



The GAPS Think Piece – 21

Participatory Development in Education: The Role of Local Communities in Closing Gender Gaps in Education

A Case Study of Egypt

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Access to basic and tertiary education remains a global challenge to development to this date, especially in the context of the developing world. Minimizing gender disparities and closing gender gaps in education are among the most pressing issues that the developing world needs to address. In many countries, girls' education is still perceived as 'unnecessary' compared to that of boys. Development aid has recently adopted an approach of local participatory development and building social capital in education as a means to address issues of access and equity in education. This is because fostering a culture of social capital in education within the home environments in poorer and/or rural communities builds awareness of the importance of girls' education leading in turn ultimately to local empowerment. In parallel, the educational process is bettered through increasing school enrolments and the adoption of educational methods that nurture students who become more equipped to respond to the demands of their environment. This paper addresses the backgrounds and struggles behind gender disparities in education globally and within the Egyptian experience and explores the approaches adopted by the international donor community to integrate local communities into the process of educational reform in order to create solutions.

The Debacle

Many studies have advocated in favor of girls' education for both the positive social implications and the positive economic impacts on both their immediate families and larger communities; including their contribution to an increase in family incomes, to reduced fertility, to improved infant and maternal mortality rates in the society, while offering of greater life choices to women. It is said that providing one extra year of education to a girl beyond the average boosts wages by 10% to 20%.



Moreover, a 100-country World Bank (WB) study has shown that increasing the share of women in secondary education by 1% jolts annual per capita growth by 0.3%¹, which thus leads to faster economic growth.

On the social level, when women gain approximately four extra years of education, fertility decreases by 1 birth rate, and extra years of girls' education can reduce infant mortality rates by 5% to 10%. Furthermore, educating women has far more impact on educating children than the education of men. Similarly, it decreases their chances of catching diseases such as HIV, and affords women increased empowerment and participation, while strengthening democracy on the political level.

Despite the benefits, girls' education remains a universal challenge, mainly because its costs are higher to parents and its benefits less immediate compared to those for boys. Global statements and world initiatives have begun to focus on the need to minimize gender gaps in education. For example, the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000 endorsed six goals, two thirds of which focused on eliminating gender disparity in education. Most importantly, the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), now, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), have focused on gaps in girls' education as detrimental to development, and UNICEF has declared that "None of the MDGs will likely be met unless there is significant progress in girls' education"². In a 2004 address to the Women's Health Coalition, Kofi Annan stated that "there is no tool for development more effective than the education of girls"³. Global initiatives have included the Education for All (EFA) UNESCO initiative, which resulted in a global increase in multilateral and bilateral foreign aid being directed to universal primary education at the expense of technical and vocational trainings and adult education.

¹ Herz, Barbara Knapp, and Sperling, Gene B. What Works in Girls' Education: Evidence and Policies from the Developing World. Council on Foreign Relations.

https://books.google.com.eg/books?hl=en&lr=&id=7a0W_bqvzA0C&oi=fnd&pg=PR5&dq=importance+of+girls+education&ots=UdIVrPdTSf&sig=UhFPgkebVL61W0xDwopxMSHJeM8&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=importance%20of%20girls%20education&f=false

² "THE CLOCK STRIKES MIDNIGHT". *Gender Achievements and Prospects in Education: The GAP Report*, UNICEF. <http://www.ungei.org/gap/educationClock.html>

³ "Women's Empowerment in Africa". *Elimu Africa- Education Africa*. <http://www.elimuafrica.org/page20/page14/page14.html>



Other initiatives include the Fast-Track Initiative (FTI), under the WB and the United Nations' Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI), under the auspices of UNICEF. The latter had mandated countries, Egypt being one, to form an action plan for the education of girls by the year 2002, to be operational in 2005. However, a UNICEF 2005 report indicated that "while UNGEI is on the way to achieving its targets of universal primary education by 2015 in some regions and countries, the challenge remains, with the accomplishments registered being 'baby steps compared to what could have—and should have—been achieved'⁴.

The Egypt Experience

Significant monetary contributions were injected towards the betterment of educational conditions in rural Egypt, especially in Egypt's post-colonial era. It is also among the top countries whose educational sector has received extensive sponsorships under the mandates of the MDGs. As a result, Egypt has made significant improvements in meeting the MDGs, especially in the basic education sector and in closing the gender gap between girls' and boys' school enrollments⁵. Despite the efforts, sub-national discrepancies continue; approximately 15% of children aged between 4 to 5 years old were enrolled in pre-primary schools; a number far from the national goal of 60% enrolment which the government had set for itself by the year 2010⁶. Until 2012, less than 10% of the total number of schools met the national standards for quality education⁷. In addition, 35% of preparatory stage students in Egypt are considered illiterate, according to a 2015 MDG report. Furthermore, Egypt scored in 139th place among 140 countries in universal education quality matrixes according to a 2013 WB report, behind countries such as Botswana, Uganda, and Bangladesh⁸. These indicators show that there is a discrepancy between quantity and quality of educational attainment in Egypt.

The number one enemy of girls' education in Egypt is poverty, where girls' education is still perceived as an added and "unnecessary" cost within the overall frame of extremely modest family incomes.

