VI.

MOVING BEYOND:

Taking Girls and the World Beyond the Broken Bridge

Adopting a gender perspective will help to close significant gender gaps on the bridge between primary and secondary school. Improvements in girls' primary educational attainment have had a positive impact on the primary school environment for both boys and girls, and importantly have presented girls with many new opportunities that may not have been available to them or their families 25 years ago. It is secondary education, however, that will place a child in a position to gain economic and social benefits, and offer greater expectation and support to a child that ultimately result in independence and empowerment.

And yet it is at the lower secondary level — the crossroads between primary school and basic functionality in society and the true economic and social freedom and empowerment provided by secondary education — that girls are at the most risk of dropping out. Promoting and achieving gender-equitable secondary education is what will ultimately lead to the greatest socio-economic returns, enabling young women to contribute outside of their families to their communities and ultimately to the development of their countries.

Girls' secondary education and the additional dimension: Critical thinking

While education at the primary level is important to teach people the basic skills to function in society, it is at the secondary level that individuals find not only knowledge, but the empowerment to use that knowledge to alter their behavior at the individual, familial, community, and national level. A child at the primary level, for instance, may learn that to prevent malaria one should sleep under a mosquito net; however, it is only at the secondary level that the child will begin to understand the causal and scientific reasoning for this as well as the long-term economic benefits. Further, it is at the secondary level that the child will begin to feel empowered and worthy of putting these sorts of decisions into practice and to encourage others to do so.

Because secondary education produces critical thinking and analytical skills beyond functional literacy, it influences positively the knowledge, attitudes, and practice of girls and women in different social sectors: the environment, community programs and participation, democracy, family law, human rights, crime and violence, and even human trafficking.

Making her own decisions

Empowerment begins with the acknowledgement by a parent or society that girls and women need and deserve a secondary level of education — that more is expected of them than the ability to keep a good home. The very act of sending a child to secondary school implies greater expectations because of the additional costs invested in this decision.

Currently, the message girls receive is that boys should be educated at the secondary level so they can eventually earn more for their families and participate in society. The message to boys is they are responsible for their own lives, and for controlling their earnings, their career, and their future. Girls, on the other hand, learn that their futures are not in their own hands and that their potential to earn and participate is only relevant to the extent that it enables them to protect their children from disease. This, in itself, demotivates a girl from decision-making. Her confidence in her ability to make decisions is shaken before it can ever be established.

With the additional knowledge, critical thinking skills, and social reinforcement of a secondary education, girls are far more likely to make and practice better decisions regarding their lives.

Primary education is a necessary but not sufficient condition

A commonly used expression in Africa to argue or persuade others of the need for girls' education is, "Educate a woman, educate a nation." The word "nation" is sometimes replaced with "family." In either interpretation, the implication is that the value of educating a girl is her impact on her family's health, economic status, and access to education. This interpretation does not acknowledge her right to an education for her own sake or the value of educating women to be self-sufficient, economically-independent members of society.

Indeed, educating girls and women does have significant value economically for women and their children. According to the Forum for African Women Educationalists, "In sub-Saharan Africa, the social return on girls' education is estimated at 24.3 percent for basic education and 18.2 percent for secondary

education, the highest rates in the world."[41] Primary education for girls reduces poverty by contributing to lower birth rates, lower rates of child malnutrition, reduced child mortality, and slightly more efficiency while vending or shopping in the marketplace.

Each of these skills is important; however, they make a comparison between a child with a basic set of skills and one with no education at all. They are not in any way indicative of a person who has a full set of capabilities and skills in these areas, skills gained through secondary education. This is especially true in certain African and Asian countries where the low quality of primary school education means students completing primary education may not be fully literate or able to contribute economically to the fullest of their potential.

For girls of industrialized countries it is not considered "good enough" if they achieve a 4th, 5th, or even 6th grade level of schooling because it is understood that this will not enable them to be fully functioning, independent adults with the ability to contribute economically, intellectually, socially, politically, and culturally to their society. Why then, are we willing to accept this standard for developing countries? Why do we accept it in particular for African girls, yet claim we are developing a nation, freeing them from the risk of HIV and AIDS, creating a more equitable African society, and contributing to true economic development?

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[41] Nduru, Moyiga. "Africa: Urged to Invest in Education of Girls to Reduce Poverty." Inter Press Service, March 22, 1999. Last accessed 22 May 2006. http://www.twnside.org.sg/title/edu-cn.htm.

To make these claims, it is crucial that secondary education be accessible — financially and geographically — for a majority of, if not all, African girls, the most disadvantaged globally. It is secondary education that develops the functional and analytical literacy that will ensure an economically productive life. UNESCO reports:

> The *economic returns* to education have been extensively studied, especially in terms of increased individual income and economic growth. While the number of years of schooling remains the most frequently used variable, recent studies also look at assessments of cognitive skills, typically literacy and numeracy test scores. They find that literacy levels have a positive impact on earnings beyond that of years spent in school…Using data from the International Adult Literacy Survey, one study concluded that differences in average skill levels among OECD countries explained 55 percent of the differences in economic growth over 1960-94, implying that investment in raising the average skill levels could yield large economic returns…Another study suggests that a literacy rate of at least 40 percent is a prerequisite for sustained rapid economic growth. How do the returns to investment in adult basic education compare with those to investment in formal schooling? The fact that literacy has been one of the more neglected EFA goals partly stems from an assumption that primary-level education is more cost-effective than youth and adult programs. Yet, what sparse evidence exists indicates that the returns on investment in adult literacy programs are generally comparable to, and compare favorably with, investments in primary level education.[42]

Instead of investing in additional adult literacy programs for those who never attended or did not learn basic skills in primary school, it would be more cost-effective and beneficial in the long run to provide children with a full set of skills through secondary education. This way they can carry these skills throughout their lives, and their productivity as adults will not be compromised by making up for lost time in adult literacy courses.

The increased depth, efficacy, and provision of essential literacy skills at the secondary level explains why an investment here has an even greater multiplier effect on the health and social welfare of families, and on the social, political, cultural, and economic status of women themselves. If education for women is always viewed only as a means to an end — to guarantee health and prosperity for families — African women will never be able or expected to support themselves and contribute to their fullest potential to the economic growth and development so needed in Africa. It is, in fact, this mindset which largely limits the progress of African women in education.

42 UNESCO. Education for All Global Monitoring Report: Part II: Why Literacy Matters, 2005. Last accessed 22 May 2006. http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=43048&URL_DO=DO_ TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.