

Making education work

The gender dimensions of the school-to-work transition¹

East Asia and Pacific Regional United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI)

The United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) is the Education For All flagship for girls' education and the principal movement to narrow the gender gap in primary and secondary education, and to ensure that by 2015, all children everywhere will be able to complete primary schooling, and that by then, girls and boys will have equal access to all levels of education. UNGEI works through partnerships with organisations committed to these goals at global, regional and country levels.²

Introduction

The intrinsic worth of education has been duly recognised in the international arena through several instruments.³ In addition to the rights-based argument, education is often considered a critical factor in facilitating a smooth transition from school to work and creating better opportunities in the labour market afterwards. Nonetheless, in many developing countries, there continues to be a lack of education available to large numbers of children and youth, and when education is available, sometimes it does not translate into higher employment due to mismatches between skills and labour market demand or further political, social and economic constraints.⁴ There still exist disparities between females and males in the opportunities for quality education at the basic level and beyond, as well as in subsequent opportunities for employment.

Economic, political and social barriers have historically marred the participation of women in education and in the labour market. While such barriers are manifold, there are equally as many, and more, reasons for investing in girls' education, including better maternal and child health, income growth and higher productivity, to name just a few.⁵ A World Bank study of 100 countries found that a 1 per cent increase in the share of women with secondary education boosts annual per capita income growth by 0.3 percentage points.⁶ These facts make a strong case for investing in girls' education, and indeed, the recognition of these benefits has fuelled the international push to achieve parity in education. With certain benefits, however, such as income growth and productivity, increases can only happen if education is accompanied by more and better opportunities for women in the labour market. In an effort to investigate the link between education and labour market outcomes of women, this paper provides a brief overview of the regional and national progress towards achieving parity in education. It then examines how men and women fare in the labour market and finally concludes by highlighting the relationships, or lack thereof, between girls' education and the ensuing employment opportunities.

Achieving the MDGs and EFA

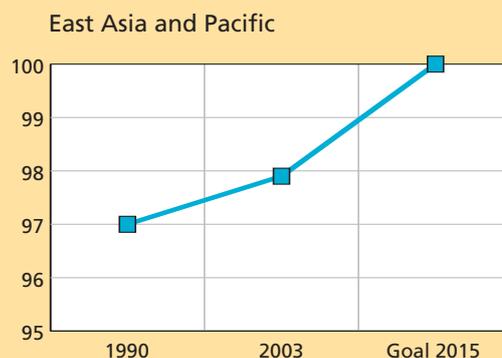
The last decade brought significant growth for the East Asia and Pacific region, driven by China to a large extent and accompanied by a significant decline in the shares of the working poor (those who earn US\$1 per day or less).⁷ Concomitantly, the region's expenditure on public education as a percentage of GDP rose from 2 per cent in 2000 to 3 per cent in 2002. In compliance with the MDGs and the Dakar Framework for Action EFA initiative, the East Asia and Pacific region is on track towards achieving universal primary education by 2015 (Figure 1), although high regional averages conceal the fact that some countries are lagging behind.⁸

Of the 689 million children enrolled in primary school and the 512 million enrolled in secondary education worldwide, 27 per cent and 29 per cent respectively are in East Asia and the Pacific.⁹ While the total gross enrolment rates in tertiary education are low in all regions of the world, East Asia and the Pacific saw an increase between 1996 and 2005 from 8 per cent to 20 per cent. In 2005, at the regional level, the gross enrolment rate of females was on a par with males for secondary levels of education but was slightly lower at the primary and tertiary levels.

The regional numbers nonetheless obscure the lack of gender parity in education at the national and sub-national levels. Girls have traditionally faced a number of barriers to their education, such as physical or social distance, relevant curricula sensitive to

Figure 1

Universal Primary Education by 2015



Source: UN; World Bank staff estimates

their needs, the availability of separate school facilities for girls or female teachers, and child labour. While a disaggregated analysis of gender disparities at the sub-national level is beyond the scope of this paper, note must be taken that such disparities do exist and should be accounted for in policy prescriptions.

The Gender Parity Index (GPI), based on gross enrolment in primary/secondary/tertiary education, is the ratio of the female-to-male values of the gross enrolment ratio in primary/secondary/tertiary education. A GPI between the range of 0.97 and 1.03 indicates parity between the sexes. A GPI below 0.97 indicates a lack of parity to the disadvantage of females, and a value above 1.03 indicates a lack of parity to the disadvantage of males.

