

Chapter 4b

Increasing the Quality of Adolescent Girls' Education: A Vital Development and Reproductive Health Measure

Annabel Erulkar, Population Council, East and Southern Africa

The significant returns from female education to families, children, and women themselves, are well known. Women and girls with education are more likely to delay marriage, childbearing, and ultimately, give birth to fewer children. Female education is associated with increased nutritional status of children, improved health and survivorship, and increased education of children. Educated women enjoy increased economic productivity, including agricultural outputs and earnings, resulting in overall economic benefits to the family (Summers 1994; Odaga and Heneveld 1995). This is to say nothing of the probable psycho-social benefits to women resulting from exposure to the larger world—a world outside the confines of the immediate family and the domestic sphere.

In many countries, particularly developing countries, girls are at a disadvantage in terms of schooling compared to boys. Girls' disadvantage is reflected in rates of school enrollment, educational attainment, and performance (Bledsoe and Cohen 1993; IBRD and World Bank, 1996, Odaga and Heneveld, 1995). The disadvantages that girls face compared to boys in educational enrollment, attainment, and achievement has been a long-standing concern, particularly in developing countries.

Much of the policy attention to adolescent girls' schooling experience has been associated in the public mind with a presumed relationship between early sexual activity, teen pregnancy, and withdrawal from school. A recent ministerial-level conference in the East and Southern African region devoted to this subject was entitled "Counting the Cost:

School Drop Out and Adolescent Pregnancy.” The problem with associating girls’ educational disadvantage primarily with pregnancy is that it is based on the assumption that pregnancy is the *principal* cause of girls’ early withdrawal from school. A recent study conducted in Kenya, however, revealed that pregnancy was probably a much less common reason for dropping out than it was assumed to be (Mensch et al. 2001). Indeed, a much larger contributing cause to drop out was a “girl-unfriendly” school environment. *Rather than becoming pregnant and then dropping out, it appears that girls often drop out and then become pregnant.*

This chapter explores classroom dynamics and school quality as experienced by girls compared to boys. It draws largely from a study conducted in Kenya (Ajayi et al. 1997; Mensch and Lloyd 1998), but makes reference to data from other parts of the world, when such information is available. The studies presented in this paper reflect an increasing interest in school quality and school experience by policy-makers and programmers. In effect, this body of work suggests an unconventional causality: *a poor schooling environment for girls may be a greater problem than pregnancy in explaining school drop out.*

Why Are Girls Disadvantaged at School?

While considerable attention has been paid to the education of girls, very little has been discovered about the reasons why girls’ rates of enrollment are lower than boys’ and why girls drop out of school at faster rates than boys. To date, most of the attention has focused on socio-cultural factors—especially familial—that pull girls out of school early. These include parents or caregivers not seeing the value in educating girls; beliefs that education is in conflict with marriage and ultimately devalues girls in the marriage

market; opportunity costs of time spent in school (which competes with time spent doing unpaid domestic labor); and parents' fear for girls' safety while in transit to and from school (Bledsoe and Cohen 1993; Odaga and Heneveld 1995). As a result of this focus, many of the early interventions that aimed to improve girls' educational participation were directed at changing family and community valuations of girls' education.

While "family values" and teen pregnancy have been identified as factors that pull girls out of school, there has been little attention to factors that *push* girls out. It has always been assumed that the school environment is safe and supportive for girls and boys alike. The first evidence that the schooling experience was not the same for girls and boys came out of studies in developed and developing countries that examined classroom textbooks and other learning materials (Obura 1991; Hyde 1993; IBRD and World Bank 1996). Researchers found that not only do pictures of men far outnumber those of women, but that men and women were often portrayed very differently. Men were most often portrayed as active, energetic, and situated in high-status jobs, while women were pictured as weeping, holding babies, or transporting water (Obura 1991; IRBD and World Bank 1996). Such representation effectively sends the message to girls that they are less capable than boys and that they belong in domestic roles.

