

# Accelerating Secondary Education for Girls: Focusing on Access and Retention

## Summary

Educating girls has enormous social and economic returns and has been identified as a primary means toward national development on all fronts. With relative success in universalization of primary education (Millennium Development Goal #2), there is a serious effort to bring similar national and international commitments toward completion of secondary education for girls. Such efforts would address related international goals such as Millennium Development Goal #3: *Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women, Target 3A: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all level of education no later than 2015.*

In order to significantly contribute to the national development process, the issue of secondary school completion for girls must become increasingly important and the cause must be recognized with urgency. Schooling brings higher economic returns to girls and women, increases their options, and facilitates their participation in civic life and overall decision-making. Despite recent educational achievements and efforts to engage girls and young women in education, there remain significant challenges to progress such as cultural norms that do not recognize the value of girls' education, early marriage and childbearing, security concerns, and long distances to school among others. ►

There are ways in which these barriers can be challenged. **Five clear strategies** at the school level that can benefit girls' completion of primary school and transition to secondary education are as follows:

1. Ensuring a reasonable distance to school;
2. Availability of private, safe latrines/acceptable menstrual hygiene management (MHM) facilities as well as basic reproductive health education;
3. Ensuring a safe and secure school environment;
4. Ensuring the presence of female teachers in the school; and
5. Relevance of curriculum to life skills and labour market.

## Why does secondary education for girls matter?

Completion of secondary education brings most of the positive benefits associated with girls' education—from dramatically increased lifetime earnings to

similarly dramatic decreases in fertility and mortality rates. The returns to girls' education are particularly high for developing countries, which in most cases exceed those observed in developed countries and those of boys. Each additional year of schooling boosts long-run growth by 0.58 percent per year. The effects are quite large, particularly for regions where gender inequality is sizable, such as South Asia or the Middle East and North Africa. Further, a World Bank study of 100 countries demonstrates that increasing secondary education of girls by one percent results in an annual income increase of 0.3 percent per capita.

Evidence also suggests an economic advantage of secondary schooling over primary schooling. Girls are likely to reap the economic benefit of education only with the completion of secondary school, unlike boys who will continue to be absorbed into the labor force much earlier in life, often at the primary level. This "gender premium" in education is shown to result in higher rates of return in the long term for women at 9.8 percent on average, compared to 8.7 percent for men.

In developing countries, the social benefits of women's schooling are significant. These gains are reflected in reduced female fertility rates, improved nutrition for pregnant and lactating mothers and infants, improving infant mortality rates, and in containing early child marriages, among others. Benefits are further seen in the agricultural sector as more productive farming methods are attributable to increased female schooling, in addition to general civic participation, as women gain confidence and demand participation in the political process.

## Girls' secondary school participation today

Today, approximately 63 percent of all secondary school aged children are enrolled in secondary education worldwide. Although there are many more girls attending school today than ever before gender equity in secondary school participation remains elusive. Out of 162 countries, only 56 percent are prepared to graduate equal numbers of boys and girls from the last grade of primary school. In half of Sub-Saharan countries, girls are less likely to complete primary education, eliminating the possibility for them to attend secondary school. The gains made at the primary school level do not

### Common Barriers to Girls' Secondary Education

- Early marriage
- Early childbearing
- Distance to school
- Security concerns (school related gender based violence)
- Cultural values
- Schooling costs
- Opportunity costs
- Negative experience of schooling
- Menstrual hygiene management
- Labour market participation

equate to the transition of these girls to secondary level. Among the world's poorest countries, girls' completion of secondary school overall remains low. This situation may be attributed to various barriers that girls face in accessing secondary education and in continuing to participate when enrolled. Effectively addressing and eliminating these barriers improves the chances of girls who wish to be educated.

## Five Strategies to Promote Access to and Completion in Girls' Secondary Education

### 1. Ensuring a reasonable distance to school: A girl is more likely to enroll in school if the school is located at a reasonable distance from her home.

When the distance to a girl's school is increased by a half-kilometer, her chances of enrollment decrease by 20 percent (UN Report on Women 2012). The absence of a middle school or secondary school close to a girls' home could negatively impact parents' and girls' motivation to pursue secondary education. Further, the distance to school can compound the effects of poverty, with poor households often unable to cover the cost, either of transport or of attending a boarding school. In addition, distance is associated with opportunity costs: More time spent traveling to and from school implies greater loss of income or output from a child's work contribution in domestic chores, working in the family farm or in other types of productive labour. Moreover, girls face a distinctive set of barriers: Longer distances may reinforce security concerns and, in some contexts, early marriage prevents them from progressing beyond primary school.

