

Gender in Education

Reducing gender inequality in education is seen as an important goal among those who set current development policy. By not educating girls, countries waste human capital and limit their economic growth. As a result, one of the UN's Millennium Development Goals is the elimination of gender disparity in education at all levels by 2015. Many countries, China, India, and Bangladesh among them, appear likely to reach that goal. The outlier is Africa. On average, the African continent had only 82 girls in secondary school for every 100 boys in 2010.

One response to this problem is to spend more money on girls' education. The UN finances schooling for girls in 15 sub-Saharan African countries, while NGOs like Camfed pay for hundreds of thousands of girls to be educated in places like Ghana, Malawi, and Tanzania.

Research shows, however, that paying for girls' schooling is not enough to end educational inequality. One recent study found that, in rural Uganda, girls' school attendance falls much more than boys' during droughts. For example, a 15% decrease in rainfall caused a 5 percentage point drop in school attendance of seventh grade girls. Although often temporary, these absences had long term effects as the girls who stayed away from school during droughts had lower test scores than boys at the end of their primary school years. Researchers also found that this pattern continued and even intensified after Uganda eliminated fees at state-run schools in 1997.

Why do families choose to keep girls home during droughts? Most of the workforce in Uganda is employed in agriculture, so droughts can abruptly and drastically reduce family incomes. The additional income that can be generated by children's labor is suddenly needed to help support the household. Since returns to education are higher for boys than for girls (in other words, boys tend to earn more in the job market than similarly educated girls), families are more likely to choose girls over boys to leave school and enter employment. Older girls suffer the greatest, as they have higher earning potential than their younger sisters.

One possible solution to this issue is the introduction of weather insurance or savings schemes that will boost household income during droughts or other tough times. Insurance has been shown to help families smooth consumption, allowing them to maintain relatively constant levels of household spending even when they suffer unexpected losses of income, or income shocks. For example, studies of Victorian England show that working-class women and girls would eat less when families experienced income shocks, but their nutrition levels improved as groups called "friendly societies" developed insurance programs to help these families.

In addition to helping girls, the benefits of reducing gender inequality in education are believed to extend to all members of a society. An increase of 1% in the number of girls with secondary education should increase growth in annual income per capita by 0.3%. Increasing girls' education also improves the health of their eventual children. About half of the reductions in child mortality over the past 40 years in Ghana have been attributed to improvements in female education.

Read the article entitled "Gender Inequality in Education." Write an essay, based on the article and your own knowledge of economics, explaining why African girls receive less schooling than boys and propose a solution to the issue. Be sure your position is supported by economic reasoning.

Evaluation will be based on the accuracy, clarity, completeness, and originality of your answer. A good essay should be well written, well organized, and coherent.

Excellent/Good Answer (Score of 5 or 6): Gender inequality in education is a problem facing many African countries. Economists see this as an issue due to the lack of investment in human capital that might have otherwise been used to improve economic growth. Studies show that increasing secondary school education of girls should increase per capita economic growth in a country. Other studies have found that the health of children improves when their mothers have more education, and if we want the next generation to be healthy and strong, we should dedicate ourselves now to educating girls.

In spite of the knowledge that educating girls is beneficial to the girls, their families and society, many poor families find it hard to keep girls in school. This is because poor families suffer from economic shocks, such as the droughts that plague Ugandan farmers. When droughts occur, agricultural income falls, and the Ugandan farm families find it difficult to keep up with their expenses. One way to increase income during these times is to take children out of school and send them to work. Since women earn less than men in the labor market, girls' education is less valuable than boys' in Uganda and other African countries. These families therefore find it rational to take girls out of school earlier and more often than boys.

This explanation of family behavior points to a couple of possible solutions to the problem of gender inequality in education. First, aid organizations should find ways to maintain family incomes in the face of droughts or other negative economic shocks. This could be through offering drought insurance to families or by encouraging families to save for future hard times. By helping families smooth their consumption, policy-makers can help insure that they no longer need the income that girls can bring in when they are pulled out of school.

In addition to smoothing consumption, another way to keep girls in school is to increase the incentives for families to educate their daughters. One simple way to do this is to pay for the schooling of girls, removing that economic burden from families, or possibly even to pay families to send their daughters to school. Another way would be to work with industry to encourage and reward women's work force participation, especially in jobs that require secondary education. By working to increase the economic returns to female education, we can increase the incentives for families to send their girls to school.

Whatever solution we choose for decreasing educational inequality between boys and girls in Africa, it is clear that simply encouraging female education for the future benefit of society is not enough. We must recognize that families' choices are economically rational and if they pull their girls out of school it is because that is the best economic choice for them at that time. If we want people to change their behavior, we must often change the incentives that they are facing. This is true if you want to discourage driving by increasing gas taxes in the United States or if your interest is in increasing the education of Ugandan girls.

Fair/Adequate Answer (Score of 3 or 4): Many countries in Africa have the problem of gender inequality. This means that more boys are going to school than girls. This is a problem because girls are as valuable as boys and they can make a valuable contribution to the economy if only they are allowed to go to school by their parents. Better educated girls can also contribute to the next generation by producing healthier children.

Many NGOs have tried to encourage the education of girls. They do this by paying for girls' schooling in Africa and all over the world. In Uganda, this is not enough. Because Uganda is an agricultural society, girls do not earn as much as boys, and families do not find educating them to be valuable, even when it is free. They also don't mind pulling them out of school in the case of drought so that the girl can work and bring in income to the family.

The way to fix this problem is to create insurance for families to pay for their daughter's education in the case of drought. A family with enough insurance will never suffer financially and will not mind sending daughters to school even though they earn less than sons. They will also have enough money to continue to send their girls to school even in the case of economic shocks. Once they know that it is for the good of the country to educate their daughters, families with insurance should be happy to do so and the problems of gender inequality in Uganda and other African countries can be solved.

Poor Answer (Score of 1 or 2): African education is bad for girls, as many girls in Africa do not get as much education as boys. This can be bad if the economy depends on girls and the country will lose the economic growth.

Even though all girls' educations are paid for in Uganda, many families do not send their girls to school. This is because girls can earn more money working than they can gain from going to school. This is true because women earn less than men.

If we educate families about the value of sending girls to school, they will realize that there are many benefits. They no longer choose what is the most convenient for them and instead send their daughters to school for the good of their daughters and the good of the country.