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Girls' schooling in developing countries: Highlights from Population Council research

Prepared by Cynthia B. Lloyd

As more girls from developing countries attend school into their teens, the importance of schooling experiences and school quality for adolescent sexual and reproductive health, as well as for girls' successful transitions to adult roles, is clear. The Population Council's research on schooling seeks to foster a deeper understanding of the patterns and trends in schooling for girls and more particularly the relationship between experiences in school, school quality, and various adolescent outcomes, including: school attendance and attainment; time use and work roles; sexual and reproductive health; gender role attitudes, citizenship, and community participation; and transitions to marriage and childbearing.

Highlights from this research program are summarized below under five broad subtopics: (1) the demography of schooling; (2) school attendance and its benefits for girls; (3) sexual and reproductive experiences and school progress; and (4) gender equity, teacher attitudes, and school quality; (5) adolescent girls' participation in the non-formal education sector. The research has been both comparative and in-depth in selected countries, including Bangladesh, Egypt, Guatemala, Kenya, Pakistan, Senegal, and South Africa. It has run in parallel with the development and evaluation of programs to address the needs of out-of-school girls and other marginalized groups of girls. These programs aim to support girls in school, to support their return to school if they are no longer in school, and to provide safe spaces to learn various life skills.

Universal schooling contributes to fertility decline, yet gender gaps persist

For sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, the gender gap in schooling is disappearing, but the levels of participation are well below what is required to achieve universal primary school completion by 2015 (Millennium Development Goal 2). Nationally representative household survey data on schooling participation and attainment from 24 countries in sub-Saharan Africa have been used to derive alternative estimates of levels and trends in schooling, with a particular focus on gender differ-



ences (Hewett and Lloyd 2005). The data analysis illuminates some of the biases inherent in the school-based data reported by UNESCO, in particular a potentially exaggerated gender gap.

The gender gap persists, however, in vulnerable groups (rural populations, ethnic minorities, or other excluded populations). In-depth analyses in Guatemala (Hallman et al. 2007), Pakistan (Lloyd et al. 2007), and Senegal (Montgomery and Hewett 2006) document the huge gender gaps in school participation and attainment that persist among rural (particularly geographically isolated) and ethnically marginalized or excluded populations. These analyses document the double, triple, and sometimes quadruple disadvantages suffered by girls from these groups.

Both comparative research on Africa (Lloyd, Kaufman, and Hewett 2000) and in-depth research in Pakistan (Sathar et al. 2003) demonstrate the importance of the achievement of mass schooling for fertility decline. All sub-Saharan countries that have achieved mass schooling, defined as 75 percent of young people reaching grade 4 or higher, have begun the fertility transition. In rural Pakistan the achievement of gender equity in school access was strongly associated with women's expression of lower fertility desires and therefore their likelihood of using contraception to limit family size.

The Ishraq program in rural Upper Egypt: Providing a pathway for re-entry to formal schooling

In 2001, the Population Council and Save the Children, in partnership with Caritas and the Centre for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA), designed and implemented a pilot program, known as Ishraq (“enlightenment”) to address the needs of out-of-school girls aged 13–15 in several rural villages of Al Minya governorate in Egypt. The program has multiple goals, including the promotion of literacy, teaching of life skills, development of social networks, fostering of leadership and self-confidence through sports, and the reintegration of participants into the formal schooling system. In 2009, Ishraq was scaled up throughout Upper Egypt, and to date 1800 girls have participated in the program.

www.popcouncil.org/projects/40_IshraqSafeSpaces-Girls.asp#/Resources

For girls, school attendance leads to multiple benefits

Certain benefits associated with school attendance for girls appear to be nearly universal regardless of the type or quality of school attended. These include greater gender equity between boys and girls in time use and work burdens while they remain enrolled (Lloyd et al. forthcoming; Arends-Kuenning and Amin 2004; Lloyd and Grant 2005; Lloyd 2005), a reduced risk of premarital sex, particularly among girls (Lloyd 2005), and a decline in rates of early marriage, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (Mensch, Singh, and Casterline 2005). Furthermore, it appears that adolescents who do become sexually active while still in school are more likely to use contraception than their same-age peers who are no longer in school; thus, they face less risk of unwanted pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS (Lloyd 2005).

In societies such as Bangladesh and Egypt, however, where traditional gender role attitudes are deeply entrenched, increased education for girls did not change such attitudes (Mensch et al. 2003), nor did it improve job prospects in the case of Egypt (Amin and Al-Bassusi 2004) or delay age at marriage in the case of Bangladesh (Mahmud and Amin 2006), even though education was associated with other benefits for girls. Thus, greater schooling for girls may confer temporary benefits during adolescence but at least some of the beneficial effects of formal schooling may disappear as young women take up traditional adult

roles, particularly in societies where local cultures value strongly differentiated gender roles.

Risks to girls' sexual and reproductive health threaten their school progress

When girls reach puberty, they face risks such as sexual coercion, unwanted pregnancy, early marriage, and HIV that may interfere with their school progress or force them to drop out. In particular, premarital sex, including nonconsensual sex, can lead to school dropout and remains a risk that adolescents need to manage while attending school. Results of studies in South Africa (Hallman 2007) and in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Malawi, and Uganda (Biddlecom et al. 2006) document that the risks of dropout increase significantly for girls who have had premarital sex. The relationship between school enrollment and girls' experience with reproductive events is more complex today than in the past, as a result of rising numbers of adolescents in school and the lengthening period of adolescence spent in school.

