

## A LEAP TO EQUALITY?

### Abstract

The international community has agreed upon time-bound targets to achieve Education For All. By 2015, all boys and girls shall complete a full course of primary schooling. Gender parity in primary and secondary education is required by 2005 and at all levels of education by 2015. Two international reports – the 2003/4 issue of the 'EFA Global Monitoring Report' published by UNESCO and UNICEF's 'State of the World's Children' 2004 – assess progress made and obstacles encountered in the efforts to promote girls' education and reach the goals. The article reviews the two reports and discusses what should be regarded as 'education', the limited progress towards achieving education for all, why girls are held back, and prospects for the future.

*Keywords:* gender equality, gender and education, EFA, pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary education, development strategies, development co-operation, UNESCO and UNICEF

**Torild Skard**  
Guest Researcher,  
NUPI, Oslo

The objective of Education for All (EFA) is very ambitious: the basic learning needs of children and youth everywhere, girls as well as boys, must be met. In 1948 the nations of the world asserted the right to education through the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Countries around the globe made notable efforts and often achieved impressive results. But it was a struggle against the tide for poor countries with few resources and significant population growth. After 40 years, more than 100 million children had no access to primary schooling and more than 960 million adults were illiterate. The objective of education for all was therefore re-stated by the World Conference on Education for All, held in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990. Representatives from 155 countries committed themselves to renewed action to implement an extended agenda with time-bound targets. By 2000, universal primary education was to be achieved and the adult literacy rate was to be halved.

Despite the commitments, the numbers of illiterate adults and of children without schooling worldwide were not substantially reduced. The World Education Forum held in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000 therefore revised the framework for action, updated the goals and strengthened commitments. The UN General Assembly followed up later the same year, integrating parts of the Dakar framework in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These stated *inter alia* that by 2015 all children should be able to complete a full course of

primary schooling. Gender equality was judged to be particularly urgent: elimination of gender disparities in primary and secondary education was required by 2005, and gender equality at all levels of education was to be achieved by 2015.

So, what is happening now? UNESCO has a global monitoring role and publishes annual reports. The EFA Global Monitoring Report is an independent publication, written by a team of experts under the leadership of Christopher Colclough from the University of Sussex. The 2003/4 issue focuses on gender and education, with the promising title 'The Leap to Equality'. It is a comprehensive document (416 pages), providing updated global statistics, assessing progress towards EFA and analysing obstacles to girls' education, lessons from good practice, national strategies in action and international commitments. UNICEF's report, *State of the World's Children 2004*, is also about education, promoting both girls' education and a human-rights, multi-sectoral model for development. The two reports describe the same reality, but the contents and formats differ. The UNICEF report is a brief, legible advocacy document (148 pages), while UNESCO provides a thorough, academic analysis. Both are of high quality and represent important contributions to the promotion of gender equality in education worldwide.

## Basic problems

Nevertheless, both reports are marked by basic problems. First, what should be regarded as 'education'?

The Jomtien Conference underlined that education should meet basic learning needs. These comprise both essential learning tools (such as literacy, oral expression, numeracy and problem-solving) and the basic learning content (such as knowledge, skills, values and attitudes) required by human beings to be able to survive, to develop their full capacities, to live and work in dignity, to participate fully in development, to improve the quality of their lives, to make informed decisions and to continue learning. The scope of basic learning needs, and how they should be met, varies with individual countries and cultures, and inevitably changes with the passage of time, but it was important at Jomtien to broaden the means and scope of basic education. It was agreed that basic education should include early childhood care and initial education provided through families, communities or institutional programmes; primary education provided by families, primary schooling and supplementary, alternative programmes; literacy programmes; skills training; apprenticeships;

formal and non-formal education programmes, for youth and adults, in health, nutrition, population, agricultural techniques, the environment, science, technology, family life (including fertility awareness) and other societal issues. In addition to the traditional means, libraries, television, radio and other media could contribute to meeting the basic education needs of all.

In the UNESCO and UNICEF reports the scope and means of education though not discussed specifically, are limited. 'Education' does not refer to all kinds of teaching of children and youth. The global statistics comprise 'all formal schools, including public and private institutions'. Traditional, family- and community-based education is not included; non-formal schools and education programmes are also omitted. There are obvious technical problems about including these in official education statistics. But they are not given much attention in the texts, either. The references to early childhood care and education relate only to programmes of organised instruction. Neither report focuses on the role of the family. UNESCO discusses non-state providers of education – NGO programmes, as well as private, community and religious schools – but is limited by the paucity of information. Both reports underline the importance of engaging women and girls in achieving social change, but neither goes into depth regarding the role of mothers, women's groups and women's organisations in the education of girls. UNICEF, in a special chapter on the education of boys, has little to say about the role of fathers.

