



Education International
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Progress Reports

Congress Book 2B

Progress Reports



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C. Education of Girls and Women

1. The Role of Education in Gender Relations and Development

Education systems have a two-fold impact on gender relations. On the one hand, they create opportunities for women to develop careers in the labour market and achieve financial independence. This is described as the right to education – who can access what education – and rights *through* education – which doors are opened by education and training. On the other hand, gender relations are reproduced or transformed in the school systems through interactions between girls and boys, female and male teachers. This concerns gender rights *within* education. In the past decade, many policy initiatives have led to great progress in the right of girls to education, guided by international frameworks such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs 2 and 3) and the Education For All goals (EFA goals 2 and 5):

- MDG 2: Achieve Universal Primary Education
Target: to ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling
- MDG 3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women
Target: to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015
- EFA goal 2: to ensure that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality
- EFA goal 5: to eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieve gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality

These policy initiatives have been motivated and backed up by numerous studies showing that educating girls can make more dramatic positive changes than any other single intervention – both for the individual and for society as a whole. As expressed by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan (2004): *"Study after study has taught us that there is no tool for development more effective than the education of girls and the empowerment of women. No other policy is as likely to raise economic productivity, lower infant and maternal mortality, or improve nutrition and promote health, including the prevention of HIV/AIDS."*

Although a considerable amount of money has been invested in fostering the education of girls, many problems still persist. Worldwide nearly one billion people have had no schooling or left school after less than four years. Nearly two thirds are women

and girls. An estimated 77 million children, 55 per cent of whom are girls, are still denied any form of education (E4 2010: 4). Two thirds of the almost 800 million illiterate people worldwide are women (UNESCO 2010b: 1). There are still major obstacles to realising rights to education, in education and through education for millions. Gender inequalities are deeply entrenched in this denial of rights.

A recent report by UNGEI (United Nations Girls' Education Initiative) describes three major trends in the education landscape with regard to gender equality in the last 10 years (UNGEI 2010: 9):

- Gender parity in access and attendance has substantially improved, though progress is not uniform across all levels of schooling or all regions and countries.
- Large gaps remain in areas that involve gender equality, such as subject choices, gender bias and stereotypes in textbooks, teaching-learning processes and teacher attitude towards girls.
- Women are more likely than boys and men to have their education cut short as a result of adverse circumstances such as poverty, conflict, natural disasters and economic downturns.

The report identifies a range of challenges faced in attaining gender equality in education (UNGEI 2010: 19), most importantly the risk of losing the gains in girls' enrolment, attendance and retention due to reductions in education investment and in other areas that affect girls' education directly or indirectly. Similarly, the UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Report 2010 (UNESCO 2010a: 6) highlights the effects of the economic crisis as a major threat to the right to education. While the crisis originated in the financial systems of the developed world, the aftershock is now reaching education systems in the world's poorest countries. Rising poverty, growing unemployment and diminishing remittances lead to situations where many poor and vulnerable households have to withdraw children from school because they cannot afford school fees or need the children's labour in the household or as an income source. The UNESCO report warns that *"the crisis could create a lost generation of children in the world's poorest countries, whose life chances will have been jeopardised by a failure to protect their right to education"* (ibid). In most cases, girls are the first to be taken out of school.

2. Access to Education

The UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Report 2011 (UNESCO 2011) presents the most recent statistics for school attainment. It shows that much progress has been made in the past ten years. But while the MDGs set the goal of full universal primary schooling and elimination of gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2015, reality is still far away from these targets.

Globally, 90 per cent of children in the primary education age group attend school, compared to 82 per cent in 1999⁵. This increase in school attendance applies to both boys and girls. The most dramatic increase in primary education attendance can

5 Net enrolment ratio (students enrolled in a level of education who belong to the relevant age group, as a percentage of the population in that age group)



be found in the regions that had low bases, i.e. south and west Asia (90 per cent) as well as sub-Saharan Africa (77 per cent). In most regions there are more than 95 girls per 100 boys in primary education, but more than half of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa, south and west Asia and the Arab states have not achieved gender parity at the primary level. Worldwide 26 countries still have fewer than 90 girls per 100 boys in school; 18 of these are in sub-Saharan Africa.