In a comparative analysis using data from several surveys in francophone Africa, Lloyd and Mensch (2008) show that the risks of leaving school during adolescence for reasons other than childbirth or marriage, such as exam failure or financial constraints, far exceed the risks associated with these demographic events. Furthermore, the risks of dropout for these traditional reasons have declined over the past 20 years, despite an increase in the percentage of adolescents who are still attending school after puberty and the lengthening exposure to the risks of pregnancy with later age of school exit. This evolving relationship between reproductive events and schooling requires careful analysis to ensure that policies and programs are able to both support positive outcomes and guard against apparent risks.

Gender equity, teacher attitudes greatly affect school quality

To understand the full effect of schooling on girls it is important to measure more than the traditional elements of school quality—school facilities, pedagogical practices, and time to learn—that are associated with acquisition of the basic academic skills of literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking. A broader approach to school quality also considers health, especially reproductive health, the development of gender-equitable attitudes and behaviors, self-confidence, and decisionmaking skills. The goal of the Council's research has been to identify such factors and document their effects. Clearly, teacher attitudes and behaviors greatly affect these aspects of school quality.

In settings as widely varied as Egypt, Kenya, and Pakistan, Council research has shown that girls are more responsive to various dimensions of school quality than boys. In particular, in Kenya, various aspects of the school environment, including levels of teacher support and advice, teachers' attitudes toward the relative importance of math for girls and boys, and experiences of harassment and unequal treatment, seem to have a greater effect on girls' dropout rates than on rates for boys (Lloyd, Mensch, and Clark 2000). In Egypt, where girls are seen

to be well behaved and easier to teach, many of the factors affecting school exit for girls are related to more traditional elements of school quality. Teacher treatment, such as whether or not a student was told by a teacher that he or she was a failure, mattered to both boys and girls in terms of dropout rates (Lloyd, el Tawila, Mensch, and Clark 2003). In rural Pakistan, both enrollment and retention decisions are responsive to school quality. In the case of enrollment, the share of teachers residing in the community—a fact easily known to parents—was found to have a particularly important effect on girls' enrollment; in the case of retention, attending a government school rather than a private school—government schools typically have a lower rank on most dimensions of school quality—tends to significantly increase the chance that a girl will drop out of school (Lloyd et al. 2005 and Lloyd et al. 2006). Teacher absence, which is most prevalent in government girls' schools because of their lower level of amenities and their reliance on non-local female teachers, reduces school access for girls. At the time of the school visit, 25 percent of enrolled girls in rural Pakistan did not have a teacher present in the classroom (Ghuman and Lloyd 2007).

Enrollment rates and dropout rates are not the only adolescent outcomes affected by school quality. In Kenya, a school characterized by a gender-neutral atmosphere appears to reduce the risk for girls of engaging in premarital sex relative to a school which is less friendly to girls (Mensch et al. 2001). In South Africa, girls' poor performance in school as measured by their record of grade repetition and dropout is strongly positively associated with their likelihood of becoming pregnant while enrolled in school and with dropping out of school if pregnant (Grant and Hallman 2006). An evaluation of the life skills education program introduced in all secondary schools in South Africa in 2005 found significant effects on knowledge and attitudes and reported use of condoms but no reported delays in the age of sexual initiation and no reduction in number of partners, suggesting that the quality of the program was not yet sufficient to meet all of its stated goals (Horizons program 2004).

The current and future benefits of adolescent girls' participation in non-formal educational programs are unknown

Along with the push to universalize schooling in the past 10 years has apparently come a rise in the number of NGO schools, which are typically non-formal schools (UNESCO 2007). A recent Council report entitled *New Lessons: The Power of Educating Adolescent Girls*, commissioned by the United Nations Foundation and the Nike Foundation, indicates that non-formal education offers a route to learning for disadvantaged girls and documents many examples of non-formal educational programs currently providing an alternative education for adolescent girls (Lloyd and Young 2009). Ironically, enrollment in non-formal schools is rarely captured in national school enrollment data, thus minimizing the visibility of these efforts and their ability to contribute to development goals. Furthermore, their coverage and impact for adolescent girls are unknown both in the short run, for their school progress, and in the long run, for how well girls are prepared for adulthood, paid work, and household management.

Policy implications

Even as school enrollment rates increase for girls and the gender gap closes in many countries, girls in vulnerable subpopulations still lag far behind and will require special support to be integrated into formal schooling systems. Complementary non-formal educational programs that are designed to track children back into the formal education system will be an increasingly important strategy for allowing adolescent girls to progress to formal secondary school. Growing evidence of poor learning outcomes in many developing countries has led educational policymakers to recognize the importance of investments in school quality. The results of Population Council research on schooling draw attention to the many dimensions of school quality that can be important for success as an adult, particularly in the case of girls, whose behavior and progress in school seem to be more sensitive to the learning environment than is the case for boys. Additionally, *New Lessons: The Power of Educating Adolescent Girls* provides a compendium of girl-friendly educational programs for adolescents, stressing the need for more data on the social and economic returns for girls who enroll in the growing non-formal education sector (Lloyd and Young 2009). As countries seek to capture the gains from increased schooling for their young people, they will benefit from careful assessments of these aspects of schooling and their implications for desired outcomes.

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