In the early 1990s evidence was emerging that the school environment was often not safe for, or supportive of, girls. In sub-Saharan Africa, this was underscored by the St. Kizito tragedy in Kenya in 1991, in which 19 secondary-school girls were killed and 71 others raped in their school dormitory by fellow male students, prompted by a protest over school fees. The deputy principal at the school was quoted as saying, "The boys never meant any harm against the girls. They just wanted to rape" (Perlez 1991).

A 1997 study conducted by the Population Council, in collaboration with the Kenya Ministry of Education and Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), investigated factors that influence the early withdrawal of girls from school, including those associated with the school environment and educational quality. Conducted in three districts of Kenya, the study examined the experience of girls and boys in the classroom, in the schoolyard, and in their homes. The study focused on girls and boys in primary school, as that is the level of education that the majority of Kenyans reach. The study found that girls are disadvantaged on many fronts, including in their interactions with teachers, in the playground, in the classroom, and with other students—particularly as a result of sexual harassment. In the study, teachers were asked, “Do you prefer teaching boys or girls?” While most teachers reported no preference, 33 percent of female teachers and 8 percent of male teachers reported that they prefer to teach boys. No teachers reported a preference for teaching girls. Teacher preference for boys was reflected in classroom interactions, which were quantified by observers. Boys were called on more than girls, and teachers gave more positive encouragement to boys than to girls.

Observers also took narrative notes, excerpted (unedited) below:

Three girls were missing writing materials. The teacher knocked their heads as punishment for forgetting books at home. She promised to “deal” with them after class.

Most questions were directed at boys and not girls. The teacher told the girls if they do not improve, he could foresee them joining the local Mathenge technical institute instead of a good boarding school or institutions. ...The teacher constantly told the class that the girls do not use common sense and that is why they might not make good salespersons.

Regarding harassment or bullying, schoolyard observation and interviews with students revealed that girls are harassed more than boys. Observers recorded harassment of girls in 80 percent of schools in one of the Kenyan district and about 50 percent of schools in the other two districts. In comparison, boys were observed being harassed in

10 percent of schools in one district and no schools in the other two districts. Both girls and boys in focus groups reported harassment of girls in the school environment:

Boys come and hold our breasts in class even when the teacher is there; he pretends that he is packing something (girl, 15-19 years old, Kilifi District).

Some [boys] touch their [girls'] breasts, even in classrooms (boy, 15-19 years old, Nakuru District).

This was one of the first studies to highlight that the school environment is, at times, hostile toward girls and could be a factor in their lower rates of school participation compared to boys (Ajayi et al. 1997; Mensch and Lloyd 1998).

As a result of this study, the Kenya Ministry of Education drafted a policy that calls for gender training for existing teachers, teachers-in-training, and district inspectors. Recent media coverage of the extent of sexual abuse of girls in Kenyan schools (“Sexual Abuse Rife in Schools,” *East African Standard*, 9 April 9, 2001) has sparked increased commitment among Ministry of Education officials to address the issue of safety within schools.

A recent qualitative study in Zimbabwe concluded that school is “a site of sexual violence for girls.” The study reported that older, male pupils and sometimes teachers aggressively force themselves upon girls, threaten them if their advances are rejected, accost them on school grounds, and taunt them by touching their breasts and buttocks. Students’ reports of harassment in the school environment in Zimbabwe are remarkably similar to the reports from Kenya:

A boy grabbed my breasts during sports. I nearly cried because it was so painful.

This boy in Form 4 touched my bum. He pretended it was by mistake, but it wasn't because he laughed with his friends.

In this study, male teachers and students viewed this behavior as a normal and natural part of school culture (Leach, Machakanja, and Mandogo. 2000). Most recently, Human Rights Watch published *Scared at School: Sexual Violence Against Girls in South African Schools* (2001). This document reported that cases of sexual violence against girls in schools in South Africa are “widespread,” with rape taking place in empty classrooms, hallways, and hostels (where students live), while verbal abuse and unwanted touching took place throughout the school premises. This prompted Human Rights Watch to recommend that the South African government adopt a national action plan to combat sexual violence against girls in schools. Mounting evidence of the hostility that girls face in school has resulted in *id21 education* creating a Web page (http://www.id21.org/education/gender_violence/index.html), funded by the Department for International Development (DfID), that is devoted to reporting on gender violence in African schools and efforts to combat it.

