Adolescent Girls and Education: Challenges, Evidence, and Gaps

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Executive Summary

In recognition of the criticality of adolescence, the severity of deprivation adolescent girls face, and the opportunities we have to support girls, there has been considerable recent interest in better understanding adolescent girls' lives. Of particular interest have been the pathways out of poverty for girls, with education being one of the main avenues. Access to education is critical to the human development of boys and girls alike, but girls are more often denied access than their male counterparts.

In this perspective, we look at why education is important for adolescent girls, exploring the main moral and instrumentalist arguments, as well as the evidence around investment (or lack thereof). We then present six main constraints to adolescent girls' educational attainment. In the final section, we discuss a number of interventions that have been used to increase girls' opportunities for an education, providing both evidence of their success, and identifying evidence gaps.

Education and adolescent girls: why is it important?

The period of adolescence is a critical one, which profoundly influences girls' future potential. It is a time of key transitions: from girlhood to womanhood; from primary to secondary education; from education to work and family life. Too often, however, these transitions go wrong: with high drop-out rates from secondary school; early and forced marriage; exposure to violence, abuse and to HIV infection; and high maternal mortality.[1]

Adolescence is also the time when gender roles for girls become more entrenched and gender discrimination even more pronounced. In many countries, adolescent girls' lives become limited to the domestic sphere as their mobility becomes increasingly restricted and their work burdens increase. In many societies, gender discrimination also means that family poverty has a greater impact on girls, who are fed less, are less likely to

have access to healthcare, and are less likely to go to school.[2] Limited educational opportunities also keep girls from securing safe, reliable, and rewarding forms of employment, thereby perpetuating chronic poverty across generations.[3]

Globally, there are 582 million girls aged 10 to 19 years.[4] Over 85% of adolescent girls are estimated to live in poverty (less than $2 per day), in countries such as Bangladesh, Liberia, Tanzania and Rwanda.[5] Approximately 25% of girls in developing countries are not in school.[6] In over a dozen countries across the world, more than 50% - and in some as much as 87% of girls – do not complete primary school.[7] These statistics – accompanied by others – highlight the deprivation, discrimination, and lack of opportunity that adolescent girls globally must contend with.

[1] Plan (2011).
[2] WDR (2012).
[3] WDR (2012).
[4] www.girlsdiscovered.org
[5] www.girlsdiscovered.org
[6] Chabaan and Cunningham (2011)
[7] www.girlsdiscovered.org

But there is strong evidence that investments in adolescent girls' education can reverse this dire picture, and lead to both broad and long term positive changes for girls, their future children, their communities and their countries. There are compelling reasons, both moral and instrumental, for investing in adolescent girls' education.

The moral argument is often neglected in the discourse about girls and education. Adolescent girls have a right to be included on terms that do not disadvantage them, based upon their entitlements as citizens – in some contexts in place for over 200 years.[8] These include their rights to health, education, and personal and economic integrity. Moral arguments frame education as a powerful mode of empowerment – not a panacea.[9] Education has the potential to improve a girl's future possibilities for paid work, her sense of self and confidence, her health and control over fertility and her children.[10]

Mainstream development has largely taken an instrumental approach to girls' education, however, stating how investing in girls' schooling has a host of spill over benefits for issues such as child nutrition, population control, poverty and, importantly, economic growth.[11] Research shows that investing in adolescent girls is a smart economic decision,[12] as greater employment of girls can have impressive impacts on GDP.[13] Investing in a girl's education prevents health related costs of childbirth,[14] and improves the health of future generations because more educated mothers have the assets, capabilities and agency to invest more in their children.[15] Educating girls also postpones marriage; reduces the risk of HIV/AIDS; increases family income; lowers eventual fertility; improves survival rates, health indicators and educational outcomes for future children; increases women's power in the household and political arenas; and lowers rates of domestic violence.[16]

Constraints to girls' education

Girls face a number of constraints and barriers to accessing and benefitting from education. We know, for example, that as adolescent girls grow older, enrollment rates drop off – and this is particularly true in the poorest countries. For example, in only eight of 37 sub-Saharan countries does the secondary school completion rate for girls exceed 15 percent. In 19 countries, the completion rate is below five percent.[17]

There is also strong global evidence that shows that high primary school attendance rates are not reflected in girls' skills and capabilities. Fewer than half of adolescent girls globally have achieved basic literacy by the end of grade three, with Bolivia and Honduras as notable exceptions. In half the African countries included, fewer than 50 percent of young women have achieved basic literacy even after grade five.[18] This is partly attributable to the fact that even where girls are enrolled in school, their attendance is often irregular at best.[19]

In this section we present six main constraints to girls' access to and attainment in education.

