There was no significant impact on HIV, other STIs, or pregnancy. The Mema kwa Vijana experience has demonstrated that it is possible to take an innovative adolescent sexual and reproductive health program to scale through an NGO partnership with the government, but that such interventions, on their own, may not be sufficient to reduce HIV and other STIs among young people in Sub-Saharan Africa. Given many of the promising results, the program has since been scaled up to cover all 551 primary schools and 184 health facilities in four districts.^{53, 54}

BOX 3

"Girl-friendly" educational programs are "specifically designed to support girls in overcoming obstacles to attending and participating in school or to reaping the full and equal benefits and rewards of education."

Source: Lloyd, C. and Young, J. 2009. *New Lessons: The Power of Educating Adolescent Girls*, p. 64.

More and more organizations are moving beyond a narrow focus on one sector and are embracing different strategies for improved outcomes: for example, education-oriented NGOs, such as FAWE and Room to Read, are emphasizing “gender-responsive” interventions⁵⁵ and long-term, holistic approaches to girls’ education.⁵⁶ CARE’s **Power Within** program focuses on building girls’ leadership competencies in and out of school.⁵⁷ Other efforts are initiated by organizations outside of the education sector, but work with and through schools to change social norms and improve adolescent life transitions. For example, ICRW, the Committee of Resource Organizations for Literacy and the Tata Institute for Social Sciences, are implementing the **Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS)** project. Using extracurricular activities, role-playing and games, GEMS works with boys and girls ages 12-14 in public schools in Goa, Kota and Mumbai, India. The GEMS curriculum encourages equal relationships between girls and boys, examines the social norms that define men’s and women’s roles, and addresses different forms of violence. In a quasi-experimental study of the pilot, students in intervention schools showed improved attitudes toward gender equality, and more opposition to violence and to discriminatory statements.⁵⁸ Now being scaled up to reach 250 schools in Mumbai, GEMS is an example of how the education sector can serve as a platform for social change that empowers girls and promotes gender equality.

These are only a few examples of how the education sector – in both formal and non-formal spaces – has been leveraged to promote goals that go beyond educational outcomes alone. These examples illustrate that educational institutions offer a venue to provide girls with the basic building blocks for safer, smoother transitions to adulthood. The population and reproductive health sectors can offer tested tools, resources, and models that can engage hard-to-reach girls, promote more positive interpersonal relations, and lay the groundwork for normative change that supports girls’ empowerment and gender equality. Together, these sectors can work to get and keep all girls in school through the secondary level, provide girls with relevant, high-quality education in a safe and supportive environment, and link girls with opportunities to work, learn and participate more actively in their communities.

LEVERAGING LIMITED RESOURCES

Given the global economic crisis and increasing limitations on foreign assistance by many bilateral donors, it is more important than ever to plan for joint resource mobilization to support these goals. Overall, aid to basic education has doubled since 2002 to US\$4.7 billion, in support of policies that accelerate progress in Education for All; however, there are still shortfalls. UNESCO's 2010 EFA Global Monitoring Report estimated an "external financing need for key [basic education] goals in low-income countries of about \$16 billion annually" through 2015.⁵⁹ In 2011, the poorest countries only received 15 percent of the external funding that is necessary for them to reach their goals. This lack of donor financing is matched by a lack of national financing, thus shifting the burden onto the families themselves. In recent years, Uganda, Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Malawi have struggled with increased strain on resources once school fees were removed. For example, after eliminating school fees in Ethiopia, some classrooms had an average of 59 students per teacher; the resulting strain on teachers and resources caused one in four students to drop out in 2008.⁶⁰

In order to not only meet the global financial requirements for basic education, but also begin to fill the considerable gaps in secondary education, there must be more resource-sharing and coordination. Linking education interventions to other development outcomes offers the education sector an opportunity to make the case more directly for the broader benefits it accrues. It is critical to also engage the economic development sector, which has also begun to invest more in adolescent girls. There is increasing realization by the private sector and policymakers that equipping girls and young women for "transitions to work" is critical from a household poverty reduction perspective, as well as for the economic growth opportunities for entire nations. The education sector plays a fundamental role in preparing young people for work; without a strong female work force, economies suffer. The 2012 World Development Report notes that, "in both high- and low-income countries, gender differences in education have contributed significantly to the productivity and wage gap between men and women."⁶¹ In order to close that gap, global education strategies are beginning to prioritize significant investments in the education of girls and women, and in connecting skills learned in school to opportunities in the labor market.

5 Catalyzing a Joint Action Agenda

Given the natural convergence on adolescent girls as a key investment for multiple sectors, now is an optimal time to forge new alliances among the various constituencies working on education, population, reproductive health, economic advancement, and girls' empowerment. These constituencies can jointly focus on education programs and policies with a clear and direct aim of achieving both educational and broader life transition goals for adolescent girls and draw on their respective experience, opportunities and expertise, to contribute to more effective interventions and methods for measurement. Such efforts need not overreach to create complex multi-sectoral programs. Rather, limited, strategic, and effective cross-sectoral coordination can be achieved by creating linkages across development sectors and selectively incorporating key intervention components and outcome measures. With a shared vision, and joint strategies to achieve that vision, these sectors can contribute to a whole that is greater than the sum of their parts.