Recent research has focused not only on the barriers that girls face in getting to school, but also on the intense obstacles that they face once they are in school. The experience of harassment and the shadow cast on a girl's reputation by such an experience, dissuades girls from attending school and makes parents less likely to send them. These studies highlight the fact that threats to personal safety, verbal assaults, and intimidation seem to be the reality for many girls when they enter the schoolyard—a reality that, in all likelihood, contributes to girls' early withdrawal from school.

What Are Some Intervention Options?

A number of programs have sought to address the factors that pull girls out of school too early, such as economic disincentives and familial and societal attitudes. The

strategies of these programs are varied, but they are generally designed to increase the affordability and attractiveness of school to girls and parents. These programs include:

- Programs that address community attitudes, raising awareness of the value of girls' education through grassroots initiatives and the media (e.g., an awareness campaign for girls' education in Kwale District Kenya, implemented by the Kenya Alliance for the Advocacy of Children's Rights, and UNICEF's Girl-Child Project in Kenya).
- Programs that aim to remove economic barriers to sending girls to school by: waiving school fees; providing free uniforms, books, and other subsidies; supplying cash incentives to keep girls in schools, or creating after-school micro-enterprise activities for girls (e.g., a bursary scheme for secondary school girls in Chikonba District, Zimbabwe, a project of Camfed; and the Female Scholarship Scheme and the Food for Education Scheme implemented by the Government of Bangladesh) (see Ahmed et al. 1993; Amin and Sedgh 1998).
- Programs that promote girls' increased participation in science and math studies (e.g., Female Education in Mathematics and Science in Africa (FEMSA), a project of the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE)).
- Programs that aim to make schools safer and more supportive for girls (e.g. Reducing Barriers to Primary School Completion Among Kenyan Girls, a project of Maendeleo ya Wanawake, Academy for Educational Development, and Johns Hopkins University/ Population Communication Services).

This last area—making schools safe and supportive for girls and confronting the obstacles to girls' safety and comfort in school—*is a critical, largely unexplored, and much needed area of intervention.*

The realization, at least in sub-Saharan Africa, that school is not a safe place for girls comes at a time that is particularly challenging for most developing countries. Worsening national economies, compounded by the HIV/AIDS crisis (especially in Africa), have put a strain on public-sector budgets, including those devoted to education. Weaknesses in educational policy place additional burdens on schools. These factors increase the difficulty of responding to the already challenging problem of girls' lack of safety at school. Teachers, especially head teachers, must take it upon themselves to

ensure safety within their own schools. Unfortunately, the preparedness and quality of teachers is already compromised in many settings. Countries such as Kenya and Zimbabwe are losing record numbers of teachers to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which is contributing to shortages of teachers in many countries. Classes that were already large are growing ever larger. Over-burdened curricula and the diminishing status and remuneration of teachers combine to undermine attempts to improve school quality.

Several areas present themselves as logical policy and programmatic points of entry to improve girls' schooling experiences. These include:

- Family life education (FLE) programs attentive to gender issues;
- Ministry- and school-level protective measures regarding sexual harassment and safety of girls in school;
- Teacher training to prevent sexual harassment of girls in school, including harassment by teachers;
- Teacher training to encourage them to foster the development of skills and self-confidence in both girls and boys; and
- Revision of school curricula to offer a positive and non-gender-biased portrayal of girls, boys, men, and women in school texts.

The classic area for intervention in school curricula has been the offering of FLE programs, which provide young people with basic information about the process of physical maturation, reproductive health knowledge, and sexual and reproductive rights. The best of these programs offer broader life skills that both boys and girls can find highly useful and practical, and which may assist girls in negotiating sexual safety. FLE is becoming a priority for many Ministries of Education in sub-Saharan Africa —though these ministries are notably constrained by limited budgets, limited human resources, and

political sensitivities surrounding the provision of reproductive health information to school students.

