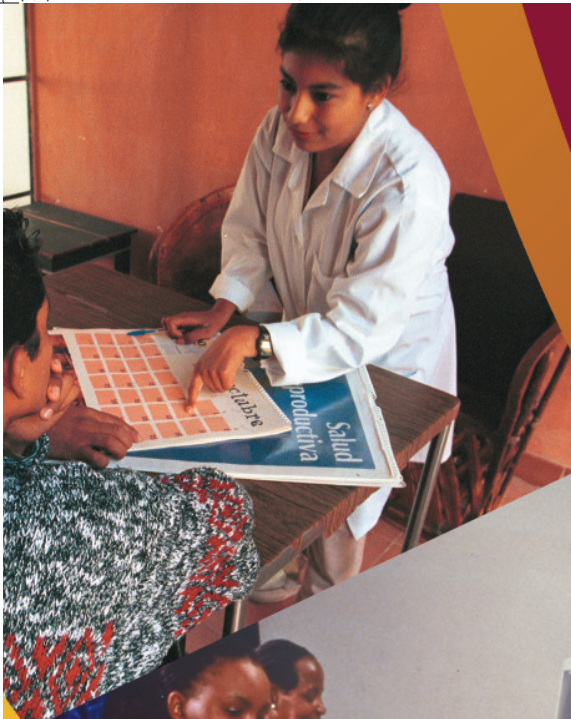
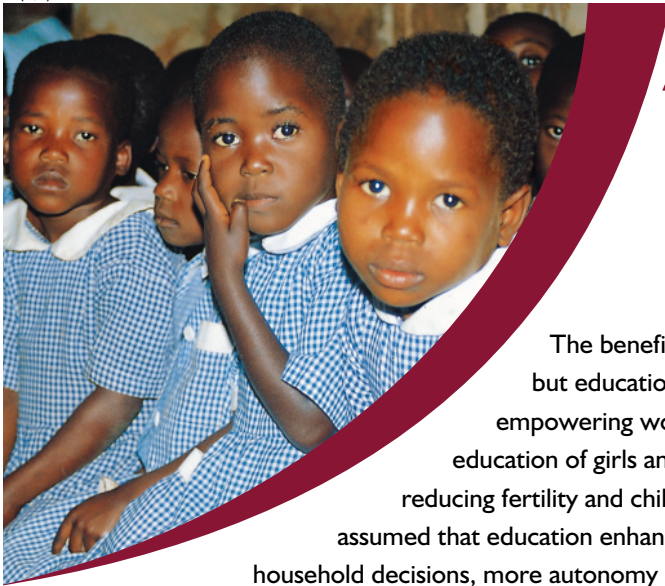


A Second Look at the Role Education Plays in Women's Empowerment





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The benefits of educating girls and women are well understood, but education's role as a catalyst for promoting gender equality and empowering women is not. Because research has established that basic education of girls and women improves key development outcomes, such as reducing fertility and child mortality or increasing worker productivity, it is often assumed that education enhances women's well-being and gives them a greater voice in household decisions, more autonomy in shaping their lives, and better opportunities for participating in the community and labor market.

But a recent literature review by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), entitled "Impact of Investments in Female Education on Gender Equality," shows that education is a necessary but not sufficient investment to achieve gender equality or improve women's well-being. In most cases, only secondary or higher levels of schooling lead to improved options, opportunities, and outcomes for women. That said, for secondary and higher levels of education to have the greatest payoff, investments also are needed that address the social and economic constraints that can impede education's benefits.

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The international development community and most developing country governments have made increasing girls' primary education a central policy aim. That's a good start. But in a globalizing economy, it increasingly is important to consider what must be done to help women and girls not simply to get by, but to thrive. ICRW research shows that women are more likely to control their own destinies and effect change in their own communities when they have higher levels of education. As such, the international development community and developing country governments must begin investing in girls' and women's post-primary education if they are to achieve the third Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of gender equality and women's empowerment.

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Secondary Education Is Key

To date, global commitments to girls' education have focused on primary education. Indeed, the second MDG is to achieve universal primary education for girls and boys by 2015.¹ This focus must continue, and international commitments to universal primary education must be met because primary education results in positive health outcomes, including improved fertility and lower child mortality rates.

However, a review of available research shows that education is most beneficial to women in settings where they have greater control over their mobility and greater access to services. In many developing countries, women do not have such mobility or access to the resources they need to improve their health or the health of their families. Often, health services are not widely available, or where available, they are of poor quality. In such situations, primary education alone often cannot equip women with the skills and knowledge they need to overcome the many constraints. Recent research in India, for example, shows that women with higher levels of education are more likely to reject a strong societal preference for a son and find ways to compensate for the lost support and discrimination they may experience should they give birth to a daughter (Pande and Astone 2001).

Higher levels of education – six years or more – also are strongly associated with women's improved use of prenatal and delivery services, and postnatal care, and have a greater impact on girls' and women's knowledge of HIV prevention and condom use. Studies of HIV in Africa and Latin America find that education lowers women's risk of HIV infection and the prevalence of risky behaviors associated with sexually transmitted infections (Jewkes 2003; Wolff 2000). While primary education increases girls' and women's ability to discuss HIV with a partner, ask for condom use or negotiate sex with a spouse, secondary education has an even greater impact. Girls who attend secondary school are far more likely to understand the costs of risky behavior and even to know effective refusal tactics in difficult sexual situations.

