

Because I am a girl – invest in me

Marie Staunton and Sharon Goulds

Plan is a global children's charity. For over 70 years, we've been working with the world's poorest children so that they can move from poverty to opportunity. What 70 years' experience has shown us is that poverty, especially where it is combined with prejudice, has a particularly devastating impact on girls. All children have the right to fulfil their potential, but it is girls whose rights are least likely to be realised. We have a responsibility to do something about it.

We need to start at the beginning of each girl's life, when she needs adequate health care, a family that values her and the chance to learn. Education is the key to opportunity, to leading a more fulfilled and productive life. For most of us, going to school, learning at the very least to read and write, is vital. Today, 75 million girls are denied that opportunity. That's more than the entire population of the UK.

In too many Commonwealth countries, more girls than boys die before the age of 5, and more are excluded from education. They get pregnant much too young, and if they survive childbirth they produce low-weight babies who continue the cycle of poverty from generation to generation¹.

That's not right – it's against the gender, equality and human rights principles of the Commonwealth. It's also not smart – if our fragile

global economy is to fully recover, it needs girls to make their economic contribution.

Gloria is one of a small group of girls Plan is following from birth until 2015. Now a lively 5 year old, she lives in Uganda. She has already been through kindergarten, and is about to start primary school; she has also recovered from bouts of malaria. Her parents are intent on her staying in school. If Gloria does make it to secondary school, she is likely to have fewer, healthier babies who will in turn become productive citizens. We know that if the number of girls in secondary school increases by 1 per cent, the per capita income increases by 0.3 per cent². In a country like Uganda, that would mean a rise in national income from US\$28.46 billion to US\$37 billion³. If Gloria finishes secondary school, she will perhaps realise her father's ambition for her to become a midwife.

In many Commonwealth countries, there have been significant achievements in enabling children to gain access to education, and to achieving parity between girls and boys in primary school in particular. But enrolment numbers and time spent in school tell us nothing about the quality of the education girls are receiving, as the analysis in the box shows.

Quality education⁴

The number of years that girls spend in school tells us little about the quality of education that they receive while they are there. What they are actually learning and retaining, and the overall quality of the experience, are much more complex questions. There is some interesting data about literacy rates reflected in the chart.

The very low literacy rate in Sierra Leone, where girls do stay in school for more than 10 years and boys for nearly 13, indicates clearly that this in itself does not guarantee an adequate education. The same can be said for Rwanda, where the amount of time spent in school has so far produced disappointing literacy rates. However, Nigeria, where girls spend well under eight years in school, has a higher literacy rate – 87 per cent – than might be expected, and according to the gender parity index, there is little difference between boys and girls. Pakistan, where girls spend the least time in school, has, unsurprisingly, one of the lowest literacy rates. In India, girls get just below 10 years, but overall literacy rates remain at 82 per cent and girls do less well than boys. In Sri Lanka, where girls spend over 12 years in school, literacy rates for young people are high with girls doing marginally better than boys.

What seems clear, given the lack of any consistent correlation between the number of years spent in school and literacy rates, is that we need to measure educational success by more than just years in the classroom. The increase in the number of girls spending more time at school, though a measure of success, is not in itself a guarantee of getting an education.

Country	Youth Literacy* %	GPI**
Sierra Leone	54	0.68
Papua New Guinea	64	1.04
Pakistan	69	0.74
India	82	0.89
Botswana	94	1.03
South Africa	95	1.02
Swaziland	94	1.05
Namibia	93	1.04
Ghana	78	0.95
Rwanda	78	0.98
Tanzania	78	0.97
Malawi	83	0.98
Uganda	86	0.95
Zambia	75	0.82
Nigeria	87	0.96
Sri Lanka	97	1.01
Malta	98	1.02
Cyprus	100	1.00
Brunei Darussalam	100	1.00
Trinidad and Tobago	100	1.00

Data source: UNESCO GMR 2010

* Youth Literacy = male and female literacy among 15–19 year olds.

** Gender Parity Index



So, for Gloria, even going to secondary school may not be enough.