Formal education is important and is the primary concern of the educational authorities. But a limited focus on other forms of education has implications. It may easily be interpreted as meaning that non-formal education is of lesser or minor importance: that it does not *count*, in both meanings of the word. As a consequence, learning outside of school may be ignored, children and adults without formal schooling may be perceived as 'uneducated', the educational role of parents, the extended family and community may be underestimated and their support for EFA as well as their need for assistance in the upbringing of the next generation neglected. Further, in many developing countries, there is a cultural cleavage between the formal school system – created by the former colonial powers and marked by a Western orientation – and traditional practices, norms and approaches. The Jomtien Conference stressed that traditional knowledge and indigenous cultural heritage have a value, and validity, in their own right, but this is not acknowledged when traditional education is disregarded or depreciated. Thus, basic learn-

ing needs may not be met and disparities between the modern school and local culture may be overlooked in the development of educational opportunities. Tensions in this area are particularly important for the education of girls. The UNESCO report discusses traditional resistance to girls' education, but from a somewhat different angle.

The statistics present problems of their own. In many countries it is extremely difficult to obtain complete, reliable data on access to education: enrolment in educational institutions, participation and completion. The global tables have many empty spaces, varying from region to region and from one table to another, and estimated data are sometimes used along with actual statistics. Further, the data collection entails a time lag, so that we are now, four years after the Millennium Assembly and one year before the 2005 goal, using the most recent data for 2000. Assessments relating to recent years are therefore based on trends during the 1990s. The quality of education is even more difficult to capture. Direct indicators are lacking, and the UNESCO report is obliged to use 'proxies': the number and qualifications of teachers and data on financial resources, in particular the amount of public spending on the school system.

## Progress, but not enough

In spite of the limitations, the reports paint a fascinating and at the same time troubling picture of the efforts worldwide to achieve EFA. Both reports present the same main features, but UNICEF concentrates on primary schooling, while UNESCO covers the whole educational system, from early childhood to tertiary education.

The reports describe appreciable efforts in many countries to achieve education for all and show that considerable progress has been made globally:

- ▼ A broad variety of pre-primary programmes have been established, entailing organised instruction in the setting of a school or centre. The duration, curriculum and teacher qualifications of the various programmes are so diverse as to make international comparisons difficult. Enrolments have generally increased considerably during the last decade, though they are often very low. Substantial setbacks have been experienced in Central Asia and Central and Eastern Europe. Generally, gender disparities in favour of boys are less pronounced in pre-primary education than other levels of education. Non-formal programmes, which

often target poorer groups, and private formal provision tend to have high gender parity.

- ▼ In the course of the 1990s, the total enrolment in primary schools increased from 596 million to 648 million, with the highest relative increases in sub-Saharan Africa. Nevertheless, this region remains furthest from achieving universal primary education. Generally, girls' enrolment increased relatively fast, reaching 47 per cent globally in 2000. In the three regions where gender inequalities are greatest – sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab States, and South and West Asia – disparities have eased substantially.
- ▼ In secondary schooling, there were significant moves towards gender parity in enrolments in all developing regions during the 1990s, but with great variation in enrolment levels.
- ▼ In tertiary education, women continued to move towards parity with men, but progress was slow and there is a clear gender pattern in the choice of fields of study.
- ▼ Finally, during the decade, the estimated adult literacy rates rose from 75 to 80 per cent, increasing slightly more for women than for men. In 2000, 85 per cent of men and 74 per cent of women were literate. Literacy rates increased most in sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab States; but these two regions, together with South and West Asia, were still at the bottom of the list.

Despite the progress, discrimination in the access to basic education continues to be concentrated on women and girls. In 2000, an estimated 104 million children were not enrolled in school and 57 per cent of these were girls. Around 862 million adults were illiterate, of which 64 per cent were women. Many countries have, despite great efforts, made little progress and will probably not achieve the MDGs. On the basis of past trends, 60 per cent of the countries for which data are available are likely to miss reaching gender parity at primary and secondary levels by 2005. Forty per cent risk not achieving this even by 2015.

### **Why are girls held back?**

The UNESCO report underlines that gender equality is more complex than gender parity, which is a purely numerical concept. Full gender equality would imply that girls and boys are offered the same chances to go to school, enjoy teaching methods, curricula and academic orientation unaffected by gender bias, and obtain equal learning results and subsequent life opportunities for similar

qualifications and experience. The report therefore refers to rights *to* education, rights *within* education and rights *through* education.