With regard to primary education, recent international data reports that several countries in the region have not achieved gender parity. Only Mongolia, Myanmar, Kiribati and Malaysia have an index of 1 or higher, indicating gender parity or a higher propensity for females to be enrolled in primary education than males.

Females often fare better when looking at the GPI based on the gross enrolment ratio in secondary education. In 13 out of the 20 countries for which there is data, females have a higher propensity than males to be enrolled in secondary education. Indonesia, Myanmar and Vietnam, however, are very close to achieving parity.

Data also indicate that females have a higher propensity to be enrolled in tertiary education than males in 10 out of the 17 countries in the region for which such data are available. Countries where women have yet to achieve parity in terms of the gross

enrolment ratio in tertiary education are Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Samoa, Vanuatu and Vietnam. Data on the female share of graduates in a particular field for any year between 2000 and 2005 is only available for a small group of countries in the region. Based on this limited data, it appears that females tend to favour the areas of health and education – areas commonly perceived as 'nurturing'. The share of female graduates in engineering, manufacturing and construction, however, is low in all countries for which there is data, strengthening the notion that these areas are conventionally male.

The latter data confirm that significant progress is being made with regards to girls' education in the East Asia and Pacific region. Additionally, however, based on the limited evidence available, it appears that females and males tend to opt for different occupations, which is perhaps due to socio-cultural expectations and influences. The different tracks that females and males pursue can be investigated further by looking at their respective participation in public technical and vocational education and training.

Gender representation in the labour market

With a growth rate over twice the global average, Asia today is touted as the most economically dynamic region in the world. Growth in East Asia and Southeast Asia has been accompanied by



large relative shifts in production away from agriculture towards industry. Flows of foreign direct investment (FDI), competitive integration into global markets and the exceptional export performance for a wide range of labour and capital intensive goods have fuelled this growth and dynamism. East Asia, in particular, is characterised by a growing middle class and rapid urbanisation. The question emerging from this discussion is how females and males have fared in the labour market in the face of all these changes.

The 2006 estimates illustrate that significant differences in the rate at which males and females participate in the labour force remain in both sub-regions. Females in both sub-regions are disadvantaged, but the difference is more pronounced in Southeast Asia and the Pacific (24 percentage points) than East Asia (15 percentage points). The decline in the labour force participation rates between 1996 and 2006 may partly be attributed to the fact that youth are remaining in school longer.

In several countries in the region, male and female youth are more or less represented equally in employment. In Cambodia and China (including Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan), young women have a higher propensity to be employed than males. Incidentally, in these two countries, females also have a lower gross enrolment ratio than males in tertiary education. This implies that a higher proportion of young females may be leaving education to start full-time work.

In Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand, females have a lower propensity to be employed than males do, while in Malaysia, Mongolia, the Philippines and Thailand, they have exceeded males in terms of the gross enrolment ratios in secondary and tertiary education. This implies that young females tend to remain in the education system longer rather than becoming employed. These data, nevertheless, do not say much about whether an education ultimately helps females secure employment. Furthermore, it is not only a question of more employment but also of whether education facilitates better employment. Based on employment data alone, these questions remain unanswered.

Linking education and labour market outcomes

Perhaps this report's most significant contribution is to highlight the fact that, despite the acknowledgement of the importance of (i) gender parity in education and in the labour market, and (ii) making the link between the education of girls and the subsequent employment outcomes, it is still difficult to make these assessments adequately on the basis of existing data.

As such, only partial aspects of the initial question raised in this report have been addressed: how does parity in education, or lack thereof, translate into labour market outcomes for women? Women in the region seem to be making headway in achieving parity in education, but beyond parity, are women making progress, and are higher proportions of girls in secondary and tertiary education translating into better employment outcomes for them?

