

The Detrimental Impact of Globalization on Female Education in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Introduction

While it has been argued by World Bank development thinkers that the globalization process will lead to poverty alleviation and economic growth, the successes of globalization have been unequal both among and within countries. The social inequalities created by globalization refer to an unbalanced allocation of assets and opportunities. Authors such as Nancy Birdsall argue that economic growth and poverty alleviation can be brought about by addressing these issues (Veltmeyer, 2009: 113). Education is among the assets distributed unequally in developing countries, with preferential treatment given to men.

The importance of female education to the development of a country was recognized on September 2000, when 189 member states of the United Nations (U.N.) came together to construct the eight Millennium Development Goals (World Bank, 2011). These goals are a global commitment to work towards the eradication of poverty. Despite the fact that the second goal is universal primary education and the third goal is to empower women and provide gender equality, women lag behind in school enrollment and literacy rates in Sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 2011). The following paper argues that female education is vital to development in Sub-Saharan Africa, and that the globalization process rooted in the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) of the 1980s and 1990s has played a destructive role to the education of women. This will be accomplished by describing the direct and indirect effects of the globalization process on female education in Sub-Saharan Africa, cultural practises that have contributed to the gender gap in education, the beneficial impact that female education has to development, and proposing solutions for the discrimination of women in education.

Globalization Process in Sub-Saharan Africa

Globalization refers to the process of removing protection-type barriers to free trade among countries (Weisbrot *et al.*, 2001: 3). The globalization process has been created by the World Bank and IMF through various forms of structural adjustment since the 1980s through conditionalities in accessing loans. Indebtedness to global financial systems such as the World Bank and IMF has reached a level where 25-40% of export earnings go towards servicing loans. Indebtedness has had a crippling effect on the government's ability to act in order to advance socio-economic development. This process has had detrimental impacts to education in Sub-Saharan Africa. The goal of universal education prior to the establishment of the MDG's in 2000 has receded since the decade of the 1980s (Brown *et al.*, 1991: 282). Prior to the debt crisis in the 1970s and the subsequent SAPs in the 1980s, many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa provided free and compulsory primary education. As debts increased during this period

governments could no longer deliver these services and were forced to install user-pay systems for education (Konadu-Agyemang and Shabaya, 2004: 418). The establishment of user-pay systems in Sub-Saharan Africa has forced poor families who can barely meet their basic needs to pay for school fees, uniforms and textbooks. As a result of this, a price tag is created for female education where families must decide whether they can afford to pay for education and lose the additional household income that a female child will earn in the informal sector (Konadu-Agyemang and Shabaya, 2004: 411).

The period of the 1980s was difficult financially for all countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. It is difficult to measure the exact impact that SAPs have had on education during that period, though public expenditure fell more rapidly in countries that were undertaking SAPs than countries that were not (Brown *et al.*, 1991: 282). Per Capita income declined in 71% of SAP countries, compared to only 46% of countries without SAPs (Reimers, 1994: 121). As household income in Sub-Saharan Africa suffered, there was less money available for school fees. There was also a greater need for children to contribute to household incomes. As household income increasingly became incapable of providing the resources needed for education, the state would have had to increase public expenditure on the education system to maintain school enrollment rates. Empirical data suggests that this compensation did not happen, due largely to the economic burden created by SAP conditionality and debt servicing (Reimers, 1994: 123).

Public Expenditures per person fell from 33 USD to 15 USD between 1980-1986 and education as a percentage of GNP fell in 67% of adjusting countries, compared to only 14% of non-adjusting countries during the same period (Brown *et al.*, 1991: 282). A reduction of funding led the Education Ministries to disproportionately cut the share of teaching materials and additional pay for working over-time hours were cut from teachers' salaries (Reimers, 1994: 127). The quality of education in Sub-Saharan Africa was affected as a result of this as there were fewer teachers, less teaching resources and school facilities were aging and poorly maintained.

In addition, less household income had the effect of forcing children to generate income while going to school. Students were therefore often tired and had fewer quantities of needed school supplies such as uniforms and textbooks (Reimers, 1994: 127).