Why are girls held back? The UNESCO report offers a comprehensive analysis of a broad set of factors. Generally, girls' rights to education are limited by poverty, gender inequalities in the family and society, a gender-based division of labour and the need for families to put children to work. In this connection, sensitive subjects such as patriarchal structures of authority, son preference, early marriage of girls, rites of passage and sexual taboos are discussed. Special attention is given to children in difficult circumstances due to armed conflict and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, or because they are foster children, are disabled or belong to marginalised groups, indigenous peoples or ethnic minorities. Schooling costs, school availability, distance of schools from homes and school facilities (including water and latrines) as well as type of school are all factors affecting girls' access to education. The report also considers rights within education, throwing light on problems girls may encounter in school: intolerance, discrimination and violence, lack of female teachers, teacher misconduct, and sexism in textbooks and curricula. Where education systems are well developed and girls enjoy equal participation in schooling, boys at times find themselves outperformed by them. This has created concern in some countries. But many examples show that girls are unable to convert their academic edge over boys into greater equality in other spheres of life.

The international consensus makes gender equality in school seem a straightforward, if not an easy task. But the term 'equality' is not without ambiguities. What does it actually mean? Do we want men and women, boys and girls to become completely similar, or to be treated in the same way, to have equal opportunities or equal status? The choice of definitions may lead to different strategies and results. Equal treatment or equal opportunities, for example, do not necessarily lead to equal status, due to the different conditions of girls and boys, women and men. Clarifying such questions might not be very important as long as the challenge is to combat direct discrimination against girls: to prevent them from being abused and treated in a degrading way, and to ensure that they, like boys, are able to acquire basic skills and knowledge. But in the practical development of educational services the definitions may rapidly become significant. Should girls and boys always be taught in *exactly* the same way, within *exactly* the same curriculum? Is *all* differential treatment necessarily negative? In certain situations, a mechanical equality might in fact become discriminatory. What about special

activities aimed at strengthening the position of girls? Or single-sex classes and schools? How should education related to the reproductive roles of women and men be organised? The answers are not necessarily simple. The UNESCO report mentions the existence of differing views on gender roles in various contexts, but does not enter into a discussion of how 'gender equality' should be interpreted.

In *The State of the World's Children 2004*, UNICEF – like UNESCO in its report – places education in a broad societal setting and identifies fairly similar obstacles to the achievement of EFA. But UNICEF deals with the hindrances in a more superficial way. An advocacy document is not the place for profound analysis, and UNICEF presents a compelling plea for universal education. But the enthusiasm sometimes leads to an oversimplification of reality. The role of education is exaggerated and problems downplayed. The report not only states that the barriers to girls' education are surmountable; the impression given is that education *in itself* will solve even complex development problems. For example: Give girls an education and child labour will disappear. While education can undeniably be a useful instrument in combating child labour, it can hardly do the job alone. The elimination of child labour also depends on the reduction of poverty and the implementation of labour standards.

### **A bleak future?**

Both UNESCO and UNICEF hold the view that it is possible to achieve education for all and they provide advice on how to renew efforts, based on experiences from countries where progress has been fast.

UNESCO acknowledges that gender equality within and through education will not happen easily. The state must play a leading role, making legislative changes, managing educational infrastructure, supplies and incentive schemes, regulating the actions of teachers and reforming the curricula. Measures to redistribute resources within education, and more broadly in other sectors, in order to meet girls' specific educational needs, are a major priority. Much can be done to reduce the direct and indirect costs of educating girls that families have to face. Besides the direct involvement of women and girls, multi-sectoral partnerships are essential to promote education for all, but partners must be held accountable for their actions and impact on equality.

UNICEF proposes a number of specific strategies both within and outside the classroom to increase school attendance and completion by girls. These range from abolishing school fees, recruiting teachers who are sensitive to gender and child rights, scheduling lessons flexibly, supplying safe water and latrines, eliminating gender bias from textbooks and teaching in the local language, to providing early childhood programmes, organising special activities to reach the most disadvantaged, offering alternative education for drop-outs, overage children, working children or children in armed conflict, reducing the domestic workload and involving the local community.

Both in Jomtien and Dakar, Ministers of Education committed themselves to achieving education for all. In Dakar, important industrialised nations were very explicit, affirming that no countries seriously committed to education for all would be thwarted in their efforts to achieve the objective by lack of resources. Both the UNESCO and UNICEF reports now note, however, that the commitments have not been honoured. Despite the efforts of some countries, there has not been the major shift of resources into education that is required. National EFA plans as well as Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers are generally weak with regard to gender analysis, and a number of studies find that education sector programmes pay limited attention to both gender outcomes and the inputs that affect them. With some significant exceptions, industrialised countries and multilateral organisations have substantially failed to meet their part of the bargain. Overall, support for education has been declining during recent years, creating a significant gap between international rhetoric and reality. This relates both to the levels of funding for EFA and to a real willingness to work together in a well-coordinated manner.

Despite the need for more insight, the two reports demonstrate that a lack of knowledge or policy options is not a valid reason for failing to realise gender equality in education. Limited progress has more to do with a lack of political commitment, effective implementation of measures and resources. For the international community the task remains to follow up on their commitments and respond to the scale and urgency of the challenge of EFA in an appropriate way.