Village or community based schools may help in eliminating reasons for the disparity. Just as the successful introduction of local primary schools in various contexts, introducing secondary schools located close to the students they serve may help overcome these barriers. Further, where it is not possible to construct new secondary schools, the

## Benefits of Girls' Secondary Schooling

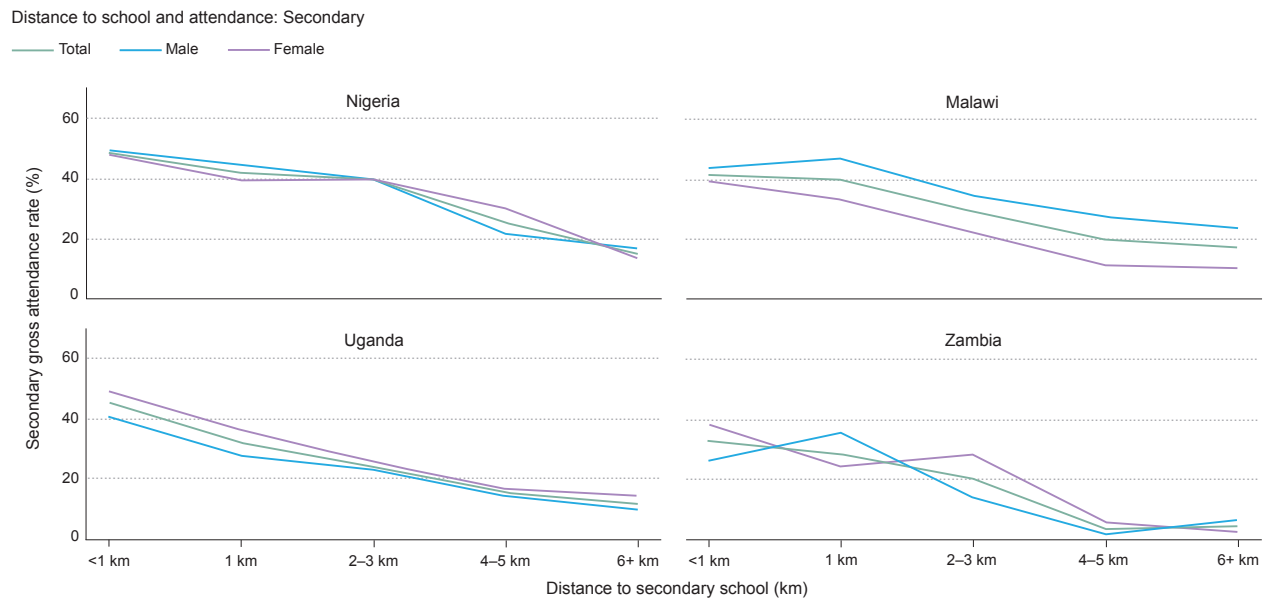
- An extra year of secondary schooling for girls can increase their future wages by 10 to 20 percent.
- Women with secondary education have, on average, 1.5 fewer children than those with primary schooling.
- Secondary education reduces the vulnerability of girls to human trafficking and other forms of abuse.
- Women with post-primary education are five times more likely than illiterate women to be educated on the topic of HIV and AIDS, and are thereby equipped with the knowledge to practice safer sex and prevent infection.
- Women with more education report having more decision power over their own earnings whether it is alone or with someone else.

Source: The World Bank, 2012.

existing infrastructure of the middle school may be expanded to serve as the high school. Alternatively, the existing school could be run in two shifts, for both middle school and high school. Where possible, smaller secondary schools for girls in close proximity to their homes would accommodate and motivate girls to participate in secondary schooling.

