Female School Participation in West Africa: Success Factors

The United Nations' Special Initiative for Africa (UNSIA) focuses on selected low-enrollment African countries in an effort to help them find pragmatic, sustainable solutions to the problems that have depressed primary school enrollments for so long. As part of this process, a four-country study was conducted between November 1998 and May 1999 in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and Mauritania. The study specially focused on identifying and understanding the practices likely to promote female school participation in a significant way. One of the study's main assumptions is that the body of knowledge on girls' education and the interest accorded to it in the last ten years in Africa should already have resulted in improved parents' and communities' attitudes, school policies, and classroom management approaches. These improvements should in turn lead to change in girls' behavior and performance in school, and thus greater female survival, confidence, achievement and retention. Moreover, this particular study will help identify ways of improving what we do to advance girls' schooling.

Rationale

Twenty years ago, little was said and even less was known about female schooling in Africa. Although it is no longer the case today, there are still important gaps in our knowledge base, particularly at the school level. Girls' enrollment, persistence, and success in school depend, of course, on many factors beyond the classroom and the school itself. Studies in a number of African countries demonstrate the critical importance of factors such as the local functions of marriage, mothers' and daughters' workloads, distance from home to school, discrimination against women in the job market, demand and supply issues as determined by established policies, the parents' level of education and their socio-economic status as well as political commitment.

The fact that girls tend to be marginalized in classrooms has been documented in several studies. Classroom studies in the United States and France have shown that even when girls make up the majority of students, teachers pay less attention to them than to boys. It is fair to add here that boys sometimes get attention because they are being disciplined for bad behavior while girls tend to be disciplined less because they are more reserved and timid. Studies also show that most teachers hold lower expectations on girls' academic performance and tend to assign girls all the housekeeping tasks around the school.

As research continues on female schooling in developing countries, it is becoming more obvious that one of the most interesting themes appearing in the literature is about the way things are done in different cultures. It appears that cultural barriers include not only parents' cultural practices, but also the decision-making and implementation cultures characterized by lower awareness and inclusion of gender issues; teacher-training cultures which do not make gender consciousness a target in the curriculum; teaching
and learning cultures which reflect teachers’ and children’s acquired cultures that contribute to maintaining females in their socially “assigned status” and perception; the mass-media cultures of portraying gender roles, and the child-rearing practices at home where the process of gender differentiation starts only to become reinforced by bias and neglect acquired by all concerned actors (all of us). As the outcomes of this study show, notable differences are the result of improvements in all or most of these habits.

Objectives and participation

This article is sourced from the findings of a workshop held in Nouakchott, July 5-8, 1999. The workshop had four principal objectives:

- Share experiences related to the promotion of female schooling.
- Engage in in-depth reflection on the implications of the study results and share information for effective integration of girls’ issues in the national policies of all participating countries.
- Enable the various attending partners to openly exchange ideas to strengthen their collaboration.
- Discuss follow-up strategies to help integrate the lessons learned over the course of this seminar and to reinforce established plans of action.

Six countries took part in the workshop’s activities: Burkina Faso, Guinea (Conakry), Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Senegal. In addition to country representatives, experts from the World Bank also participated in the workshop’s activities as well as representatives from the civil society, Unicef and local consultants who had conducted the study in the four targeted countries.

Success factors for girls’ education

Families

Family mobilization is vital to success in educating girls. Information and awareness-raising campaigns should target parents, particularly mothers and encourage them to register girls in school. However, for the girl to remain and succeed in school, thorough action must be taken to encourage families to change attitudes and lighten the household workload of the girl and provide her with the time and a comfortable space for learning at home. Families are called upon to increase their involvement in the process of educating their daughters by providing adequate follow-up to academic learning at school and at home. This decisive contribution of families was clearly illustrated by experiments conducted in participating countries where the parents themselves developed very interesting initiatives in a style similar to that of the Association des Mères Educatrices (AME) in Burkina Faso. Methods of operation with respect to families have been reexamined and range from Information, Education and Communication (IEC) to reinforcement of parents’ abilities to intervene through adult literacy and education.

Communities

Communities’ commitment to female schooling was considered from several angles namely: (a) attractive effect on the families in the community; (b) agent for change in social and cultural factors that determine the representation of, and attitudes towards girls; (c) decisive support to the school in terms of access, attendance, management and improvement of education quality; (d) feeling of ownership of national policy that guarantees success in the field.

To set communities on this track, important players have been identified: school administrations, NGOs, elected local officials, community association movements and various political, union, cultural and religious leaders. While community involvement is necessary to promote awareness and mobilization for
female education, it is also essential to adopt a participatory approach empowering the community and reinforcing its ability to organize and intervene on its own behalf. Only then will communities be able to take over female education projects and extend the movement beyond isolated campaigns.

For this reason, communication policies, horizontal partnerships, role-sharing accounting for the legitimacy and abilities of each partner, and decentralized action plans have been studied as factors of success in mobilizing communities, insofar as they have access to areas of autonomy, initiative and creativity. Success factors are greatly strengthened when systems are created in search of synergies, participant coordination and cooperation, capitalization, and the exchange of experiences in implementation.

**Teachers**

The role of teachers was posed as a fundamental success factor in terms of what happens at school and in the classroom. Indeed, teachers determine the behaviors, attitudes and performance of girls, as well as the quality of teaching. They also influence the relationship between the school and the family.

The participants focused on the teaching-learning process, models of organization, management and animation of the class and school, judgments on the work and the potential of students, the use of textbooks and other teaching supports, and the sexist stereotypes often transmitted, consciously or unconsciously, which weigh negatively on the treatment of girls. Proposals were made to guide the teacher in types of behavior resulting in girls’ successful schooling.

