

Gender and Education

A Review of Issues for Social Policy

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Acronyms

BEOC	Basic Education for Older Children
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CSO	civil society organization
DPEP	District Primary Education Programme
ESIP	Education Strategic Investment Programme
GER	gross enrolment ratio
GNP	gross national product
HPS	higher primary school
ICPD	International Conference on Population and Development
IDA	International Development Assistance
LPS	lower primary schools
MSK	Mahila Samakhya Karnataka
NER	net enrolment ratio
NFPE	Non-formal Primary Education
NGO	non-governmental organization
NPM	New Public Management
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PROBE	Public Report on Basic Education
REFLECT	Regenerating Freirean Literacy Through Empowering Community Techniques
RORE	Rates of Return to Education
SAP	structural adjustment programme
SKP	Shikshakarmi Programme
SWAp	sector-wide approaches
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
WID	women in development

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Summary/Résumé/Resumen

Summary

In this paper, Ramya Subrahmanian provides an overview of key issues relating to the achievement of gender equity in education, laying out some of the contradictions and tensions in donor discourse and policy efforts, and pointing out some of the disjunctures between policy assumptions and the complexities of household decision making in different contexts. The past decade has witnessed a significant increase in the importance accorded to education, with both “instrumental” as well as “intrinsic” arguments made for increasing financial investment and policy attention to education provision. Investing in education is seen as one of the fundamental ways in which nation states and their citizens can move toward long-term development goals and improve both social and economic standards of living. The education of women in particular is seen as providing the key to securing intergenerational transfers of knowledge, and providing the substance of long-term gender equality and social change. Yet the author argues that analysis of how advances in female education can be achieved requires sophisticated conceptual frameworks and tools, which unpack the intersections and interlinkages between social and economic aspects of exclusion. In particular, she argues that it is necessary to understand household education investment strategies as part of a continuum of well-being decisions, vulnerable to the counterpressures and fluctuations caused by economic insecurity and social disadvantage.

Although significant gains have been made in women’s education as a result of global advocacy and donor pressure, more often than not these gains are fragile, vulnerable to changes in economic and social environments, and lagging behind male rates of enrolment and achievement. Achievements are particularly visible in the primary education sector, whereas gaps are still large in the secondary and tertiary sectors, especially in the countries of South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Although enrolments have gone up, good quality, accessible and affordable education is still lacking in many countries. Furthermore, an educational “gender gap” persists, despite a well-developed and accepted body of scholarship on the factors that constrain female education achievement relative to that of men, and despite the prediction of high rates of return to state and household investment, especially in primary education.

Subrahmanian addresses several interrelated themes relating to achievement of “education for all”. The difficulties of crafting “global” education policy are noted in relation to the diversity of needs and constraints that obtain in different contexts. This is equally true about the efforts to develop global consensus on how to address gender inequalities in education. Current global discourses rest on assumptions that are contested in the gender and development literature. The argument that investing in education generally, and women’s education in particular, is good for development is consistently made in policy documents of the World Bank and other agencies. These arguments, however, have limited value. While female education appears to have a positive impact on many variables relating to child survival and fertility, the extent to which it enhances the quality of women’s lives in a substantive way is not clear. Instrumentalist rationales are important for securing investments in female education, but they obscure issues

of power and agency that are critical for developing a gender-aware perspective on the design and delivery of education services.

The argument that both private and social rates of return are high—particularly to primary education—is another consistent thread running through global policy documents, notably those of the World Bank. This argument is highly contested, both on methodological and conceptual grounds. The author questions the notion of “investment” underpinning analyses of the rates of return to education and the related and implicit assumptions about why households do or do not send children to school. Household investment strategies in many cases do not reflect policy confidence. While levels of supply are far from adequate in many parts of the developing world, the mixed and changing patterns of education participation in certain countries indicate that household investment decisions intersect with experiences and calculations about value, returns, aspirations and evaluations about prospects for long-term change in individual circumstances. These are in turn gendered and shaped by prevailing social and cultural norms.

A crucial aspect of current debate is the achievement of efficiency—reducing the costs of providing education for all—without compromising equity. Contradictions between policy commitment to equity and the cutbacks prompted by macroeconomic policies have resulted in exacerbation of prevailing patterns of inequality in some countries, and the creation of new forms in others. Despite some increase in the allocation of resources for elementary education, the costs of providing quality education continue to rise. Policies for raising revenue, whether through taxation or through charging user fees, have implications for the equity challenge, as the paper argues.

Access, retention and achievement are all pressing challenges to equity in education, but cannot be addressed without analysis of the socioeconomic complexities within which household decision making is embedded. Subrahmanian reviews evidence that demonstrates the intertwining of four broad types of factors that shape individual or household decisions about investing in education: the macroeconomic context, which shapes employment opportunity, *inter alia*; household livelihoods and aspirations, and the extent to which they permit resource commitment (either financial, or even forgoing children’s work contributions); assessments of the prospects and capacities of individual children, which have a particular impact on girls and disabled children; and factors relating to schooling provision, in terms of proximity, quality and inclusiveness. She argues that these factors or dimensions impact on both boys and girls in some instances, especially across class and ethnic divides, but do so in different and intensified ways for girls.