Analyses of FLE curricula suggest that they often do not respond to the information and skills needed by adolescent girls and boys. Virtually all curricula lack a gender-sensitive understanding of the context of sex for adolescents. In assuming that all sex is consensual and free of power dimensions, curricula neglect the considerable amount of pressure and coercion that girls experience in school, in their communities, and often within their own homes, which plays out as well in their sexual relations.

The study by Leach and colleagues (2000) highlights the fact that harassment and coercion of girls in schools is seen as an integral and normal part of school culture in many places. Therefore, another critical area of intervention is ministerial-level policies and protective measures regarding harassment, which can set the stage for changing cultural norms and expectations regarding this behavior. School-based violence, including sexual violence, should be high on the agenda of school governing bodies at both the national and local levels.

Teachers who are guilty of misconduct in schools, including harassment of students and sexual assault or relationships with students, should be dismissed and not allowed to re-enter the educational system. Currently there are few policies in developing countries that call for punishing teachers who make sexual advances toward students, harass them, or even impregnate them. When such policies do exist, there are typically no clear mechanisms to communicate them or enforce them.

Appropriate disciplinary actions should also be institutionalized against students who assault other students. Support mechanisms for victims of abuse, at the levels of reporting events and of treatment and recovery, need to be put in place.

Improved teacher training is a vital intervention area. Teacher-training curricula for new teachers and in-service training for teachers already in the system should make teachers/head teachers aware of the extent and effect of sexual harassment and their responsibility for the safety and comfort of all students. Negative attitudes toward girls, demeaning treatment of girls, and harassment or coercion of students in general should be addressed in the initial stages of new teacher training, as well as during subsequent in-service training.

The content of school curricula needs to foster positive images of girls and boys and respond to a new reality that the vast majority of girls will carry sole or major responsibility for supporting themselves and their families. Some programs have taken steps to revise the portrayal of men and women in school texts in ways that do not reinforce traditional gender norms and stereotypes. However, FLE curricula still need to respond to the real-life context of sex for adolescents—especially adolescent girls who, by virtue of their traditional gender roles, have diminished control over sexual decisionmaking, including the decision as to whether or not to have sex and whether or not to use protection during sex. Not only should FLE curricula take into account gender-based power dynamics in sexual relationships, they should also include lessons on laws and policies regarding marriage, inheritance, gender-based violence, and human rights.

While the benefits of education—especially girls' education—are well documented and recognized as a global priority, steps to ensure that girls and boys have positive schooling experiences, and therefore remain in school, have been inadequate. Research is revealing that girls' experience in schools can be, at the very least, discouraging and, at worst, harmful. Such revelations challenge the way that we typically think about school—as a safe and nurturing environment where young people gain

knowledge and skills for adult life. Policymakers and program planners are challenged to respond to the emerging reality that school can be hostile and unsafe environments for young people—especially girls.

Reproductive health professionals accustomed to working in the health sector need to acknowledge the risks that school attendance and sexual power relations impose on girls. It is not enough to offer family life education in a school that is essentially hostile to girls and that puts them at risk; it is also not sufficient to educate young people on the risks of unprotected sexual behavior when many of them—mostly girls—have limited say in whether and when to have sex. Advocates for improved adolescent reproductive health must acknowledge the social contexts in which girls and boys operate. This includes acknowledging that the school environment is not free of risk.

Fostering “girl-friendly” schools should be a high priority at national, regional, and local levels. Such efforts will promote girls’ educational participation and the myriad benefits this confers on girls, women, and the children of educated women.

References

Ahmed, Manzoor, Colette Chabbott, Arun Joshi, Rohindi Pande, and Cynthia J. Prather. 1993. *Primary Education for All, Learning from the BRAC Experience: A Case Study*, Project ABEL: Advancing Basic Education and Literacy.

Ajayi, Ayorinde, Wesley Clark, A. Erulkar, K. Hyde, C. Lloyd, B. Mensch, C. Ndeti, B. Ravitch. 1997. *Schooling and the Experience of Adolescents in Kenya*. Nairobi: Kenya Ministry of Education and Population Council.