Firstly, while education should support girls to achieve the kinds of lives they value, girls' experiences of schooling rarely do this.[20] Girls who stay in school often face poor conditions, a lack of resources, gender-insensitive environments, and gender bias in school materials. A lack of appropriate sanitation facilities to deal with menstrual hygiene affects girls' attendance, leading to high levels of absenteeism, poor performance and drop-out.[21] Called the 'hidden curriculum', gender stereotypes can also be embedded in the content and methodology of education, as well as teachers' expectations of girls.[22] In South Asia, for example, girls are often not represented in textbooks, and teachers may compound this by asking girls (particularly those from excluded caste and ethnic groups) to make tea, wash cups and sweep floors.[23]

8   Plan International (2011); Jeffery and Jeffery (1998).
9   Kabeer (2005); see also Malhotra et al. (2003).
10 Stromquist (2002).
11 Khosla (2013).
12 Cerise et al. (2012); Duflo (2012).
13 Ibid
14 World Bank (2006).
15 Patrinos (2008), Summers (1994), Plan International (2011).

16 See Grown (2005), Lloyd and Young (2009), Plan International (2009).
17 Ibid
18 Ibid
19 See, for example, Calder and Huda (2013).
20 Rao, (2012), Aikman and Unterhalter (2005).
21 Mannathoko (2006), Miske (2004).
22 Gunawardena and Jayaweera (2008).
23 Heijnen-Maathuis (2008); Naryan et al. (2010).

Secondly, given that teachers play a crucial role in shaping girls' aspirations as well as facilitating learning,[24] the lack of skilled, committed, gender-sensitive teachers is another impediment to enrollment and attendance. For example, corporal punishment contributes to high drop out rates in Sub-Saharan Africa,[25] particularly among girls. Girls also commonly face sexual assault, rape and harassment - both in schools, and on their way to and from school - at the hands of fellow school students, teachers and men in the community.[26] In Kenya, research shows that women aged 15-49 who claimed to experience violence since childhood reported high levels of violence from their school teachers.[27]

Thirdly, because formal school systems must follow a set sequence of curricular material (regardless of age), those who start late – often girls – can find themselves sharing a classroom with younger children – a situation that often leads to early dropout.[28] The learning trajectory does not always fit well with the developmental trajectory in many poor countries, particularly for children who get off to a late start or resume their education after some interval. This has been part of the rationale for the development of non-formal learning alternatives.[29] Nonetheless, these are often described as serving children, youth, or adults, but rarely adolescents.

Fourthly, costs associated with schooling are an impediment – particularly for adolescent girls, who are rarely seen as a strong potential 'investment' for education as compared to their male counterparts. Whilst many countries have instituted free universal primary education, this often does not include costs of uniforms, textbooks, travel to school, meals, and other associated expenses.[30] In developing countries, secondary schools typically have much higher associated costs than primary school, making them inaccessible for girls from vulnerable families.

Fifthly, household and community level constraints and expectations also curtail girls' educational attainment. Gendered stereotypes around domestic work, for instance, lead to girls being removed from school in order to contribute to household and agricultural chores.[31] This invariably leads to girls having less time for activities that contribute to their human development.[32] In East Africa, the impact of HIV/AIDS can lead to children, most often girls, having to sacrifice their education to look after sick family members or take on paid work or domestic duties.[33] Interestingly, marriage and pregnancy are a consequence, rather than a reason leading to, girls dropping out of school. Nevertheless, the relationship exists, with almost half (48 percent) of girls in South Asia married before the age of 18, and the same proportion not in secondary school.[34]

Following on from this, countries with lower levels of discrimination against women are more likely to have gender parity in secondary school enrolment.[35] There is a greater gender gap in secondary school enrolment in countries with higher restrictions on women and girls' physical integrity and civil liberties. This suggests that social norms around women and girls' access to public space and violence against women should be taken into account in policies and programmes to close the gender gap in secondary school enrolments.

Sixthly and lastly, even when parents send their daughters to school, their rationale for doing so may reflect underlying views of appropriate gender roles. Among the Annany in Nigeria, for example, formal education is thought to enhance a girl's value in marriage by increasing her familiarity with health care services and the other requirements of running a household. In Egypt, educating girls is justified by many families as a way to make their daughters into better wives and mothers.[36]

[24] Kirk (2008), Rao et al. (2012)

[25] Camfed (2012).