Responding to these diverse and complex forms of exclusion remains a challenge, and there has been a wide range of interventions targeted at improving female education. According to the author, however, these have been aimed largely at providing incentives to promote girls’ education in terms of the supply of education, and have focused less on creating enabling environments at local levels for women and girls to develop voice and articulate their choices and priorities, without risking social censure. The extent to which investments in education

have actually contributed to women's well-being—comprising equity, justice and empowerment goals—is still a matter of debate. “Investing” in women's education with the purpose of securing social returns that benefit society and the nation at large can result in bypassing, or according low priority to processes through which women secure their own interests. Subrahmanian outlines some lessons from innovative programmes in South Asia that have worked with both adult women and girls to promote female education. Such collective forms of support help to address the risks faced by women who transgress social norms that have traditionally excluded them from education.

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Résumé

Dans cet exposé, Ramya Subrahmanian donne une vue d'ensemble des principales questions liées à la mise en œuvre de la parité des sexes dans le domaine de l'éducation, exposant certaines des contradictions et des tensions dans le discours des donateurs ainsi que dans les efforts politiques déployés, et montrant l'existence de distorsions entre les postulats politiques et la complexité des décisions prises par les ménages dans différents contextes. Depuis dix ans, l'importance accordée à l'éducation a considérablement augmenté, tandis que des arguments tant “utilisables” qu’“essentiels” sont présentés en faveur d'un accroissement de l'investissement financier et d'une attention politique plus soutenue accordée aux prestations en matière d'éducation. Investir dans l'éducation est perçu comme un des moyens fondamentaux permettant aux États-nations et à leurs citoyens de progresser en direction de la réalisation d'objectifs de développement à long terme ainsi que d'améliorer leur niveau de vie, tant sur le plan économique que social. L'éducation des femmes, notamment, est considérée comme la clef du transfert des connaissances d'une génération à une autre et comme étant susceptible de fournir la matière à l'égalité des sexes et à un changement social à long terme. L'auteur fait cependant valoir que cette analyse de la manière dont les progrès dans l'éducation des femmes peuvent être obtenus nécessite des cadres et des outils conceptuels complexes. Ces cadres et outils vont défaire les liens et autres intersections qui existent dans bien des aspects tant économiques que sociaux de l'exclusion. Elle démontre notamment qu'il est nécessaire de comprendre les stratégies des ménages en matière d'investissement dans le cadre d'un continuum de décisions liées au bien-être, décisions vulnérables face aux contre-pressions et aux fluctuations suscitées par l'insécurité économique et les inégalités sociales.

Bien que des acquis significatifs aient été obtenus dans l'éducation des femmes grâce au plaidoyer international et à la pression des donateurs, ces acquis demeurent le plus souvent fragiles, sensibles aux changements qui ont lieu dans les environnements économique et social, et sont en retard par rapport aux taux d'inscription et aux succès enregistrés par les hommes. Les résultats sont visibles notamment dans le secteur de l'éducation primaire, tandis que les écarts restent importants dans les secteurs secondaire et tertiaire, surtout dans les pays d'Asie du Sud

et d'Afrique subsaharienne. Bien que les taux d'inscription aient augmenté, une éducation accessible et de bonne qualité fait encore cruellement défaut dans nombre de pays. En outre, des "préjugés contre les femmes" subsistent, malgré un ensemble élaboré et reconnu d'écrits et de connaissances concernant les facteurs entravant les résultats scolaires des femmes, comparés à ceux des hommes, et cela malgré la promesse de taux de rendement élevés par rapport à l'investissement effectué par les États et les ménages, surtout dans l'éducation primaire.

Ramya Subrahmanian aborde plusieurs thèmes étroitement liés menant à un but qui est l'"Education pour tous". Les difficultés d'élaborer une politique "globale" en matière d'éducation sont relevées par rapport à la diversité des contraintes et des besoins requis dans divers contextes. Cela est également vrai quand il s'agit des efforts visant à former un consensus international autour de la manière d'aborder les questions d'inégalité entre les sexes en matière d'éducation. Les discours que l'on entend actuellement de par le monde reposent sur des hypothèses qui sont réfutées dans les textes consacrés à la sexospécificité et au développement. L'argument selon lequel investir dans l'éducation—notamment dans celle des femmes—contribue au développement, est systématiquement avancé dans les documents directifs de la Banque mondiale et dans ceux d'autres organismes. Ces arguments n'ont cependant qu'une valeur limitée. Bien que l'éducation des femmes semble avoir une incidence positive sur nombre de variables liées à la survie des enfants et à la fécondité, la mesure dans laquelle elle améliore substantiellement la vie des femmes n'est pas évidente. Les principes des connaissances de base sont importants pour obtenir des investissements dans l'éducation des femmes, mais empêchent de voir les questions de pouvoir et d'action qui sont essentielles au développement d'une perspective tenant compte de la sexospécificité en vue de la conception et de l'offre de services éducatifs.

L'argument selon lequel les taux de rendement tant privés que sociaux sont élevés, surtout en ce qui concerne l'éducation primaire, est un point systématiquement avancé dans les documents directifs internationaux, notamment ceux de la Banque mondiale. Cet argument est vivement contesté, à la fois sur une base méthodologique et conceptuelle. L'auteur remet en question la notion d'"investissement" qui étaye les analyses des taux de rendement de l'éducation, ainsi que les hypothèses implicites et connexes liées à la raison pour laquelle les ménages envoient ou non leurs enfants à l'école. Les stratégies d'investissement des ménages dans nombre de cas montrent un manque de confiance en certaines politiques. Tandis que les niveaux d'offre en matière d'édu-

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