Secondary education also can play a crucial role in reducing violence against women and the practice of female genital cutting. While educating women clearly cannot eliminate violence, research shows that secondary education has a stronger effect than primary education in reducing rates of violence and enhancing women's ability to leave an abusive relationship (Jejeebhoy 1998). Secondary education also has more effect in reducing female genital cutting than primary education. Profiles of nine African countries found that the practice was more prevalent among uneducated than educated women (Population Reference Bureau 2001). Women with primary or no education are more likely to have been cut than those who have received secondary instruction. In the Central African Republic, for example, 48 percent of women with no education and 45 percent with primary education have been cut, while only 23 percent of women with secondary education have been subjected to the practice. Women's education also affects their attitude toward the genital cutting of their daughters. A study in Egypt found that women who had some secondary education were four times more likely to oppose female genital cutting for their daughters and granddaughters than were women who had never completed primary school (El-Gibaly 2002).



¹ The MDGs are a set of eight development goals that constitute an international agenda to significantly improve the health and well-being of people living in developing countries by 2015.

Context Matters

The effects of education, in general, are greatly influenced by the social context in which women live. In situations of domestic violence, for example, the degree to which education can have a positive impact differs, depending on the social rules or norms governing a woman's life as well as her economic situation. Studies show that the benefits of education in reducing domestic violence are greater in the less patriarchal state of Tamil Nadu in southern India than the more patriarchal state of Uttar Pradesh in the north. In the latter case, only secondary schooling for women leads to lower domestic violence rates (Jejeebhoy 1998).

In Nigeria, the degree to which education increases a woman's autonomy and decision making depends on family structure and employment opportunities. In a study of five ethnic groups in Nigeria, education had no effect on a wife's decision making among the Ibo and Ijaw, whereas among the Kanuri, both primary and secondary education increased women's decision-making authority (Kritz and Makinwa-Adebusoye 1999). Among the Hausa and Yoruba, only secondary education had that effect.

The study found that cultural differences related to family and gender roles, and the varying employment opportunities among the groups, accounted for the failure of education to benefit some women and for only secondary education to help others. In sum, context matters.

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Making Education Pay

Investments in secondary education and policies to ease contextual constraints are especially important to women's economic well-being. ICRW's review of research on the economic returns to women's education shows the benefit to be closely tied to the availability of higher-quality and better-paying jobs. Moreover, for women to be competitive in today's world, they need secondary schooling and training in skills that are appropriate for the market place. Being literate or having only primary education is not enough to enhance productivity or obtain better-paying jobs. In Egypt, for example, one study found that women with low levels of education were virtually shut out of regular wage work (Assaad and El-Hamidi 2001). Furthermore, general or vocational training that is poor or emphasizes women's traditional roles fails to liberate women either economically or socially.

Higher levels of education have greater economic returns for women than men. In India, for instance, a recent study found that the wage benefit for women with secondary education was double that for men. This result is consistent with studies in other countries. Women with higher levels of education also are more likely to work in the formal employment market (where earnings are higher) versus being self-employed or engaging in informal work. In India and Thailand, women are more likely to secure nonmanual, "white-collar" work than production or agricultural jobs. The same study found that women with post-secondary schooling were about 25 percent more likely to be formally employed (Mammen and Paxson 2000).

The benefits of education for women are only realized, however, if they can find appropriate employment. Several studies show that not only do women lack decent employment opportunities in many developing countries, but they also face various discriminatory actions in the work place, ranging from preferential hiring of men to lower pay for equal work. To reap the full economic rewards of investing in women's education – especially higher levels of education – developing country governments also must ensure that their social and economic environments are favorable to women working.

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What's Needed to Realize the Full Benefits of Education for Women

- Scale up investments to achieve universal primary education by 2015;
- Increase investments to achieve gender parity and higher levels of enrollment in, and completion of, secondary and tertiary education;
- Improve the content, quality, and relevance of education through curriculum reform, teacher training, and other actions aimed at transforming attitudes, beliefs, and gender-biased social norms that perpetuate discrimination and inequality; and
- Provide women and girls better health care services, social services, decent employment, and other support so they are better able to reap the full benefits of education.

Helping Women Thrive

The ICRW research review shows that if the end goal is to empower women, then policymakers need to make secondary education as high a priority as primary education has been in the past decade. ICRW research would caution, however, that just as primary education is not a panacea to the many disadvantages and inequalities women face today, neither is secondary education. While education can be used as a policy instrument to increase women's ability to negotiate their sexual environment, for instance, other key risk factors in the general population must be addressed concurrently in order to reduce the prevalence of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV and AIDS. Similarly, in the economic sphere, policy efforts to educate girls need to go hand in hand with adequate job creation. A comprehensive approach, therefore, is needed that invests in both primary and secondary education as well as the social and economic factors that will ensure that education has the greatest payoff for women.

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