UNESCO (2012) has compared the impact of distance to school on girls' education at both primary and secondary levels in Nigeria, Malawi, Uganda and Zambia. The study finds that distance to school has a negative impact for both sexes, and is a serious barrier to girls' education, particularly at the lower secondary level, as illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** How distance affects secondary attendance in four Sub-Saharan African countries



Source: Malawi 2002 DHS EdData survey, Nigeria 2004 EdData survey, Uganda 2011 DHS EdData survey, Zambia 2002 DHS EdData survey, cited in UNESCO World Atlas on Gender 2012, p. 105

## *Lessons from a successful primary school access initiative: Reducing the distance to school in Ghor Province, Afghanistan*

In an intervention focused on access to primary schools in Ghor Province, Northwestern Afghanistan, Burde and Linden (2013) found that placing a formal school in a village dramatically improves academic participation and performance among all children, particularly for girls. Within the 31 villages that participated in the study, results indicated that enrollment in a formal school increased by 52 percent and that average test scores of all girls in the village increased by 0.65 standard deviations. The gains for girls are large enough that in the treatment villages the gender gap in enrollment is virtually eliminated and in test scores it is reduced by over one third.

The study also revealed that the demand for education for both boys and girls was present, however, due to conservative cultural norms, a family would not be willing to send their daughters to school if the school was located outside the village. The intervention demonstrated that in areas such as rural Afghanistan where conditions are typically harsh for girls and women, introducing village-based schools can be an effective strategy to increase girls' participation in education.

Source: Burde, D and Linden, L. 2013. "Bringing Education to Afghan Girls: A Randomized Controlled Trial of Village-Based Schools." American Economic Journal: Applied Economics 2013, 5(3): 27-40.

## **2. Availability of private, safe latrines/acceptable menstrual hygiene management (MHM) facilities: A girl is more likely to continue her schooling if there are adequate MHM facilities in the school.**

Many studies draw attention to the menstrual hygiene challenges within school environments, which range from girls having to miss school days, to a disruptive experience while at school. Findings highlight the gendered nature of the school environment for adolescent girls, emphasizing their unique needs. Tangible improvements to the school environment must be made in order to make it girl-friendly. Although literature is divided on the effect of menstruation on girls' absenteeism, there is no doubt that MHM remains a challenge for girls especially in the absence of adequate facilities.

A UNICEF (2009) study undertaken in India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan on overcoming exclusion and discrimination in South Asia reported that girls face huge disadvantages in all four countries for lack of toilet and water facilities at schools. During the time they are menstruating, girls frequently have to leave school or abstain for lack of proper facilities, sanitary cloths or to dispose of their sanitary pads. The existing facilities were such that it embarrassed the girls, offering them no privacy and dignity.

The availability of separate latrines for girls and women may also affect the retention of female teachers. Having clean, safe separate female designated latrines must be a requirement for every school at all levels of education.

## **3. Ensuring a safe and secure school environment: A girl is more likely to continue her schooling if she feels safe and secure in her school and learning environment.**

Gendered beliefs and practices in the home/ community and school environments mutually reinforce and impact girls' persistence in school and their potential to learn. Girls face specific adversities in the school environment each day. Teachers and male students perceive girls' abilities and interact with female students through the same gendered

### *Acceptable Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) facilities are those which:*

- Provide privacy for changing materials and for washing the body with soap and water;
- Provide access to water and soap within a place that provides an adequate level of privacy for washing stains from clothes/reusable menstrual materials; and
- Include access to disposal facilities for used menstrual materials (from collection point to final disposal).

Source: WHO-UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme, 'Consultation on Draft Long List of Goal, Target and Indicator Options for Future Global Monitoring of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene', 2012, cited from Sommer, M. et al. 2012.

constructs prevailing in their socio-cultural milieu. As a result, girls experience disadvantages at both ends with respect to their learning opportunities.

Differential treatment of boys and girls extends across the spectrum in the school environment ranging from the various curricular opportunities available, perception and treatment by individual teachers of the boys and girls, and application of rules, regulations, and administrative practices in the conduct of various interactions. Research suggests that it is the girls' and boys' experience of schooling in their early teen years that determines the difference in their enrollment, retention and schooling outcomes.

The perception of girls' abilities compared to those of boys with respect to schooling and academic participation further becomes a serious barrier to girls' continuation and completion of secondary schooling. These perceptions result in 'girl-unfriendly' school environments and day-to-day practices, which deter girls from participating in school. These perceptions extend from textbooks to attitudes and behavior toward girls in school. Moreover, school related gender-based violence creates a hostile and uncomfortable environment for learning.