Cultural Related Barriers to Female Education

Despite the fact that the Globalization process characterized by structural adjustment made it difficult for governments and households to pay for education, this is an inadequate explanation for the discrimination of women in education in Sub-Saharan Africa. While the degree of access to education and therefore literacy differs depending on the country, the gender gap in education is universal across the continent (Konadu-Agyemang and Shabaya, 2004: 400). All across Sub-Saharan African women aged 15-49 tend to have fewer years of schooling than men (Konadu-Agyemang and Shabaya, 2004: 396). Women in Sub-Saharan Africa also have the lowest literacy rates in the world.

The gender gap can be attributed to cultural beliefs that systematically condition school for boys to be perceived as more valuable than for girls. This conditioning is reinforced by the family, religious leaders and much of the rest of society. Families often believe that because female education is not necessary for marriage, it is a waste of resources. This perception is rooted in the belief that a woman's role should be centered on the home and raising children (Colclough *et al.*, 2000: 4). Religious leaders often interpret religions in a contentious and sexist way that discourages the education of women (Sossou and Turow, 2008: 368). Religious interpretation can also discourage interaction between the sexes, which makes adequate provision of female education a more complex issue.

The education system in Sub-Saharan Africa rarely mentions successful women who could act as role models for potential female students. The absence of female role models further exacerbates the perception of male superiority. This perception is further reinforced by discrimination against women in the formal sector. As in many developed countries, women in Sub-Saharan Africa receive lower earnings than males for employment in which they have equal qualifications (Colclough *et al.*, 2000: 4). Gender-bias in employment has the combined effect of discouraging households from spending on education for women and discouraging female students from performing well because of the lack of perceived future benefits. The lesser value on girls' education and the apparent irrelevance of formal education to economic prosperity is clearly evident in the enormous proportion of illiterate and semi-illiterate women in urban centers in West Africa (Sossou and Turow, 2008: 367).

The discrimination against school-aged women in education in Sub-Saharan Africa is also caused by household duties and the reliance of households on income-earning activities that are not expected from their male counterparts. Women and female children contribute to the majority of agricultural work in subsistence farming and have additional household duties such as: gathering firewood, drawing water, preparing food, taking care of children and managing finances (Sossou and Turow, 2008: 371). Women play an enormous role in the informal economy, modern non-agricultural work without recognized contracts, fixed wages or government protection (Doane and Johnston-Anumonwo, 2011: 9). In most Sub-Saharan African countries this is made up of occupations such as street vending and selling services such as sewing, laundry, hairstyling, and repairing shoes, vehicles and electronics. These non-formal occupations make up a significant proportion of household income in many Sub-Saharan African countries. The opportunity cost of sending female children to school may be too much for an impoverished family to bear (Konadu-Agyemang and Shabaya, 2004: 413). If a choice must be made between deciding which children will go to school, male children are generally favoured.

Another cultural restraint on female education is early marriage. Women tend to marry at a much younger age than males (Coclough, 2000: 4). This is significant to the degree of education that women receive because a girl's allegiance is perceived by society to change to the husband's family after marriage. Households therefore must consider that future increased earnings from education will not go towards the parents of girls when deciding whether to finance their daughters' educations (Konadu-Agyemang and Shabaya, 2004: 414). The problem of early marriage for gender discrimination in education is evident from a 1999 Demographic and Health Survey in Nigeria, which found that 19% of

girls cited early marriage as a reason for dropping out of school (Sossou and Tuwor, 2008: 368). Early marriage is also associated with poor health, low self-esteem and social isolation because girls are of school age when they marry. Early marriage is a major factor in perpetuating the feminization of poverty and gender inequality.

The education system in Sub-Saharan Africa may favour male attendance and performance over females. This is due to a variety of gender specific challenges in the learning process of women. Harassment from boys and male teachers is a prominent issue and school buildings often do not provide separate toilet facilities for girls (Coclough, 2000: 4). Teachers themselves may not provide women with adequate encouragement, and sexual harassment is not well monitored in many countries (Konadu-Agyemang and Shabaya, 2004: 415). In this hostile environment, female students experience a difficult learning process and may not achieve the level of education that they desire.