[26] Rao et al, (2012), Dunne et al. (2006) and Leach and Mitchell (2006).

[27] Kenya National Bureau of Statistics and ICF Macro (2010).

[28] Lloyd and Young (2009).

[29] Ibid.

[30] Tamusuza (2011), Rao et al. (2012)

[31] Plan International (2008).

[32] Jones et al (2010).

[33] Akunga (2006), Calder and Huda (2013).

[34] Narayan et al. (2010).

[35] Watson et al. (2013).

[36] Mensch et al. (1999).

What works? Building programmes and policy on the evidence

In this final section, we focus on interventions that have been used relatively extensively to improve girls' educational opportunities. They include economic incentives, investing in school infrastructure and meals, and social norms interventions. There is evidence that these interventions have met with some success in certain contexts. However, other interventions – though popular – have little evidence to support their extensive use and/or impact. We conclude by highlighting some of these apparent evidence gaps.

Economic Incentive

A popular approach to increasing educational investments in adolescent girls is the use of economic incentives through cash transfer programmes or school scholarships. This is often linked to delaying marriage, the two outcomes being inextricably linked, as cash transfers to promote education have also been proven to delay child marriage. Economic incentives take on many different forms. The most prevalent type, cash transfers, are typically given to the families of adolescent girls to incentivise, as well as offset the costs of, investing in the education of adolescent girls. In most cases money is given to individuals on the condition that they (i) enroll in school, (ii) attend regularly, and/or (iii) remain unmarried. However there is robust evidence that programmes without conditions attached also boost girls' educational outcomes, and indeed may be more effective in delaying marriage than conditional programmes.[37]

To some extent, livelihood opportunities for girls' parents have shown to impact positively on education outcomes for adolescent girls; however the direct objective of these programmes is to increase household income, and impacts on children's education is a secondary outcome. For instance, evaluations of India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme have shown that participating households increase investment in adolescent girls.[38] Critically, however, the transfer amounts must be sufficient to meet household needs and the costs of investment. Studies of public works schemes, such as the Productive Safety Net Programme in Ethiopia, show no impact upon girls' schooling, as the transfers are not enough to offset the cost of education.[39]

Investing in the 'supply side': school infrastructure and meals

Investing in physical infrastructure addresses supply side constraints that prevent girls from accessing education. In Ghana, constructing new schools in rural areas during the 1980s boosted girls' enrolments by 60 percent, and boys' by 19 percent. In an independent study, Siphamanlani[40] showed that a girl's probability of ever enrolling in school drops by 1–2 percentage points if the distance to primary school increases marginally, although does not discuss the effects of distance on secondary school enrollment. There appears to be little concrete evidence, however, showing that gender friendly infrastructure (girls' toilets) makes a difference in school attendance,[41] though anecdotal evidence is strong.

School meals are a popular educational intervention to bolster school enrollment and children's nutrition. However, there is little evidence regarding the effect of school meals on children's health and nutrition, except in contexts of drought or famine.[42] For instance, the Midday Meal Scheme (MDMS) in India has shown to have positive impacts on children's health outcomes following a severe drought in Andhra Pradesh.[43]

37 Kidd and Calder (2013).
38 http://www.younglives.org.uk/files/working-papers/yl-wp95_afridi-et-al
39 Ibid.
40 Siphalmani (1999).
41 Camfed (2012).
42 http://www.younglives.org.uk/publications/WP/food-security-beyond-PSNP-ethiopia-well-being-children
43 Ibid.

Social norms interventions

It is clear from an examination of constraints that efforts to enhance girls' schooling opportunities should also involve other influential stakeholders within a girl's life. Working with parents to delay marriage, for instance, can also be critical for enhancing opportunities for education. For example, the Christian Children's Fund's Naning'oi Girls Boarding School project in Kenya delayed age of marriage of Maasai girls by encouraging parents to "promise" their daughters to school, instead of promising them in marriage.[44] A strong sense of honour kept parents from breaking this promise, and the Naning'oi girls' school has a 98 percent completion rate.[45]