Since many schools systematically reflect and promote society's low expectations of schooling outcomes for girls, schools have the potential to promote the opposite reality. Altering the school's cultures so that teachers promote positive attitudes about the academic potential of female students and offer equal learning opportunities for girls is needed. It is important for teachers, principals, and school district administrators to be oriented on providing a healthy schooling experience for adolescent girls, keeping in mind a code of conduct expected from all staff, which protects the health and safety of all students, especially girls. Teachers' unions must also be involved, particularly in apprising their members of expected behaviors in school and consequences of violations of any such codes of conduct.

#### **4. The presence of female teachers in a school: A girl may be more comfortable to approach a female teacher than a male teacher, especially in regions where cultural norms challenge the participation of girls' schooling.**

In regions where there is a shortage of female teachers, all efforts must be made to recruit, train and deploy qualified female candidates to those schools in which there is a lack of female representation on staff. Establishing teacher training institutions which provide opportunities for professional teaching qualifications for girls with higher secondary school education may be one incentive for girls to pursue a professional occupational track immediately after their higher secondary education as well as guaranteeing the supply of female teachers who can be deployed to under-represented schools. Further, parents who are reluctant to send their daughters to school due to gendered cultural beliefs may feel more comfortable if the teacher is female. Female teachers serve as role models for younger girls and in changing perceptions of society in terms of girls' education. The visibility of female teachers help demonstrate to parents and the community that education is a valuable pursuit for girls.

#### **5. Relevance of curriculum to employment in the labour market: A girl may be more motivated to participate in school if the school curriculum was aligned with labour market needs.**

In most contexts there is a serious mismatch between the education received by girls and the knowledge and skills sets required for entering the labor market. Such situations, therefore, require re-evaluating and re-drafting school curriculum for girls in all levels of secondary school, such that it offers the choice of a skills-based education for girls. This re-tooling of the offered choices of compulsory and optional subjects would aim to equip adolescent girls with applied knowledge and vocational skills to better align their education with the demands of the labour market at the entry level, locally. Strong linkages with technical training institutes and industrial training colleges would assist this re-tooling of the secondary curriculum.

### **Conclusion**

There is strong evidence from all regions of the world demonstrating that increasing investments in women's human capital, especially education, should be a priority for countries seeking to increase both economic growth and human welfare. Investing in quality secondary education for girls yields high economic and social returns. In many cases, the weight of gender biases and cultural beliefs and practices may require adaptation of strategies or the adoption of multiple strategies, as each context is unique and requires careful consideration. These interventions have the potential to make enormous contribution to girls' and women's condition and to transform societies in the shorter and longer terms.

---

<sup>1</sup> This briefing note was written by Amritpal Sandhu. It was adapted from a draft report written by Joshi Sudhanshu and his report served as the primary resource for this discussion paper. The UN Girls' Education Initiative also provided support in the development of this paper.

---

**For further information on strategies to promote secondary education participation for girls, and for updates on successful practices, please refer to the following resources:**

**UN Girls' Education Initiative website:**

[www.ungei.org](http://www.ungei.org)

**Global Partnership for Education website:**

[www.globalpartnership.org](http://www.globalpartnership.org)

## References

Burde, D and Linden, L. 2013. "Bringing Education to Afghan Girls: A Randomized Controlled Trial of Village-Based Schools." *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 2013, 5(3): 27-40.

Rihani, M. 2012. "Keeping the Promise: Five Benefits of Girls' Secondary Education." *Academy for Educational Development*: Washington.

Sommer, M., Vasquez, E, Worthington, N and Sahin, M. 2012. "WASH in Schools Empowers Girls' Education: Proceedings of the Menstrual Hygiene Management in Schools Virtual Conference 2012." *United Nations Children's Fund and Columbia University*: New York.

Sudhanshu, Joshi. 2012. "Accelerating Transition of Girls to Secondary Education: A Call for Action." *Global Partnership for Education*: Washington.

UNESCO. 2012. *World Atlas of Gender Equality in Education*. UNESCO: Paris

World Bank. 2013. *World Development Indicators: Participation in Education*.

A large, solid orange abstract shape that resembles a stylized speech bubble or a drop, positioned on the left side of the page. It has a rounded top and a pointed bottom, with a small notch at the bottom center.

**United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)**

3 United Nations Plaza  
New York, NY 10017, USA

© United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
April 2014