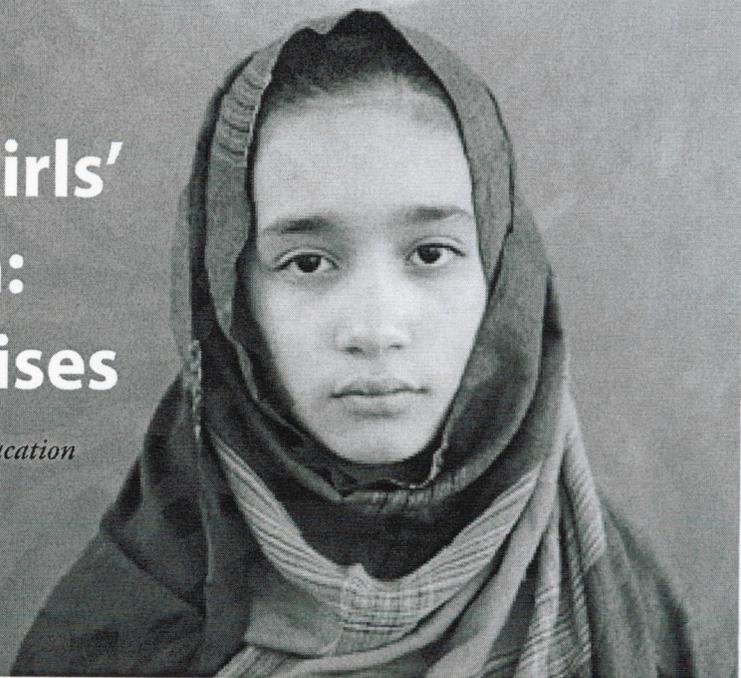


The Critical Issue of Girls' Education in Pakistan: Challenges and Promises

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Background

Although evidence in the past 15 years indicates that girls' education in the developing world "has been a story of progress" (Lloyd, 2011b), globally 39 million primary school age girls (70% from most disadvantaged communities), have never been to school (Lewis and Lockhead, 2007).

Girls' education is particularly challenging in South Asian countries and the progress to date is uneven: in Afghanistan, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Pakistan enrolment of girls has remained problematic indicating great gender disparities. In Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, although gender parity in enrolment has been achieved, other forms of exclusion of girls still exist including in vocational and higher education. Provision of education for girls is not universally available, poverty and socio-cultural factors remain barriers, and national budgets are not sufficient to provide good quality education for all girls in the region (Chitrakar, 2009).

In Afghanistan, girls' education still faces massive challenges especially in the rural and remote areas. Lack of female teachers and infrastructure, and safety are key obstacles. Special measures and incentives including for higher education are needed to bring more girls to school and narrow the gender gap (Chitrakar, 2009).

In Bangladesh, the government and civil society organizations have improved girls' education significantly. Access for both boys and girls is no longer an issue but quality of

education and low achievement especially by girls, must now be addressed (Chitrakar, 2009). The girls' stipend program, for example, now extended up to secondary and higher secondary education has been controversial as it has been found successful in some areas but counterproductive in rural areas of the country (Baulch, 2010; Chitrakar, 2009; Raynor, 2006).

In Bhutan, almost an equal number of boys and girls attend primary education. Girls' participation in vocational and technical education is still very low (only 33%) and less than 1% of teachers are female. Girls' social roles remain subordinate of those of boys. The country needs to invest more in promoting quality girls' education (Chitrakar, 2009).

In India, although great gains have been achieved, inequality still remains especially among the marginalized, the rural, and the poor. Enrollment rates are high but the quality of learning is very low. There is a great need for policies and practices to promote active learning pedagogy (Chitrakar, 2009).

In Maldives, universal primary education and attainment of adult literacy have been achieved. The challenge remains for girls' participation in post-primary education as some rural areas and islands do not offer secondary school. The same is the case with higher education. Although the Maldives has almost the highest ratio of female-headed households in the world, supportive policies for women and girls still lag behind (Chitrakar, 2009).