The situation is worse when it comes to secondary education. The global school attendance rate lies at 67 per cent⁶, and there are strong regional differences. The enrolment ratio is lowest in sub-Saharan Africa (34 per cent), which also shows the worst statistics in terms of gender parity: Only 79 girls per 100 boys attend secondary school, and the increase in school attendance in the past 10 years has been greater for boys than for girls. Low enrolment rates can be found as well in south and west Asia (54 per cent; 87 girls per 100 boys) and in Arab states (68 per cent; 92 girls per 100 boys).

The Gender Parity in Education Index⁷, computed by the UN Statistics Division (UNIFEM 2008: 124) indicates big regional differences for higher education, leading to substantial differences in women's chances to access leadership roles in politics, economy and administration.

One section of the EI questionnaire focused on the education of girls and women. Unions were asked about their opinion concerning access and barriers to education on the one hand, and gender equality within education on the other hand. Open-ended questions gave unions the opportunity to describe access barriers in more detail and explain how government measures affect girls' education.

Access to education is considered a problem by teachers' unions in one third of the countries responding to the survey. There are

strong regional differences: Almost all unions in Europe, North America and the Caribbean indicate that full access to education has been achieved for both girls and boys at all education levels. By contrast, unions in over 80 per cent of the countries in Latin America, as well as in half of the countries in Africa and Asia-Pacific say that access is a problem, and they identify about five times as many barriers to education as unions in Europe, North America and the Caribbean.⁸

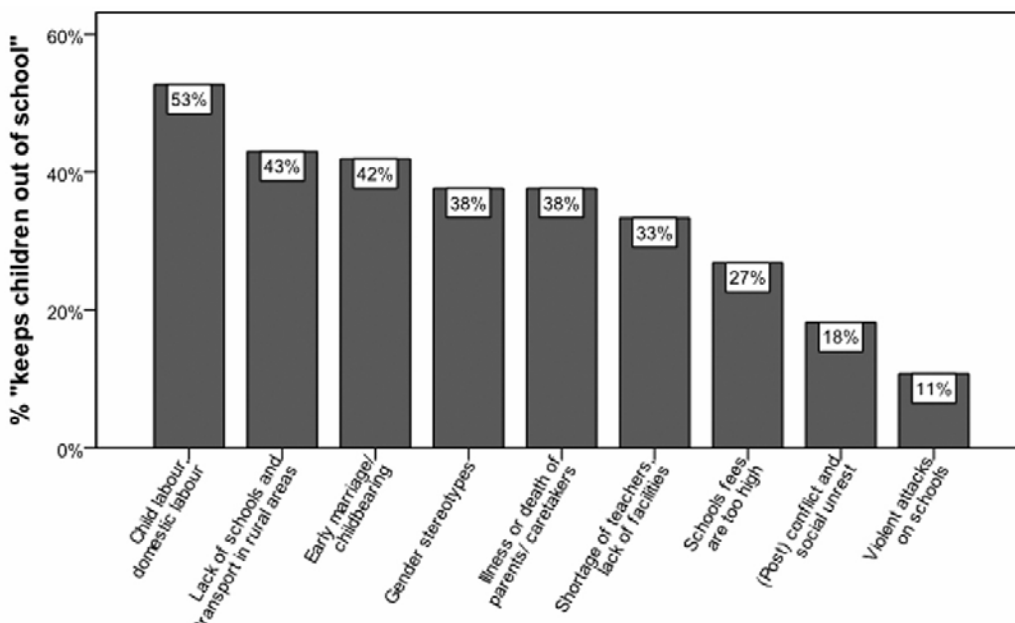
Barriers to Education

The reasons for absence and dropping out of school are multi-dimensional and mutually reinforcing: "Girls and children from poor households and rural areas all face a much greater risk of being out of school. These three categories interact with each other and with additional factors – such as language, ethnicity and disability – to create multiple barriers to school entry and survival." (UNESCO 2010a: 12) A report from UNGEI points out that girls from socially disadvantaged families and poor households face the greatest education inequalities – such as girls from indigenous populations in Latin America, lower-caste populations in south Asia or rural populations in many developing countries. The rural-urban divides constitute one of the main challenges for EFA, and they are acute especially in sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia (UNGEI 2010: 14, 18).

