NARROWING THE EDUCATION GENDER GAP
IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Increasing women’s education has several important benefits for developing countries: It raises the supply of skilled labor, decreases fertility, lowers infant mortality rates, and improves child care. Most developing countries are attempting to achieve universal basic education and raise general education levels. Yet a large gap remains between the educational levels of men and women in the Third World. Evidently, increasing women’s education presents a special policy challenge.

RAND researchers addressed this issue using household data from the Asian Marriage Surveys on Indonesia, Pakistan, and the Philippines. They found that although women are getting more education than their mothers did, the gender gap remains. The study concluded that it is vital for policymakers to understand what explains both phenomena because lower education for women perpetuates itself across generations.

How Much Education Women Get and Why

Indonesia, Pakistan, and the Philippines have similarities and differences that make them especially interesting for studying the gender gap and why it persists. In all three, bearing and raising children are still the dominant activities of women and their primary source of status.

In other ways, however, these countries differ significantly: Pakistan and Indonesia are both Muslim countries, but they have inherently different sociocultural foundations. Indonesia and the Philippines share a similar ethnic stock and rice economy, but they have different religious and cultural bases. They also differ in women’s status. In Pakistan, women’s activities outside the home are greatly restricted. In Indonesia, they have more freedom to work alongside of men. In the Philippines, they have become at least as educated as men, and more of them occupy prestigious jobs than in the other countries.

Women’s education levels have risen but the gender gap remains

In all three countries, daughters are getting more education than their mothers did, although Pakistan still trails considerably in absolute levels. The Indonesian experience in particular illustrates the remarkable growth in women’s education. In that country, the percentage who had any schooling went from 75 among women born in the 1940s to 95 for those born in the 1960s. In Pakistan, the change is from 40 to 57 percent; in the Philippines, it is from 97 to 100 percent.

As the figure shows, the educational gender gap also differs, both among and within the three countries. In the Philippines, the gender gap has all but disappeared in urban and rural areas. However, in Indonesia and Pakistan it persists. In middle-income urban families, for example, daughters still get only about 80 percent as much education as sons do. In all three countries, rural girls lag further behind boys than urban girls do. The gap is especially large in rural Pakistan, where daughters get only 24 percent as much schooling as sons do.

Even when factors such as age, birth order, and family circumstances are the same, parents in the three countries still decide to get more education for their sons than for their daughters.
Why families behave this way

What accounts for this evident sex discrimination? The researchers concluded that it might result from three factors: return on educational investment, “relevance” of education, and social pressure. If parents believe that sons can earn more than daughters, they may simply invest their money where they expect a greater return. Further, in more traditional societies, the woman’s primary roles are wife, mother, and housekeeper. Families may believe that formal education is not required in these roles. Finally, families may feel strong social pressures not to educate their daughters, and, hence, are culture-bound to give more education to their sons.

Although adequate measures of these factors are not available, their effects may be inferred from the gender gap in rural areas. There, tradition and culture probably retain a stronger hold than in cities, which are more affected by social and economic development.

A vicious circle of lower education for women

Giving educational preference to sons helps create a vicious circle of lower education and status for women across generations. The study looked at family characteristics that influenced the amount of education daughters are given in these countries. It found that a woman’s education, age at marriage, occupation, and labor force participation are all correlated with her daughters’ level of education. For example, the more education mothers had, the more education their daughters were likely to get. Similarly, the later a mother had married, the higher her daughter’s level of schooling.

Thus, mothers’ lack of education decreases the chances that their daughters will have more education—both in and of itself and through its effects on other factors that improve women’s status.

This vicious circle becomes a policy issue for at least three reasons. First, increases in women’s education benefit developing countries in the ways mentioned above. Second, young children do not control the allocation of family resources. Thus, a girl may begin adult life with skills inferior to her brothers’. Unless she has resources and mechanisms available to correct this condition, it may persist throughout life. Third, educating a child is much less expensive than training an adult.

Implications for policy

Where the dominant cause of educational inequality is cultural, policymakers have little leverage. With economic development and greater work opportunities for women, history suggests that tensions builds between traditional social norms and families’ desires to benefit from changing conditions. However, such a slow and uncertain effect is less than optimal for raising women’s education.

This and other studies suggest that policy has options that can bring change less slowly. For example, the return on women’s schooling will continue to be lower than the return on men’s if women are paid less for doing the same jobs and fewer, higher-paying occupations are open to them. Policy could certainly address these problems of discrimination. Simultaneously, governments could decrease the costs of educating girls by building more schools, especially in rural areas. In other work, the researchers found that school-building programs in Malaysia, as well as the Philippines, increased girls’ school attendance. Another RAND study estimated that building more schools would almost close the enrollment gap between boys and girls in Malaysia.

In addition to increasing access to schools, governments need to establish incentives and subsidies that encourage parents to get schooling for their daughters. Where the girls’ primary school enrollment still lags far behind boys’, countries need to develop broad strategies affecting both the supply of and demand for girls’ education. In countries that have achieved some success, targeting becomes essential. For example, efforts should be aimed at families living in low-income and rural areas. There, public health, family planning programs, and social services are least developed, health is poorest, fertility highest, and literacy lowest. In such areas, educating women has the greatest social benefits.

For fuller discussion of the study reported here, see Elizabeth M. King, J. R. Peterson, S. M. Adioetomo, L. J. Domingo, S. H. Syed, Change In Status of Women Across Generations in Asia, The RAND Corporation, R-3399-RF, 1986. For other work mentioned, see Elizabeth M. King and Lita Domingo, “Intergenerational Change in the Status of Filipino Women: Estimates of a Multi-Equation Model,” Philippine Population Journal, Fall 1987; Elizabeth M. King and Lee A. Lillard, “Education Policy and Schooling Attainment in Malaysia and the Philippines,” Economics of Education Review, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1987, pp. 167-181; Dennis DeTray, Schooling Policy in Malaysia, The RAND Corporation R-3147-AID, 1985. The central study summarized here was sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation; the other studies were supported by the Agency for International Development. The preparation of this Policy Brief was supported by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. For more information about the Family in Economic Development Center, contact Julie DaVanzo, The RAND Corporation, 1700 Main Street, Santa Monica, CA 90406.