In Nepal, the education system is guided by decentralization. School Management Committees are authorized to achieve their educational goals through the design and implementation of a School Improvement Plan (SIP). Although basic education is viewed as a fundamental right of every child, gender is often ignored by SIPs. More work needs to be done especially in supporting poor parents to send their girls to school and by providing second chance opportunities for illiterate adults and drop-outs to participate in literacy and vocational programs (Chitrakar, 2009).

Girls' Education in Pakistan

Pakistan, a federal parliamentary republic consisted of four provinces and four federal territories with a population of over 176 million is a very diverse country ethnically, culturally, linguistically, educationally and socioeconomically. It is one of the countries where girls are disadvantaged compared to boys in both primary and secondary education. With female enrolment 16 % below that of males, Pakistan is the third country (following India and Nigeria) with the largest number of out of primary school girls—about 4.2 million (UIS, 2010).

The past several years, the Government of Pakistan developed favorable policies (the National Education Policy of 2009, the Education Sector Reforms, the National Education for All (EFA) Plan 2000-2015, and the insertion of Article 25a in the Constitution) and has initiated efforts to improve the education of children and, in

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particular, the participation of girls in primary school. And there has been a significant incremental improvement over the years in bringing and keeping more girls in school.

However, in Pakistan the allocated budget to education is well below the average of South Asian countries. The Gender Equality Education Index (GEEI) is the lowest in the region. Government education spending can be more effective in reducing the gender gap in education by improving targeting the poor while addressing the constraints that prevent under-privileged girls accessing available services (Chitrakar, 2009; Sabir, 2002).

The problem still remains huge, especially in rural, remote, and in the northern areas of the country. For example, an analysis of social barriers for rural girls in Pakistan reveals a substantial decrease in primary school enrolment rates for girls who have to cross hamlet boundaries to attend, irrespective of school distance, a school located in a neighborhood with high-caste households (this is not the case for boys). Low caste girls benefit from improved school access only when the school is also caste-concordant (Hanan and Ghazala, 2011).

The most disadvantaged group in getting equal opportunities to enroll to and complete school falls in the intersection between gender and marginalization: being girl, being poor, being disable, belonging to a linguistic, religious, or cultural minority, and living in a rural area.

Although in Pakistan about 61-72 different languages are spoken, the language of instruction in schools is Urdu or English followed by Sindhi and Pashto leaving 91-95% of the country's children without opportunity to receive education in their mother tongue (Coleman, 2010). This presents a great disadvantage for poor language minority children and especially for girls and nearly 20% of children (52% girls) aged 3-16 years are out-of-school in rural areas. The majority of these children have never been to school (ASER, 2011).

Efforts to Improve Girls' Education in Pakistan's Provinces

With the devolution of power to the provinces, the implementation of educational reforms has become the responsibility of the provincial governments which often do not have the organizational and technical capacity to successfully deliver results. However,

all provincial governments have taken some action so far to improve the education of girls. They have initiated projects to increase girls' enrolment, attendance, and performance but a systematic review to determine what has worked well and identify optimal levels of incentives for girls and parents needs to be undertaken (Shakil, 2004).

The government of Punjab has initiated stipends for girls' lower secondary schools, free textbooks for all primary school children, improvement of facilities, facility-based contract teachers, and promotion of public private partnerships through the Punjab Education Foundation (PEF). The government of Sindh has been providing free textbooks to primary school children and scholarships to girls in lower secondary school.

The government of Baluchistan has focused on improving the delivery of social services, increasing budgetary allocations to education, improving teaching qualities by strengthening teacher training programs, reducing rural urban and gender disparities, mobilizing communities, developing public private partnerships, and improving school management. There are many organizations engaged in girls' education and networking and coordination amongst them is crucial. For example, fellowship community schools programs in Baluchistan in the 1990's were a success story; about 1,400 community managed schools were integrated into the public system. Similar programs were developed around the same time and in the northern areas and community based programs run today in most of the provinces. Especially in remote areas and scattered communities such innovative strategies can make a difference and meet a great need (Shakil, 2004).