The following graph shows which barriers to education were mentioned by how many unions. The most relevant barriers to education are related to child labour, lack of school infrastructure and gender stereotypes. Furthermore, illness or death of parents and caretakers is an important reason why children do not go to school.

The constellation of barriers to education seems to vary from region to region. In Africa, barriers to education are mainly related to gender roles, early marriage and childbearing, and illness or

Graph: Barriers to education



⁶ Gross enrolment ratio (students enrolled in a level of education, whether or not they belong in the relevant age group for that level, as a percentage of the population in the relevant age group for that level)

⁷ Gender Parity Index = the ratio of girls to boys enrolled

⁸ ANOVA eta²=.47; sig=.000

death of parents. In contrast, Latin American unions mention above all barriers connected to child and domestic labour. Additionally, many unions (20), mostly in Africa and Latin America, say that poverty keeps children out of school. Some added that parents with limited resources would rather send their sons to school than their daughters. Further barriers mentioned include: overcrowded schools and lack of qualified teachers (nine unions), ignorance and lack of support from parents (five unions), bad management of schools and corruption (three unions), lack of attractiveness of schools and inflexible school timing (three unions), sexual violence (three unions), as well as juvenile delinquency and gang violence (three unions).

The majority of African unions think that these barriers mainly keep girls out of education; in Latin America half of the unions say that the barriers mainly affect girls and half of the unions say that they affect both genders equally. In Asia-Pacific, Europe and the Caribbean, the majority of unions think that boys and girls are affected equally by barriers to education. Other social groups particularly affected by barriers to education are children from rural areas, indigenous children, Roma children, migrant children, ethnic and religious minorities, children with disabilities and special needs, as well as lesbian or gay students.

Unions were asked to describe government measures in recent years that have affected girls' education – both positive and negative initiatives. Unions from Asia-Pacific, Africa and Latin America frequently described measures that focus on the right to education for all, such as the introduction of new laws that aim at ensuring or prolonging free and compulsory education, creating more schools especially in rural areas and improving schools' infrastructure, providing midday meals for pupils and financial support for education to poor families.

Some unions described **specific efforts to support girls' education:**

- unions from Africa and Asia-Pacific: making basic education free for girls, introducing education schemes or scholarships for girls, building girls' dormitories, creating systems of motivation for girl students, creating incentives for parents to send girls to school.
- unions from Latin America and the Caribbean: measures to improve the legal status and re-entry of pregnant students into the education system.
- all regions: strategies and institutions (with budget allocation) that deal with gender equality for students.

Many unions complained that their governments are not tackling long-term problems, keeping children, especially girls, out of the education system. Resources and investment in education are being reduced; tuition fees introduced in higher education; the number of pupils per teacher is rising; governments are abolishing structures for gender equality, and educational institutions are ignoring government programmes for gender equality.

Conclusions:

- **Barriers to education: The most relevant barriers are related to child labour, lack of school infrastructure and gender stereotypes.**
- **Persistent long-term problems: Unions describe government efforts to increase access to education – for all children, and for girls in particular. Nevertheless, long-term problems persist and are not being suitably tackled.**

3. Gender Stereotypes in the Classroom

Much work on gender and schooling focuses on access to education, trying to ensure that girls are enrolled in school. While the importance of gender parity in education is beyond dispute, many reports argue that access is not enough: *"When it comes to education, gender equality goes well beyond ensuring that equal numbers of girls and boys attend school. It is about changing attitudes and relationships and about the sharing of power."* (Bokova 2010: 5) Equal access to education often does not translate into institutionalised arrangements to secure gender rights within education. That includes gender equality in curricula, gender-sensitive language, gender-responsive textbooks, gender-aware teachers and empowering classrooms, atypical gender subject options and safe school environments.

An underlying problem is what some researchers refer to as "hegemonic masculinity", meaning strict societal roles whereby men dominate other men and subordinate women. This has been observed in many developed countries, as well as in East Asia, the Caribbean and Pacific countries. *"These roles deem education to be feminine and thus the domain of girls, whereas work is seen as belonging to boys and men. As a result, a number of countries are witnessing a trend whereby boys underperform in many subjects, especially language arts, and drop out of secondary schools at higher rates than girls."* (UNGEI 2010: 16) This research sees the reason for boys' under-achievement not in the "female orientation of schools" and the "feminised teaching staff", but rather in the persistence of gender stereotypes.