The teacher should avoid:

- any act of discrimination that marginalizes girls or makes them feel guilty in comparison with boys;
- any behavior that suggests to girls that they are less capable than boys;
- any physical, verbal or mental violence susceptible of harming the dignity of girls or hindering their full growth.

On the contrary, it is strongly suggested that the teacher:

- trust the girls and encourage them to express themselves;
- give them responsibility in the process of acquiring knowledge by implementing active methods to improve learning;
- fully integrate themselves in the local community and its culture to use its educational resources to help with female schooling;
- develop partnership-type relations with parents, community associations, local towns, and NGOs to create a network to support female education;
- develop introspective practices (critical reflection on one’s own teaching and exchanges with other colleagues) to constantly improve one’s ideas and performance in class.

To guide teachers as described above, several recommendations were made:
Integrate the gender aspect into initial and in-service training of teachers.

Implement strategies for frequent supervision of teachers and move towards pedagogical advice in contrast to monitoring.

Create sources of motivation and encouragement for teachers to award merit.

Provide teachers with the support and consideration necessary to reattribute value to the job and to improve the effectiveness of teaching (material and moral conditions of the job and work, teaching environment).

Ensure that women are represented in significant numbers in the recruitment and training of teachers.

In addition to their role in the classroom and the school, teachers can also act at the community level. Indeed, several instances have been reported of female teachers associations involved in awareness-raising in families and in communities, or in educational support for girls, primarily in learning math and sciences.

**Educational Policy and School Administration**

National policies constitute the general framework for the guidance, coordination, impetus, follow-up and evaluation of actions taken for female schooling. The policies require, above all, a clear definition of priorities with defined options for equity, that is, the access of all children to education, without distinction based on gender or any other factor. Governments should commit to the promotion of women through multi-faceted actions such as the reduction of poverty which impedes female education, and the eradication of all sources of gender discrimination, be they ideological, cultural, social, economic or professional.

Moreover, all levels of government should be involved in national policies for female education and rank them as a high priority in the governmental agenda, thus making them a factor of mobilization and a source of credibility in the eyes of civil society.

The long-term objectives of national policies should target education for all, including girls, and should be structured to include intermediate objectives such as resource planning mobilization and results evaluation at each stage. To reach those goals, the following measures are particularly recommended:

- Develop widespread national and local cooperation to involve all sectors concerned in the development and implementation of these policies in order to provide the benefit of strong social support.

- Build partnerships to mobilize private organizations and local communities based on a negotiated framework.

- Create and apply communication policies that allow for permanent dialogue.

- Decentralize policies to give responsibility to intermediate levels and local players.

The school administration plays a very important role that should focus on:

- the concrete translation of national options in the daily management of the system; especially in
terms of decentralization and a partnership relationship with civil society;

- cultural and social support to be given to girls and their families (grants, social assistance, school textbooks and supplies, library, etc.);

- rational management of the school mapping and expansion of the educational supply to satisfy, to the extent possible, the demand for education;

- supervision of pedagogical support for teachers and merit-based incentive systems;

- measures to encourage and support girls such as the award of prizes or the use of specific support teaching methods.

**Partnerships**

At the international level, the need for priority action in female schooling in a perspective of equity, development and fundamental human rights is obvious and resulted in recommendations by various international conferences and conventions on education, women and social development. However, translating these good intentions and general principles into reality is problematic, and there is reason to study the mechanisms of partnerships and mobilization for female education at the local, regional, national and international levels.

**General lessons learned from the workshop**

Each country, based on its national situation and specific needs, retained the lessons that seemed the most relevant.

All of the national teams felt that the workshop was useful and interesting and that the lessons retained called for the re-examination and strengthening of their national plan strategies for female education.

Sub-regional cooperation would be key to learning from and building on successful experiences:

- the overall performance of Mauritania
- the *Association des Mères Educatrices* in Burkina Faso
- the *Compagnons Éducateurs* in Niger
- the *Pédagogie/Méthodologie Convergente* in Mali
- the association of women teachers for female schooling in Senegal.

The new aspects that were emphasized the most were: (a) the importance of a participatory approach and decentralization in giving responsibility to the various players, namely families and communities; (b) the role played by the community in dialogue, organization, consensus seeking and national policies support; (c) the extent to which the pertinence of academic learning plays a role in the families’ decision whether or not to enroll their daughter in school; (d) the integration in teacher training of the gender aspect; and (e) the stated commitment of the government, in combination with strengthened local expertise, as determinant of the success of national policy.

The alleged rejection of schools by the population should be taken with much skepticism. It supposedly arises because of the hesitation of some population groups with respect to the established school model.
The problem of education in general, and that of girls in particular, must be further scrutinized regarding the relevance and functionality of learning and the skills that the school offers in relation to the real needs of individuals, communities and countries.

Religion, in and of itself, does not constitute an obstacle to female schooling – rather, a certain interpretation and the resulting attitudes may constitute hindrances.

Success in educating girls depends on a multitude of factors that are all important: economic, socio-cultural, institutional, political and infrastructure factors, as well as human resources and school curriculum. More precisely, success depends on the profile and qualifications of the teachers, parental initiative and commitment, community involvement, a favorable school environment, the motivation of the student and the degree of intensity of the political commitment, as well as the relevance and sustainability of the institutional measures undertaken. In short, the success of girls in school is everybody's business.

This article is available fully-referenced from Aminata Maiga-Toure, Room J9-010, World Bank, 1818 H Street NW, Washington D.C. 20433. Tel. no.: (202) 458-2854, e-mail address: amaiga@worldbank.org