Education, of course, goes beyond what happens in school. Girls need time and space to build skills for life, to learn about planning their families, running their finances and becoming computer literate. Too many young women get pregnant too early and drop out of school. After giving birth, it is very hard for them to get back into education and to learn the skills they will need to support their families. But it can happen. Take, for example, the story of another, older, Gloria, also from Uganda. At 15, she became pregnant, was taken out of school and married. However, last year, aged 18, she got a place on a life skills course run by the local vocational training college and was given a small sum to pay for her expenses. At a weekly lesson she learned crucial skills – from how to space her children to managing her finances and starting up a business. Gloria saved her expenses money to buy seeds and asked her father-in-law for the use of a field for one season. With the proceeds of the crop she paid rent on a small hair salon and now employs two hairdressers. Her life and that of her small family has been transformed, and she is very proud of her achievements: 'I was looked down on as a school drop-out but now look at me – the others respect what I have done.'

It does not take a lot to invest in young women like Gloria. But it does take more than money. It means being aware of the particular needs and challenges that girls face. It means planning in a targeted way and understanding that providing a school building is not enough. It also involves acknowledging that in many countries, gender discrimination means that there is still no real equality between men and women, boys and girls. This prejudice gets in the way of any commitment to girls' education and so will impede, globally, our economic and social development.

Growing up in the Commonwealth

Earlier this year, Plan teamed up with the Royal Commonwealth Society to find out where is the best country in the Commonwealth to be a girl. We measured eight indicators – survival, education, early pregnancy, access to scholarships, women in politics, success in sports, the pay gap and life expectancy. We

came up with a report card, ranking countries by awarding them grades according to the eight indicators. And the results were unexpected. There was, for example, little negative correlation between poverty and gender equality. Rwanda, Mozambique and Malawi all scored very highly on our gender equality criteria, and of the six poorest countries in the Commonwealth, only Sierra Leone, still recovering from years of civil war, remains at the bottom.

It is estimated that girls need at least three years of post-primary education in order to emerge into the world as successful economic participants. So, despite its limitations, we chose for the education indicator to look at years spent in school. Girls in Pakistan spend the least number of years in school, under six, followed by Nigeria at seven. In both cases, girls lag well behind their brothers. In India, Tanzania and Mozambique, girls also trail behind boys in terms of years spent in school, but in Bangladesh, girls stay in school a little longer than boys.

Investing in girls is the right thing to do. But it also makes economic sense – simply by educating girls you can raise your country's GDP¹. Many of the Commonwealth's richer countries do invest in girls' education, though in Australia, where girls spend 16.01 years in school, and Canada, 11.94, girls still spend less time in school than boys.

However, gender disparity exists everywhere, even among the top-ranked countries. In New Zealand, for example, which by our criteria was the best place to be born a girl, women still earn only 72 per cent of the male average and there are twice as many men as women in parliament. Our survey shows that it is not historical wealth but present political leadership that determines where is the best place to be born a girl. Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago rank second and third on our report card, ahead of much richer countries. Five of the six poorest countries in the Commonwealth score higher than richer ones. A girl with political ambitions is more likely to reach office in Rwanda than in the UK.

Discrimination against women and girls is found throughout the Commonwealth and the determination to end it should be held in common too. The half a billion girls in the Commonwealth are not our problem – they are our opportunity, if we give them a chance. Given that chance, given equal opportunities, they can change their lives, and their children's lives, for generations to come.

Endnotes

- 1 Plan 2007 *Because I am a Girl*.
- 2 World Bank, 1999, D. Dollar and R. Gatti, *Gender Inequality, Income, and Growth: Are Good Times Good For Women?*
- 3 Plan 2009 BIAAG Girls in the Global Economy.
- 4 Plan/Royal Commonwealth Society: *Growing Up in the Commonwealth 2011*.
- 5 Plan 2009 BIAAG Girls in the Global Economy.

Marie Staunton is Chief Executive of Plan UK. She is a lawyer by background and has held senior positions at both UNICEF and Amnesty. She is the UK Independent member of the Board of the EU Fundamental Rights Agency.

Sharon Goulds is currently editor of the *Because I am a Girl* annual report on the State of the World's Girls. She was previously Head of Communications at Plan UK. Before joining the NGO sector, Sharon ran a small independent TV production company and has a background in documentary film-making, working for Channel 4, the BBC and ITV.