Gender Stereotypes in the Classroom

Many studies show how gender stereotypes are reproduced by the education system. These studies focus on the "hidden curriculum", a collection of messages transmitted to children through informal relations and interactions in classrooms. It is argued that students' informal interactions at school are the most influential aspect of their socialisation into what it means to be female and male in society. Since peer interaction and peer pressure play such an important role in forming gender identities, schools are critical spaces in which these notions can be either reinforced or countered.

For many years, studies have been consistent in revealing the dominance of boys regarding the school space they occupy,



the teacher-time that they demand, and the influence that they have over the rest of their peers. *“Recent research has found that teachers’ attitudes, classroom and other schooling processes, and textbooks continue to reinforce gender stereotyping despite the increase in gender reviews and additional training. Although there have been some changes in textbooks, with somewhat more balanced representations of men and women, stereotypical depictions persist in many countries.”* (UNGEI 2010: 15)

School textbooks often exclude girls and women or present them in demeaning ways, favouring gender stereotypes – for example, when men appear more often and in a wider set of roles as workers, while women are shown mainly in domestic and ‘romantic’ roles. Also the language in these books has been proven to be highly influential, especially on younger children. Gender stereotypes are reproduced by this language – for example when talking about a “fireman” instead of a “firefighter”, or about boys “laughing” and girls “giggling” (Eurydice 2009: 26).

Furthermore, teachers’ perceptions of male- and femaleness are crucial for their relations with pupils and can be an important factor in generating gender equality in schools. Despite this, many teachers are unaware of how they use gender as an important organising and categorising factor in the classroom. Studies on classroom interaction show that both male and female teachers tend to encourage passivity and conformity in their female students while at the same time valuing independence and individuality in their male students (ibid: 29). *“When (...) more girls than boys are in school, officials come to think they have ‘done’ gender, although issues remain concerning economic, political and social rights, violence and ideas about masculinity and femininity that undermine equality concerns.”* (E4 2010: 11f)

EI’s member unions indicate that a reproduction of gender stereotypes through curricular structure is being avoided in most countries. But they also say that this only partly translates into providing school books that are free of traditional gender roles. The number of countries where gender equality is part of teachers’ education is even lower: unions from only half the countries indicated that this is the case.

Furthermore, although there is no legal barrier for women or men to teach in any subject, unions from 40 per cent of the countries (especially Latin America, North America and Europe) indicate that **in reality, in there is a gender division between subjects**. Women mainly teach languages, home economics, cooking and needlework; while men are concentrated in sciences,

technical education, mechanical engineering, wood- and metalwork. There are practically no male teachers in early childhood education and very few in primary education.

In a few countries, unions reported that **governments are trying to make their education systems more gender-sensitive**. These efforts aim at removing traditional gender stereotypes from curricula and text books, and introducing equality, human rights and sex education. Other important objectives are to make gender equality part of teachers’ education, and to use specific incentives or quotas in order to create a stronger gender mix in education paths.

Conclusions:

- **Gender stereotypes are still prevalent: Although there are no legally-defined gender differences in the process of education, gender stereotypes still shape subject choice and teaching materials.**

D. Gender Equality at Work, in Education Employment and in Society

1. Women’s Rights and Gender Equality

At global level, the most comprehensive framework for realising women’s rights and gender equality exists within the United Nations: The UN Convention to Eliminate all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), often described as a “bill of rights for women”, was adopted in 1979. In 1995, the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing endorsed CEDAW and initiated the Beijing Platform for Action, a global agenda for women’s empowerment. Another vehicle for women’s rights was created in 2000 with the Millennium Development Goals, each of which can only be realised through substantial improvements in the field of gender equality and women’s rights: *“Women’s empowerment is not a stand-alone goal. It is the driver of efforts to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, achieve universal primary education, reduce child and maternal mortality, and fight against major diseases like HIV/AIDS and malaria. Women’s empowerment is also a driver of sound environmental management and is, finally, essential for ensuring that development aid reaches the poorest through making women a part of national poverty reduction planning and resource allocation.”* (UNIFEM 2008: 117)

Graph: Percentage of countries with provisions for gender-sensitive education