Beneficial Impact of Female Education

The importance of female education in developing countries cannot be overemphasized. "You educate a woman, you educate a nation" is a famous quote by South Africa's Deputy President, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka during the 4th annual Women's Parliament Conference in Cape Town (Anzia, 2006). The societal connection between standard of living and female education is a well-documented area of study. It is therefore not entirely surprising that Sub-Saharan Africa as a region has both the highest levels of poverty and female illiteracy in the developing world (Brown et al, 1991: 275). Lack of education undermines all development efforts because of the complex relationship between education and society. Although education is important for all layers of society, for development, female education is most crucial. The beneficial impact of women in Sub-Saharan Africa can be demonstrated using both social and socioeconomic rationales.

The education of women is strongly associated with many beneficial effects for society in Sub-Saharan Africa. This is apparent in the evidence that families of educated women are usually in better health, receive better nutrition and have improved hygiene (Brown *et al.*, 1991: 276). Children in particular benefit from their educated mothers. Children born to educated mothers tend to suffer less from malnutrition and are more likely to be immunized at age-appropriate levels (Konadu-Agyemang and Shabaya, 2004: 398). The education of mothers has also been shown to lower infant/child mortality rates. It has been estimated that each year of school that a girl undertakes leads to a 10% reduction of under-5 mortality rates in her offspring. This reduction is the result of a greater understanding of health, sanitation and nutrition (Konadu-Agyemang and Shabaya, 2004: 398).

Female education tends to lower fertility rates among women which will help to control population growth in a given country. While it may be a contentious issue whether lower fertility rates leads to social well-being, education empowers women to make informed decisions regarding contraception and the costs and benefits of large families. Population control studies have shown that in developing

countries, every extra year of female education will reduce fertility by between 5-10% (Konadu-Agyemang and Shabaya, 2004: 398). This is at least partially due to decisions regarding postponing marriage, and receiving higher-paying employment. Educated mothers also tend to send their children to school, which creates a positive feedback loop where generation after generation of children will become educated. This positive feedback loop will help undermine the "vicious circle" of poverty where inequality of society's productive assets will limit society's ability to help the poor and for the poor to help themselves (Veltmeyer, 2009: 113).

An educated female population will have a long term impact for a national economy. It has been proven that countries that have higher levels of school enrollment in the past reap future economic rewards through increased economic performance (Konadu-Agyemang and Shabaya, 2004: 399). While economic benefit does not necessarily translate into societal well-being, education will lead to a more productive and skilled workforce which should translate into better jobs and increased standards of living.

The beneficial effects of female education in Sub-Saharan Africa can also be demonstrated on a socio-economic basis. Sixty percent of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa is involved in agricultural work (Brown et al, 1991: 280). Most of this agricultural activity is for subsistence farming, which is food production for family consumption. Subsistence agricultural workers in Sub-Saharan Africa are predominately women, who contribute to producing 60-70% of the food consumed by families. Evidence from the World Bank indicates that educated farmers have been shown to be more productive than farmers who are uneducated. On average, four years of primary education contributes to an 8.1% increase in productivity, recorded in seven studies by the World Bank (Brown *et al.*, 1991: 280). Investment in female education would therefore have an enormous effect on the well-being of families because of their contribution to subsistence agriculture.

Women who enter the formal sector are also better equipped by education, which is critical for single parent families in Sub-Saharan Africa (Konadu-Agyemang and Shabaya, 2004: 399). Finally, as mentioned earlier countries that have higher levels of education generally reap future economic rewards due to increased productivity. This may seem intuitive, but it is an important developmental aspect because so many women in Sub-Saharan Africa have inadequate years of schooling and literacy.

Strategies for Improving the Female Education System and Closing the Gender Gap in Education

Strategies for the improvement of the female education system in Sub-Saharan Africa must take into account the economic restraints of states to spend money on the improvement of their education system, and of households to pay school fees. Indebtedness in Sub-Saharan African countries has reached a level where 25-40% of export earnings go directly to servicing loans from global financial systems such as the World Bank and IMF (Konadu-Agyemang and Shabaya, 2004: 418). Research has found a positive correlation between increases of household income and households investing in female education (Konadu-Agyemang and Shabaya, 2004: 418). While addressing state and household poverty

is an incomplete solution to achieving gender parity in education, it must be addressed in order for a more gender-specific focus to be effective. One example of how to empower the state to make effective educational policy is through debt forgiveness (Konadu-Agyemang and Shabaya, 2004: 417). The cancelling of debt in Sub-Saharan Africa would play a tremendous role in freeing up state budget improvements in female education. This must come from global financial systems such as the IMF and World Bank.