COMPONENTS OF A JOINT ACTION AGENDA

In 2011, a multi-disciplinary group of experts from the education, reproductive health, and girls' empowerment sectors convened at ICRW to discuss a joint action agenda. This group identified the following as priority areas for action.

1. Coordination among various sectors within donors, governments, research institutions and implementing agencies

In order to design and implement cross-sectoral approaches to education-based empowerment strategies, more coordination within and among donor agencies, government ministries, implementing agencies and research institutions will be required. Rather than developing strategies that are based purely on technical or functional areas of expertise, a more strategic approach, which is supported by population-based assessments of needs and opportunities, is required. This will take into consideration the multiple needs, assets and opportunities of different adolescent girls in different contexts. Examples of increasing collaboration and resource mobilization among previously siloed agencies include the World Bank Adolescent Girls Initiative and the United Nations Adolescent Girls Task Force. While the modalities and structures of the different groups will vary, what is important is that strategies are rooted in understanding and responding to what adolescent girls need and want.

2. Collaboration on research, key standards of impact and metrics for measurement

A limitation to increased collaboration is the lack of agreement on standards of impact and metrics of measurement. In the education sector, for example, the indicators for progress are often focused on enrollment, attendance, completion rates, student/teacher ratios and standardized test scores. While there is now an enhanced focus on defining and measuring learning outcomes, there is limited attention to how learning outcomes are connected to other life outcomes, such as delayed marriage, childbearing, increased economic participation, or other empowerment-related indicators. In the reproductive health sector, access to health services, contraceptive uptake, age of marriage and childbirth and household decision-making are among the many indicators that are often evaluated, but there is often less in-depth focus on educational attainment (formal or informal), reasons for discontinuation of education, or the acquisition of numeracy, literacy and other cognitive skills. Cross-sectoral collaboration can help define shared goals among different fields, and to identify the intermediate outcomes and indicators for measuring shared progress. For example, the World-Bank funded evaluation of the Zomba Cash Transfer program looked at not only how cash transfers changed school enrollment and participation rates, but also how both income and schooling affected girls' health, HIV status, sexual behavior, and age of marriage and childbearing. In terms of non-intervention research, the Population Council's Malawi Schooling and Adolescent Survey is a longitudinal, school-based survey that is gathering individual data on a variety of household characteristics, schooling experiences, and detailed information on relationships and sexual experiences. The different waves of data collection are helping to shed light on how experiences at the household and school level affect a variety of educational and life course outcomes.⁶² While it is neither feasible nor desirable that every program working with girls share the same outcomes and indicators, more harmonization of how activities are expected to lead to broader change and transformation for girls would be a significant step forward, and would allow the field to more effectively parse out what works to empower girls and why.

3. New partnerships and collaboration on the ground to ensure that girls stay in school and gain relevant information and education for their transitions to adulthood

As illustrated by the examples above, there are promising partnerships being forged in the development field. However, there is a great need for more collaboration between organizations that have historically focused narrowly on education, those that have historically focused on reproductive health, and those that have tackled other aspects of girls' empowerment. The education sector provides a huge

platform for reaching girls with the essential ingredients for empowerment and healthy transitions to adulthood. The reproductive health and girls' empowerment sectors can lend strategies and expertise in reaching vulnerable populations and providing gender-sensitive and relevant information in a safe and supportive environment. Together, they can collaborate to ensure that girls are gaining a quality education that will be relevant to their transitions to work, citizenship, marriage and parenthood.

4. Investment in efforts to scale up promising approaches

This paper has identified only a few of the innovative approaches that have demonstrated promising results for improving girls' well-being and empowerment. Such approaches need to be scaled-up in order to reach more girls, and by proxy, to facilitate inter-generational change and progress. Too many girls – especially girls in the poorest households and the poorest countries – are being left behind as others progress. The education sector offers the scale and infrastructure to reach the largest numbers of girls; therefore, the best hope lies in collaboration and coordination with it. With more coordinated and wider-reaching approaches, we can help reach enough girls to drive progress toward a “tipping point” for secure and sustainable development.

6

Conclusion

Several of the major sectors in the development field increasingly recognize the importance of investing in adolescent girls, and also recognize the central role that education plays in seeding change at the individual and societal level. Despite this shared focus on adolescent girls and increasing overlap in strategic priorities, the various sectors are not yet coordinating enough to determine how and when educational investments can yield better test scores in the short-term, healthier transitions to adulthood in the medium-term and more robust development outcomes in the long-term. The various parties that hold the pieces to this puzzle have in the past been content to concentrate on their portion of the challenge, but the needs and opportunities are before us to put those pieces together. With a coordinated effort and leveraged resources, strategies can be sharpened, funding can be enhanced, and progress can be accelerated. By investing jointly in girls' education, empowerment and healthy, productive transitions to adulthood, we can unleash the potential of adolescent girls to transform their own lives and the world around them.

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