A popular approach to shifting social norms – or accepted societal norms and behaviours – has been through ' multi-sectoral' interventions. Evidence shows that such interventions are generally more effective than single-sector approaches, which do not tackle complex constraints holistically.[46] The Berhane Hewan programme in the Amhara Region of Ethiopia, for example, provided an extensive range of support to girls aged 10-19, and their families,

to encourage the abandonment of early marriage.[47] This included supporting the formal and non-formal education of girls by providing school materials; providing productive assets (e.g. goats and materials for their enclosure) to parents in order to provide incentives to keep girls in school and unmarried; mobilising and organising girls into clubs, through which they deliver life skills, health and education; providing a safe space for their interaction, socialisation and learning; mobilising the community using a community dialogue process; supporting the provision of water pumps to communities to reduce the time spent by girls collecting water; and finally, providing fuel efficient stoves. An internal evaluation of the programme found that girls in the programme (as compared to the control) were three times more likely to be in school; 90 percent less likely to be married, and were also more likely to use family planning methods. Although the evaluation showed that girls in the older age group (15-19) were more likely to be married by the end of the programme, demographers argue that delaying marriage age by just a few years has significant impacts on a girl's life prospects.[48]

Evidence gaps

Informal 'bridging' schools to re-integrate adolescents – particularly girls – who have dropped out of school into the formal system are an increasingly popular approach to strengthen human assets. Community based schools, such as Bangladesh's BRAC accelerated learning programme, is one of the best known intervention for bridging children, particularly girls, from informal community based schooling into the formal education system.[49] While for other satellite school interventions it is difficult to untangle what the improvements were attributable to, there does appear to be a synergy between non-formal education centres' recruitment of female teachers and improved results.

In Ghana, Uganda, and Sub-Saharan Africa, decentralisation has provided a good framework for improving primary educational performance – although limited evidence exists for the impacts of decentralisation on secondary education. Some analysts also suggest that this may cause further disparities in provision, especially between rural and urban areas[50]. Universal Primary Education in countries like Ghana and Uganda have increased enrolment rates significantly, but have also shown that associated schooling costs are barriers to entry, girls face high drop out rates due to early marriage, negative social norms, domestic responsibility, and pregnancy,[51] and have not resulted in an increase in employment for young people upon school completion.[52]

[44] Rao et al. (2012), ICRW and Promundo (2007).
[45] Ibid.
[46] ICRW (2007).
[47] Erulkar and Muthengi (2009).
[48] Hervish and Feldman-Jacobs (2011).

[49] Sukontamarn (2005).
[50] see, for example, Akyeampong et al. (2007).
[51] Camfed (2012).
[52] Tamusuza (2011).

Peer support and mentoring interventions, including girls' clubs, are poorly documented but highly prevalent. Interventions like CAMFED, which is a network of members who give their time to train and support girls and their families to enable them to attend school, is regarded as a sustainable intervention – but the outcomes on school attendance, enrollment or cognitive skills are under-researched.[53] The provision of menstrual cups in school is another popular strategy to increase enrollment of girls, but the only randomised trial by Oster and Thornton (2009) shows that it does not actually affect girls' schooling outcomes among seventh and eight grade girls.[54]

Conclusion

In this Perspective, we have tried to analyse how constraints to schooling have kept adolescent girls trapped in vicious cycles of vulnerability and poverty. We have also shown that there are ways forward, and have discussed some approaches that have successfully addressed barriers to girls' education. Education is not the only constraint that girls face, nor is it the only solution to enhancing the lives of adolescent girls. However, there is a clear causality between educational attainment and improvement across other areas – health, income, self-confidence, knowledge of rights and entitlements – and interestingly, these impacts persist with future generations. Mothers who are educated tend to not only secure better paying and less precarious jobs (which naturally benefit their children), but are able to make more informed health choices when their children are ill, are more likely (and able) to ensure their food security, and also have greater likelihood of educating their own children.

It should also be noted that education and years of school attainment matter - those who complete secondary school are more likely to see these benefits as compared to those who drop out after primary. In the race to fulfill the MDGs, many countries have made great strides in promoting primary education among girls – yet there has not been enough of a push to get girls to continue on to secondary school. Domestic and societal burdens, expectations, and an inability or unwillingness of families to invest in higher education for girls (as compared to boys) have repercussions. Countries with educated, empowered women have stronger economic growth and higher gross national product (GNP). Despite this evidence, it remains a challenge to get adolescent girls on the policy agenda. The evidence is stark, and the strategies are clear, yet adolescent girls remain the missing generation in development.

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[53] Rao et al (2012)
[54] Lloyd and Young (2009).

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About The Authors

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Rebecca is a great believer in girl power, and has had enormous fun writing a paper with her friend Karishma.

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Karishma has 'graduated' from writing about Graduation programmes, and has moved onto writing about adolescent girls. She thanks her friend Rebecca for introducing her to the world of girl power.

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