Once the state is financially empowered and household incomes rise with improved economic activity, a shift towards government action in addressing gender equality is possible. Better economic performance of the state and households will increase overall student enrollment rates, but a reduction of the gender gap in education is only possible with measures to target cultural practise (Coclough, 2000: 3). Sossou and Tuwor argue that gender equality in education can be met using three strategies which include: attitude change, governmental responsibilities and parental accountability (2008: 372).

The first strategy of attitude change targets both men and women to recognize the importance of female education in Sub-Saharan Africa (Sossou and Tuwor, 2008: 372). It would encompass mass educational programmes, on how female education is beneficial to both women and the rest of society. Governments should also provide media campaigns that will help shape perceptions on gender roles. As in many regions of the world, women in Sub-Saharan Africa are taking on an increasing number of male characterized roles such as supporting families financially, but the reverse is not apparent (Sossou and Tuwor, 2008: 373). As well as changing perceptions on the value of female education, these educational programmes will have an added beneficial effect of increasing the self-confidence and self-motivation of women to achieve education-related goals.

The second strategy of government responsibility mentioned by Sossou and Tuwor involves a prioritizing of female education by government departments which oversee female enrollment and retention in schools (2008: 374). Governments in Sub-Saharan Africa should view female education as a catalyst for economic and human development for their country. Specifically, governments need to increase the percentage of national budgetary allocations to the education system. Teachers must be better paid and motivated, gender appropriate resources and curricula need to be introduced and availability of education needs to be increased. In rural areas in particular, school facilities need to be constructed and better maintained (Sossou and Tuwor, 2008: 375). Textbooks should have equal representation of males and females as potential role models for students. This is to ensure that girls will be equally inspired to perform well in classes.

The final strategy towards gender parity in education, mentioned by Sossou and Tuwor, is parental responsibility (2008: 376). The aim of this strategy is to hold parents accountable for their children's education. Specifically, parents should sign formal agreements with school district authorities that both their male and female children will stay in school for at least 12 years of basic schooling. Parents will be held accountable if their children drop out of school before the required twelve years are completed

(Sossou and Tuwor, 2008: 376). This strategy is the most conditional because formal agreements should only be implemented if the family makes sufficient household income, such that they don't need additional income from young children in order to provide for basic needs. This implication clearly demonstrates how poverty is the greatest indicator of whether women in Sub-Saharan Africa will be educated.

Conclusion

In conclusion, substantial progress has been made in female education in Sub-Saharan Africa over the past 40 years in areas such as female illiteracy, but rates are still high compared to males (Konadu-Agyemang and Shabaya, 2004: 395). Low student enrollment rates and literacy can be attributed to the effects of globalization, characterized by the disempowerment of the state by Structural Adjustment in the 1980s. The gender gap in education refers to the disparity between males and females in school enrollment and literacy rates and this is caused by the combination of poverty and cultural perception on the value of female education. Female education is a catalyst for both economic and human development which will serve to benefit both women and society. In order to improve the performance of the female education system both external economic factors and internal cultural restraints must be addressed. This can be accomplished if global financial systems such as the World Bank and IMF decide to forgive a much higher proportion of external debt, which will empower the state to be more effective in launching gender education programs for the public, and improving the overall education system in Sub-Saharan Africa. In addition to the three governmental strategies proposed by Sossou and Tuwor, the universal and gender-blind education system that characterized African countries like Ghana in the immediate post-independence years should be reinstated in order to make it possible for poor families to send their daughters to school (Konadu and Shabaya, 2004: 419). By focusing on restrictive economic and cultural structures, Sub-Saharan Africa will be able to boost school enrollment, literacy and gender parity in female education.

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