

Educating women in the third world: what is the socio-economic impact?

Educating women is purported to be one of the most valuable investments a developing country can make. Research has found that nations that educate girls to the same degree as boys benefit from longer life expectancies, lower birth rates and higher economic growth.

Evidence also shows that educating girls reduces child malnutrition rates and lowers the risk of HIV infection. So, if educating women is such a good idea, what is holding the third world back?

One of the most obvious reasons is financial constraint. For many families it is still a priority to educate boys; they see the son as the main future breadwinner who will therefore support his parents in their old age. The extra cost of educating females is not seen as necessary because a daughter will eventually be financially supported by her husband.

In addition, with unemployment rates so high, wouldn't educating girls bring more competitors to the employment sectors and only make conditions worse?

Other issues which limit education for women are cultural constraints. The lack of employment opportunities for women in developing countries, often stemming from social and religious traditions, devalues the need for equal education.

This point is highlighted by UNICEF's (United Nations Children's Emergency Fund) Damien Personnaz: "There are a lot of religious leaders who do not think that to send a girl to school is a big priority. This is actually the most difficult barrier to overcome, but we've been doing so in working with the communities involved in many countries in South Asia, in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa."

Government oppression is another factor. During the Taliban's rule of Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, almost half of the nations' schools were destroyed; under the regime, females were completely banned from academic study.

With so many obstacles to overcome, can anything be done to improve the situation?

It could be argued that foreign assistance might help. For an example, in Afghanistan, since the fall of the Taliban in late 2001, the UN (United Nations) and other groups have invested in opening education facilities such as the Women's ICT Centres. The number of girls attending school has increased by over 30% since 2001, and literacy levels have greatly improved. The ability to read and write has given many more women the chance to vote under the nation's new political rights.

Educating girls creates educated mothers and has a huge socio-economic impact. Women will pass on knowledge, and a greater financial freedom, to their children. It is a cycle built for prosperity, but can only function if enough employment is available for the newly educated work-force.

Women who are educated can not only help build a stronger economy, they are able to better protect themselves from disease, sexual exploitation and gender-based violence. For a country to prosper in the modern world, both men and women must break from the tradition which states 'girls belong at home'.