Amin, Sajeda and Gilda Sedgh. 1998. “Incentive Schemes for School Attendance in Rural Bangladesh.” Research Division Working Paper, no. 106. New York: Population Council.

Bledsoe, Caroline, and Barney Cohen (eds.). 1993. *Social Dynamics of Adolescent Fertility in sub-Saharan Africa*, Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

East African Standard, "Sexual Abuse Rife in Schools," 9 April 2001

El-Tawila, S., C.B. Lloyd, B.S. Mensch, and H. Wassef. 2000. *The School Environment in Egypt: A Situation Analysis of Public Preparatory Schools*. Cairo, Egypt: Population Council.

Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE). *Girls and African Education: Research and Action to Keep Girls in School*. Nairobi, Kenya.

Herz, Barbara, K. Subbarao, Massoma Habib, Laura Raney. 1991. *Letting Girls Learn: Promising Approaches in Primary and Secondary Education*. World Bank Discussion Papers. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Human Rights Watch. 2001. *Scared at School: Sexual Violence Against Girls in South African Schools*. www.hrw.org/reports/2001/safrica/

Hyde, Karen A. L. 1993. *Gender Streaming as a Strategy for Improving Girls' Academic Performance: Evidence from Malawi*. Lilongwe: University of Malawi, Centre for Social Research.

IBRD and World Bank. 1996. *Leveling the Playing Field: Giving Girls an Equal Chance for Basic Education: Three Countries' Efforts*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Leach, Fiona, Pamela Machakanja, and Jennifer Mandogo. 2000. "Preliminary Investigations of the Abuse of Girls in Zimbabwean Junior Secondary School." *Education Research*. Serial No. 39. Department of International Development.

Lloyd, C.B, B.S. Mensch, and W.H. Clark. 2000. "The effects of primary school quality on school dropout among Kenyan girls and boys." *Comparative Education Review* 44, no. 2: 113-147.

Lloyd, C.B., S. El Tawila, W.H. Clark, and B.S. Mensch. 2001. "Determinants of Educational Attainment Among Adolescents in Egypt: Does School Quality Make a Difference?" Policy Research Division Working Paper No. 150, New York: Population Council.

Mensch, B.S., W.H. Clark, C.B. Lloyd, and A.S. Erulkar. 2001. "Premarital sex, schoolgirl pregnancy and school quality in rural Kenya," *Studies in Family Planning* 32, no.4: 285-301.

Mensch, B.S. and C.B. Lloyd. 1998. "Gender differences in the schooling experiences of adolescents in low-income countries: the case of Kenya," *Studies in Family Planning* 29, no. 2: 167-184.

Obura, Anna. 1991. *Changing Images: Portrayal of Girls and Women in Kenyan Textbooks*. Nairobi: ACTS Press.

Odaga, Adhiambo, and Ward Heneveld. 1995. *Girls and Schools in sub-Saharan Africa: From Analysis to Action*, World Bank Technical Paper no. 298. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Perlez, Jane. 1991. "Kenyan do some soul-searching after the rape of 71 schoolgirls." *The New York Times*, 29 July.

Sathar, Z.A, C.B. Lloyd, and M. ul Haque. 2000. *Investments in Children's Education and Family-Building Behavior in Pakistan: Findings from Rural NWFP and Punjab*. Islamabad, Pakistan: Population Council.

Sathar, Z., C.B. Lloyd, C. Mete, and M. ul Haque. 2000. "Schooling Opportunities for Girls as a Stimulus for Fertility Change in Rural Pakistan." Policy Research Division Working Paper No. 143, New York: Population Council.

Subbarao, K. and Laura Raney. 1993. *Social Gains from Female Education. A Cross-National Study*. World Bank Discussion Papers. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Summers, Lawrence H. 1994. *Investing in All the people. Educating Women in Developing Countries*. Economic Development Institute of the World Bank. An Edi Seminar Paper. Number 45.

Swainson, N, S. Bendera, R. Gordon, and E Kadzamira. 1998. *Promoting Girls' Education in Africa. The Design and Implementation of Policy Interventions*. London: Department of International Development (DfID).

UNICEF. 1999. *The state of the World's Children*. New York: United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).