

# ECONOMIC GENDER EQUALITY FALLS SHORT AGAIN



UN Headquarters in New York

**THALIF DEEN**

**A** new study concludes that investments in girls' education have failed to deliver economic equality for women.

The researchers found that while such investments have delivered many other benefits—including better health outcomes for women and their families—the economic returns are often disappointing.

The study, released May 12 and authored by researchers at the Washington and London-based think tank, the Centre for Global Development, found that the huge increases to the number of girls who are going to school in the world's poorest countries are not translating into equal employment or economic gender equity.

“Investing in girls' education makes sense, there's no doubt about that. But just getting girls into school is not enough to give them equal opportunities later in life,” said Shelby Carvalho, Senior Policy Analyst at the Centre for Global Development, and one of the report's lead authors.

An analysis of 126 countries revealed that when it comes to women working, little has changed over the past 30 years, despite a dramatic increase in the level of education girls are accessing. In fact, women remain twice as likely as men not to be in employment or education.

## Access to education

The study, titled “Girls' Education and Women's Equality: How to Get More out of the World's Most Promising Investment”, also revealed:

- ◆ On average, higher rates of girls' participation in school have not consistently resulted in more women working, and where they do work, there are huge pay and seniority gaps.

- ◆ Globally, the majority of unemployed youth (aged between 15–24) are women.

- ◆ In India, the number of women working has not increased since the 1980s, despite massive increases in the number of girls who go to school.

- ◆ Evidence from Ethiopia, Malawi, Pakistan, and Uganda shows that improvements to girls' education had no impact at all on labour market equity.

- ◆ In Latin America, the number of women joining the workforce is slowing down, even though girls are achieving more in school.

Asked whether the new findings will undermine the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly relating to gender empowerment and women's education, Carvalho told IDN: “These restrictions affect at least three of the SDGs”.

SDG 5, she pointed out, calls for the achievement of gender equality and empowerment for all women and girls. Education for girls is a key instrument for achieving gender equality, and countries should absolutely invest in a quality education for all girls.”

But without a level playing field in the world of work, she argued, women can't reap many of the benefits of that education.

“SDG 10 calls for reduced inequality within and between countries. Gender inequality is a major source of within-country inequality, and a lack of women's representation – from political leadership to teachers in science classrooms – slows progress,” she noted.

SDG 4 calls for inclusive and equitable quality education for all.

“When only 5 per cent of girls are finishing high school—as is the case in Benin and Guinea Bissau—and less than 1 in 5 girls are completing high school



Education for girls, key to achieving gender equality

in Papua New Guinea and Haiti, we are far from achieving the fourth goal,” she added.

*Excerpts from an interview follow:*

**What's the status of girls' education and gender empowerment in countries such as Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia following sharia law?**

**Carvalho:** We find that more restrictive laws or norms which may limit girls' education, their aspirations, or the kinds of opportunities available to women in the labour market do have the potential to limit the role that education can play in fostering empowerment and can act as persistent barriers to equalizing economic opportunities later in life—even when education outcomes are equal.

While places like Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan, as well as many others, have made strides in some areas related to girls' education and women's rights, there are still other areas of both formal law and social norms which likely continue to limit the potential of girls' education to be the great equalizer we believe it can be.

**Is religion—or the misinterpretation of religion—playing a role in gender discrimination?**

**Carvalho:** Social norms play a major role in gender discrimination, and those can be informed by any number of social phenomena, including religion. Societies that limit women's ability to work or limit their ability to work in certain industries make it so, some women can't reap the full benefits of education.

Right now, more than a third of countries restrict women from working in the same industries as men. Often, industries dominated by men are also better paying. There are many other examples: restrictions to access to credit, restrictions to hours, etc. The only way for girls' education to pay off is if women have equal opportunities in the job market.

Carvalho also said, “for women and girls around the world, just because you have the same level of education as your male peer, doesn't guarantee that you won't be paid a fraction of what he is earning, or be unable to work because you spend so much of your time doing unpaid household labour or child-care”.

“It doesn't guarantee you won't be more likely to experience violence by men. It doesn't guarantee you'll have the same chance at prosperity, or that the society your children grow up in will be more equal,” said Carvalho.

Meanwhile, the researchers also recommend that education systems do more to support gender equality by making sure schools are safe for girls, rooting out discrimination, and supporting girls in the school-to-work transition.

“We know a lot about how to get girls into school and how to help them learn,” said David Evans, Senior Fellow at the Centre for Global Development and the report's other lead author. “But we still have a lot to learn about how to ensure schools are safe places for every girl.”

Through this lens, the authors examine the investments being made in global education by top donors such as the World Bank and the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

Gender equity and girls' education are commonly cited as a focus by these agencies—in 2020 92 per cent of the FCDO's education financing and 77 per cent of World Bank financing went to projects that included girls' education as a stated priority.

## Girls' empowerment

“But this has only translated to projects which specifically target girls or the unique challenges they face less than half of the time. A tiny 5 per cent of projects are focused on reducing gender bias in classrooms, and less than 20 per cent are focused on girls' empowerment, access, health and safety, or advocacy”, the study noted.

Few World Bank education project documents over the past 20 years addressed barriers specific to girls, such as child marriage, adolescent pregnancy, or inadequate menstrual hygiene management.

“Institutional gender bias in education systems and lack of focus on proven interventions—many of them straightforward interventions like eliminating school fees for girls—is hitting the world's poorest and most marginalised girls the hardest, with the pandemic pushing them even further behind”.

Poor girls who live outside of cities are most likely to be missing out on school. In Sub-Saharan Africa, more than half of those not enrolled in school live below the poverty line in rural settings, the study said.

“And falls in household income—common because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the corresponding economic slowdowns as well as pre-pandemic issues like a parent losing a job or falling ill—are more likely to cause girls to drop out of school than boys”.

“If gender equality and all the economic benefits from education are to become more than a pipe-dream, we have to do more, and we need to perhaps think differently than how we have in the past,” said Carvalho.

(IDN-InDepth News)