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan's Northern Frontier Province, girls remain one of the most disadvantaged student groups in the country as conflict and insurgency, prevailing poverty, high rural population, gender and cultural practices, reliance on girls' labor for household and other chores, and the lower number of girls' schools and female teachers present a great challenge for both access and quality of education. Some of the reasons for low girl enrolment and high drop-out rates as they are documented in KP's Education Sector Plan (ESP, 2012) are: (1) social access as many parents are still unwilling to send their girls to school due to gender biases and safety concerns; (2) physical access as the climatic and geographical

variations make it hard for many girls to get to and stay in school, including lack of universal access for disabled children and the absence of secondary schools in remote areas; (3) gender bias as discrimination on the basis of gender and even perceptions of the in-educability of some children, such as those with disabilities and indigenous girls; (4) economic access as about three quarters of the people in KP belong to the poorest households in Pakistan, depend almost solely on agriculture, and have been afflicted enormously by the devastating floods of the summer of 2010; (5) Parent Teacher Councils (PTCs) have remained disorganized and highly ineffective in mobilizing schools and the community to support the enrolment and retention of girls.

The KP government emphasizing the educational rights of girls and women has initiated several policies and interventions to improve school access and gender parity in the province. Some of the provisions include exemption of tuition fees in government primary and secondary schools, free textbooks in the primary school, first to girls and then to boys, and basic facilities in a large number of girls' schools such as boundary walls, latrines, water supply, and additional classrooms (Bari and Sultana, 2011). The ESP emphasizes the need to improve the quality of education through the availability of qualified teachers and the provision of teacher professional development, the mobilization of the communities, support for Girls Community Schools (GCS) and women's Community Learning Centers (CLC), the training of private school teachers and strengthening of the Elementary Education Foundation (EEF).

In addition to the measures taken by the provincial governments, donor countries, development agencies, NGOs, civil, religious, and community organizations have developed programs to improve girls' education in Pakistan. Strategies that have been used include provision of financial incentives to girls and families such as stipends and cash transfers, engagement of communities and religious leaders, recruitment of female teachers, improved curricula, instructional and assessment practices, development of literacy centers for women and drop-outs, construction of classrooms and neighborhood schools, separate sanitation facilities and boundary walls, and safety programs for girls. Despite these efforts, however, the need for schools,

classrooms, materials, trained teachers, and textbooks is still grave and in supporting girls' education financial incentives are necessary but not sufficient. Community mobilization, working with the elders, developing role models and following a community-based type of approach are critical.

Conclusion

Progression in girls' education is dependent on good governance and on the recognition of the socio-cultural, political, and economic rights of girls in the society (Ramzan, 2011). Assessment of how information flows within and between different levels of government involved in the planning and delivery of education services is necessary to inform policy makers and implementers (Shakil, 2004).

The solution to gender inequality in education goes beyond the education sector requiring a multi-sectoral strategy that addresses education, health, law, agriculture, and infrastructure (The World Bank 2008, p. 5). Data must be collected and disaggregated by age, opportunities to attend secondary school must be expanded and communities, families, men, and boys must be mobilized to support girls' education (Levine, et al., 2009).

Especially, continuing education during adolescence helps girls overcome a history of disadvantage both at the work place and in the community making the shift from dependence to self-sufficiency and self-determination (Lloyd, 2011b). However, while the benefits of educating adolescent girls during their course of study may be prevalent, they fade or disappear during adulthood in areas where women's traditional roles are deeply rooted in the society (Lloyd, 2011a).

Furthermore, in Pakistan interventions in girls' education must extend beyond the school walls, be multiple and involve entire communities. Incentive schemes to promote girls' participation in primary and secondary education, community based approaches, awareness through mass media and private radio stations present a great opportunity for dissemination of information relating to girls education and keeping the debate on the issue alive (Shakil, 2004). The benefits of girls' schooling are long term and affect positively fertility, nutrition, maternal, newborn and child health, literacy practices at home, getting and keeping more children in school, women's empowerment, and impact families, communities and across

generations. Tackling the issue of girls' education in Pakistan is critical for national unity, peaceful coexistence, progress, prosperity and for world peace. ★

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