On the one hand, evidence seems to suggest that when young women stay in education longer, they tend to postpone employment; on the other, females' unemployment rates tend to be higher than males'. In some countries, more women are unemployed at higher levels of education. This could suggest one of two possibilities: first, there are fewer professional/technical jobs available for women; or second, women with higher levels of education tend to be more selective in their job search. Which of these two possibilities reflects reality needs to be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

With regard to education and employment/unemployment, there are times when there is parity between men and women, and there are times when one or the other fares better. This perhaps leads to the question of whether a disadvantage for males necessarily implies an advantage for females. This seemingly simple question does not have a simple answer. One argument suggests that educational systems and the labour market have a certain capacity to set males and females in competition for the same seat in school or the same job in the labour market. Nonetheless, when it comes to developing countries, this argument is tenuous at best. The observed disparity between females and males in most developing countries is often more a result of engendered bias and stereotyping than the simple notion that a disadvantage for males implies an advantage for females. Indeed, based on the limited information available, men and women tend to opt for different subjects in higher education and in technical and vocational education and training programmes. Additionally, females and males tend to be employed in different professions. It is therefore imperative to note that a lack of parity, even when it points to an advantage for females, is undesirable. In fact, the lower gross enrolment rates of boys for some countries in the region are a matter of concern. It is important to capitalise on the dynamism of the East Asia and Pacific region in order to create more and better jobs for females and males. Emphasis should not only be placed on achieving parity in education but also on overcoming any economic, social and political barriers that may prevent females from finding work that allows them to make use of their education and skills – implying both supply and demand side measures. On the supply side, females should not be limited to certain subject areas in their training and education by any constraint other than their own choice; while on the demand side, more emphasis should be placed on creating jobs, particularly those of the calibre that allow women to make the most of their education and skills.

Recommendations for future action

Strides towards parity must be accompanied by specific steps to institute equality between women and men in all aspects of political, economic and social life.

- Implement measures to change social perceptions through advocacy; eliminating the perpetuation of gender bias in education via textbooks, for example; and legislating and enforcing anti-discrimination laws in the labour market, for instance with regards to wage differentials.
- Ensure that continued progress towards gender parity at different levels of education is paired with efforts to create more and better paid employment opportunities for women and to enhance their access to productive resources.

- Provide educational and career counselling for girls to better match education and skills with labour market demand. Linking education to labour market outcomes is a critical step in the economic empowerment of women.
- Empower females through positive role models in addition to education. Employment opportunities should not be restricted to fields deemed to be appropriate for females by society at large – the only restrictive factor should be individual choice.
- Design and implement specific policies that target the most vulnerable and disadvantaged and address persistent gender inequalities among the poor, minority groups and those residing in rural areas. As child labour is a major cause of school dropout for girls across Asia and the Pacific, policies and programmes should be implemented to prevent and combat this problem. While girls are vulnerable to child labour, which is largely hidden and unmeasured, it is important to recognise that boys are more exposed to work of a hazardous nature than girls and the differences become more pronounced as they get older.
- Provide incentives to encourage the participation and hiring of females in high-level positions, including political positions, and encourage their involvement in decision-making processes.
- Ensure that gender mainstreaming in curriculum and teacher training include the promotion of norms that support gender equality.

There is also a need for qualitative and quantitative studies to address deficiencies in the available data and literature. This includes household-level poverty data disaggregated by sex, in order to identify intra-household resource allocation and poverty by household member, data about the occupations that men and women pursue, strengthened understanding and data on technical and vocational education, and better understanding of the self-employed and the differences between young women and men in access to productive resources, credit and business or livelihoods.

End notes

- 1 This report, in its original form, was prepared for the East Asia and Pacific Regional UNGEI and presented at the UNGEI Global Advisory Committee in June 2008. The report was subsequently published and is available in hard copy and via the web at: http://www.unicef.org/eapro/UNC_UNGEI3_130109_Final_Web.pdf.
- 2 To learn more about UNGEI, visit www.ungei.org.
- 3 B. Herz and G.B. Sperling (2004). *What Works in Girls' Education*. New York: Council on Foreign Relations.
- 4 D. Dollar and R. Gatti (1999). *Gender Inequality, Income, and Growth: Are Good Times Good for Women?* World Bank Policy Research Report on Gender and Development, Working Paper Series No. 1. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- 5 *Ibid.*, Herz and Sperling (2004).
- 6 *Ibid.*, Dollar and Gatti (1999).
- 7 ILO (2007). Indicators for measuring progress towards full and productive employment and decent work for all. In *Key Indicators of the Labour Market*. 5th ed. Geneva: ILO. Ch. 1, Table A1.
- 8 The World Bank Group (2007).
- 9 <http://www.worldbank.org/education/edstats>. Based on data from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics. The gross enrolment rate for primary education is the number of pupils (total, male, female) enrolled in primary, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the population (total, male, female) in the theoretical age group for primary education. The same definition applies to the gross enrolment rates for secondary and tertiary education.