⁴ Sultana, Ronald G. "THE GIRLS' EDUCATION INITIATIVE IN EGYPT". UNICEF MENA-RO, Learning Series, Vol. 1 (January 2008). https://www.um.edu.mt/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/39504/GEI-Egypt_Sultana.pdf

⁵ "Egypt Programme Profile: Education". *UNICEF Egypt*. Accessed February 18, 2017. <http://www.unicef.org/egypt/education.html>

⁶ Overview. The Situation of Children and Women in Egypt". *UNICEF Egypt*. <http://www.unicef.org/egypt/overview.html>

⁷ Overview. The Situation of Children and Women in Egypt". *UNICEF Egypt*. Accessed February 18, 2017. <http://www.unicef.org/egypt/overview.html>

⁸ "The Africa Competitiveness Report 2013". *The World Bank*. Accessed February 15, 2017. <http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/Africa/Report/africa-competitiveness-report-2013-main-report-web.pdf>



Accordingly, such funds are ultimately directed to a boy's education, being the natural investment in the family's prospects for improved financial conditions in the future. Naturally, this leaves girls in their "natural" roles of performing household chores, cooking and cleaning, taking care of the laundry, and so on. Studies have demonstrated the strong connection between educational levels and poverty, and have correlated rising education levels with lessening conditions of poverty; the chance of a university-educated Egyptian being poor is less than 2% whereas the chance of poverty for someone who is illiterate is 24%⁹. One estimate placed the proportion of "poor" children out of school nationally in Egypt in 1999-2000 at 23%¹⁰.

Culture and tradition play an important role in the Egyptian context. Tradition channels girls into early marriages and hence, early reproduction, which eventually leads to bigger problems, such as increased maternal health cases. In fact, it has been proven that for every 1,000 women, every additional year of education will prevent two cases of maternal deaths¹¹.

Needless to say, early marriages decrease the quality of girls' lives in terms of their ability to make personal life choices. Accordingly, girls never enroll in the formal education system, and for the lucky ones who do, an increased number of school dropouts is the result. Access to safe, secure, and convenient educational opportunities also remains a complicated issue, especially in rural and remote areas. Another challenge is the resistance to a mixed-classroom environment, where both girls and boys are to sit in one classroom and attend school together. Studies have indicated that when girls and boys are placed together in one classroom, girls receive less pedagogical attention and reduced teaching focus as opposed to boys; in addition to being the object of bullying.

Donor Responses

The retreat of the Egyptian State as concerns the development of public education in Egypt over the years has paved the way for other

⁹ "Embracing the Spirit of the Millennium Declaration". *United Nations Egypt*. UN Common Country Assessment (2005).

<http://www.eg.undp.org/content/dam/egypt/docs/LegalFramework/Common%20Country%20Assesment%202005%20Egypt.pdf>

¹⁰ "NARROWING THE GAP IMPROVING LABOR MARKET OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN IN EGYPT". *The World Bank*. Gender Assessment 2010. Arab Republic of Egypt (2010). http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2011/09/13/000386194_20110913010434/Rendered/PDF/546980ESW0p1120derReport020100Final.pdf

¹¹ "The State of the World's Children 2004". The United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF). (2003).

https://books.google.com.eg/books?id=zrtjWRjKVfgC&pg=PA20&lpg=PA20&dq=suzan+mubarak+on+girls+education&source=bl&ots=D5Ts_t_UK4&sig=LbWxWcLZa8bj5V7d-LbWxWcLZa8bj5V7d

[RpkiiPBMc&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwipqOXzlfzKAhXH_HIKHZeHda4Q6AEIJTA#v=onepage&q=suzan%20mubarak%20on%20girls%20education&f=false](http://www.eg.undp.org/content/dam/egypt/docs/LegalFramework/Common%20Country%20Assesment%202005%20Egypt.pdf)



alternative educational modes and initiatives to emerge, such as the development of Community Based Education (CBE) programs. International donors, such as the WB and USAID, have a history of designing local and international educational programs that specifically engage the community in their operation, and more recently, the donors' community in Egypt has moved towards a community participation approach to reform national education¹².

One success story for the participatory approach in Egypt is the National Schools Program (NSP). Funded by USAID, with the help of CARE as the main implementing agency, NSP ran from 2000 to 2008 in rural Upper Egypt. The program has been commended for exhibiting exemplary signs of involving communities and parents in the educational process by providing education in areas where children lacked access to education, and where girls in particular have not been attending school, and by offering long-term direct training of teachers with strong follow up. Most importantly, the program served to change local perceptions of the importance of girls' education.

The program also decentralized school finances by collecting community contributions of land, material, and financial donations, providing teacher training, creating boards of trustees (BOTs) and Parents' Associations (PAs) with women's representation and exceeding its first targets for student enrollment, with a cumulative enrollment of 44,197; a 2.87% overachievement of its performance target. The community mobilization component in NSP was very strong, and the involvement of the community from the beginning created a strong sense of belonging and achievement among community members. By being involved in the various stages of the project, the community of Al Berka in Minia - one of the rural small villages where the program was implemented - witnessed a transformation in the way its citizens regard education due to increased levels of trust as a result of the project's positive contributions, which eventually led to feelings of ownership of the schools, and their sustainability through to today.

Conclusion

Gender access to education remains an issue in the developing world.

¹² Azfar, Omar and Kähkönen*, Satu and Meagher, Patrick. "Conditions for Effective Decentralized Governance: A Synthesis for Research Findings". *IRIS Center University of Maryland. The World Bank*. March 13, 2001. <http://www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/decentralization/Feb2004Course/Background%20materials/Azfar.pdf>



As an example, and while Egypt has made significant improvements in meeting the MDGs, especially in the basic education sector and closing the gender gap in school enrollments, sub-national discrepancies continue. Accordingly, the donor community has resorted to the alternative of involving local communities in the process of educational reform as a means to solve larger problems in education and in society, such as closing gender gaps in education, and changing the home environments of poorer rural communities to accept the necessity of girls' education.

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