

Creating a level playing field for girls: On the right track but still a long way to go

The ratification of the Beijing Declaration by 189 countries in 1995¹ to end laws that discriminate based on sex was a watershed moment for gender equality. Sex-disaggregated data collected after 1995 provide evidence of global progress in gender equality and rights for girls.² Although gender disparities remain, girls' education, improved health services, economic development, and societal changes have promoted greater gender equality.³ Furthermore, the alleviation of poverty and technological advances have benefitted girls throughout the world. That stated, targets related to gender equality are prominent in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),⁴ reflecting both our concern with gender equality and evidence on the economic returns associated with investing in girls' education, health, and social protection. The existence of an SDG focusing exclusively on girls and women, 25 years after the Beijing declaration, underscores that we still have a long way to go to address gender inequities.

The adverse impact of gender stereotypes and restrictive norms limiting human development continue to be evident.⁵ Gender disparities in sex ratios at birth in countries with strong son preferences suggest that the positive effects of bans on sex-selective abortions are still not universally seen.⁶ Violence towards girls continues to be a serious concern and there is a pressing need to implement policies and provide social support to adolescent girls who are victims of domestic violence.⁶ On a positive note, legal restrictions and changing norms over the last 25 years have led to declines in early marriage, which not only benefits the girls themselves but also their offspring. There has also been a decrease in female genital mutilation and an increase in opposition to it.⁶

A larger proportion of children and adolescents are surviving today than in 1995. However, progress in decreasing adolescent girls' health risks has been relatively slow.⁶ For example, an analysis of DHS trend data on the prevalence of anaemia among 15- to 19-year-old girls in 12 countries indicates that while it has declined, about 40% of girls still have anaemia. Similarly, the birth rate for girls aged from 15 to 19 years stands at 44 per 1000 births, despite a global decline in adolescent birth rates.⁶ Further, only about 50% of pregnant adolescent girls in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa receive four antenatal care visits and only about 61% of births among 15- to 19-year-olds in Sub-Saharan Africa occur in the presence of a skilled attendant.⁶

Girls' health and education are interdependent. Girls in poor health may not be able to concentrate in class, adversely impacting their learning. But girls who are attending school are more likely to delay early marriage thereby protecting their health.⁷ Further health, education and empowerment are inter-related, and extant data gives us reasons for hope as we see positive spill-over effects from education to health and empowerment as well as intergenerational benefits from investing in girls. In addition to being healthier and marrying later, adolescent girls who are better educated are more likely to be employed in the formal sector and have more bargaining power within a marriage than their less educated peers.

Encouragingly, there was a smaller percentage of girls not in school in 2018 compared to 1998.⁶ However, barriers to regular school attendance need to be dismantled. For example, a systematic review of menstrual hygiene management in India indicated that about 24% of girls miss school during their periods.⁸ Much needs to be done to improve water, sanitation and hygiene conditions in schools to ensure that girls do not miss several days of school every

month. It is also important to note that solely building schools and providing free education may not increase girls' participation in education as there may be a need to stimulate demand for formal education, provide incentives for attendance and address the opportunity costs of schooling. Furthermore, gender intersects with other forms of social disadvantage - living in poverty, rural and crowded conditions, and in conflict or emergency situations - that limit access to quality education. As a result, both boys and girls in low- and middle-income countries are failing to master basic literacy and numeracy skills.⁶ Providing gender-equal opportunities may be insufficient to achieve gender equity in all settings. In certain contexts, provision of additional resources to either girls or boys may be needed to achieve equality in outcomes.

Besides education and economic empowerment, we are also witnessing the power of digital technology in improving girls' well-being. Technology allowed Pakistani education activist Malala Yousafzai, at age 11, to share her story with the world about a girls' life under the Taliban. Smartphone apps are being used to prevent child marriage in Bangladesh and decrease early pregnancy and child marriage in Timor-Leste.⁹ Further, social media are supporting girls' and women's empowerment, as seen in the unprecedented Women's Movement in India in which a large group of women and young girls came together to express resistance to the government passing the Citizen's Amendment Act in December 2019.¹⁰ Perceiving this as infringement of their constitutional rights, they resorted to a sustained, organised protest.

The progress made since 1995 gives us reasons for hope. National policies that provide for fee-free primary education have increased girls' participation in education.³ Simultaneous government investment in poverty eradication (SDG 1), free basic education (SDG 4), and promotion of gender equality (SDG 5) can result in multiplicative positive impacts on girls' development.

Moving forward we need to (i) mitigate the insidious impact of culturally-based gendered beliefs and stereotypes; (ii) further address barriers to girls' education and delayed marriage; (iii) recognise the potent impact of government policy; (iv) ensure that gender equity is achieved before we progress to equality; and (v) support the development of behaviours, skills and attitudes that will enable women to thrive in the context of the 4th industrial revolution. There is not one "silver bullet" that will result in progress in gender equality and rights for girls. A combination of interventions in health, education, social protection, and employment are likely to result in the most global progress.

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