

factsheet

Girls' and Women's Education: A USAID Initiative

Investing in girls' education yields significant economic and social returns for developing countries. Studies show that women who have completed primary school lead very different lives from women who have not. They are healthier and their families are healthier. Their children attain higher educational levels. They have lower rates of fertility. They demonstrate higher agricultural, industrial, and domestic productivity, and they participate more in the democratic process. All of this translates into improved social and economic development.

Based on these findings, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) established a comprehensive Girls' and Women's Education Initiative. It was announced by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton in 1995 at the UN Summit on Social Development, held in Copenhagen, Denmark. The Initiative, managed by USAID's Office of Women in Development in collaboration with USAID's Center for Human Capacity Development, supports advocacy for girls' education and helps decision makers at the national, regional, and community levels identify the barriers to girls' school participation. It also assists them in creating solutions to overcome the barriers and it strengthens the capacity of individuals and groups to finance and implement girls' education projects using their own resources.

Lagging School Enrollments and Completion for Girls

Although primary school enrollments have increased over the past two decades, girls' enrollments continue to lag behind those of boys. Today, two-thirds of the world's children who never go to school or who drop out before completion are girls. As a result, adult women make up two-thirds of the one billion people who are illiterate.

A number of barriers constrain girls' primary school enrollments and completions. Household income is a barrier because of the direct and indirect costs of education. When family resources are limited, girls are not sent to school or boys are given an education before girls. The non-enforcement of compulsory education laws acts as a barrier, along with unenforced labor laws. Insufficient national budgets for education and inadequate roads and transportation are also barriers to girls' education, along with poor quality curriculum and teacher preparation. Finally, girls' school participation is constrained by cultural, religious, social, or political norms concerning women's role in society.

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USAID: A Leader in Promoting Girls' Education

USAID's Girls' and Women's Education Initiative is grounded on the premise that because schools do not operate in isolation from the larger social system, girls' education is a national issue that needs to be addressed by all sectors of society: government, the private sector, religious organizations, academic institutions, the media, and non-governmental organizations. The Agency arrived at this conclusion after nearly two decades of research, the promotion of policy reform, and the development of programs to address girls' school participation in countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan, where girls' school enrollment, completion, and achievement lagged significantly behind that of boys.

For nearly twenty years, USAID has supported girls' education, including the development of incentives such as scholarships and reduced school fees in Bangladesh and Malawi; promotion of government policy reform and increased budget allocations to basic education in Benin, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Pakistan, and Uganda; cultivation of local constituencies to promote and sustain girls' education policies, programs, and practices in Guatemala, Guinea, Malawi, and Mali; fostering of local participation by forming community schools and committees that support girls' education in Egypt, Guatemala, and Pakistan; fostering of social marketing campaigns in Guatemala and Malawi; strengthening of local organizations and training them in fund-raising in Guatemala; and development of teacher training programs and girls' education materials in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Malawi.

Important lessons have been learned from these programs:

- Girls' education programs are most effective when they support the national development strategy of a country; when they respond to the economic, policy, infrastructure, sociocultural, and educational constraints to girls' education; and when the educational policies, curricula, school location, school facilities, and teaching methods address the educational needs of girls as well as boys.
- Girls' education programs are most sustainable when they are "owned" by the citizens of the country, not by the donor community. When donor resources are used only to mobilize the human, financial, and technical resources of a country and when the country's citizens take control of the issue of girls' education, they become engaged in developing solutions and carrying out programs that increase educational opportunities for girls.

When Girls' Learning Needs Are Addressed, Boys' Benefit as Well

In schools where teachers lecture students and little interaction occurs, boys benefit most, since in these settings boys tend to assert themselves more than girls and girls tend to become passive observers. When schools focus on girls' needs, boys also benefit. When classroom strategies are modified, as in the cooperative learning approach of the multi-grade school programs in Colombia, Egypt, and Guatemala, students are taught to work in teams and to help and question each other. Teachers are trained to "individualize" their instruction and to deal with the abilities, skills, and experiences of each student. Thus, they learn to teach ALL children better. Both boys and girls learn to be active learners. The school becomes a community center and offers parents a role in their children's education. The result is that girls' attendance and achievement increase, and boys' attendance and achievement also improve.

Initiative Focuses on Helping Countries Find Solutions to Girls' Education

The Girls' and Women's Education Initiative aims for host countries to "own" the problems and find solutions to girls' education. In the past, international donor agencies "owned" the educational programs

by setting the agenda and financing it. The Initiative seeks to turn this around by engaging local decision makers—in government, business, industry, agriculture, religion, the media, political parties, unions—in setting the agenda and creating a budget to finance educational programs. This approach brings together leaders who influence public opinion or who directly control the resources necessary to pay for educational opportunities for girls. This approach also assumes that unless the local leadership accepts responsibility for creating girls' education programs and commits funds and personnel, the programs will not last beyond the period of outside funding.

The Initiative also focuses on attaining sustainability over the long term. To do this, it uses USAID funds on a limited basis as a catalyst for creating commitments of human and financial resources at the national, regional, and local levels. USAID funds are used to train individuals who can, in turn, foster local constituencies, develop fund-raising programs, engage in effective publicity, and create programs that address specific barriers to girls' education. The Initiative also seeks ways for decision makers throughout society to work together to create a range of programs that complement each other. For example, in a country where local values pressure girls to drop out of school and marry young or where educational policies prohibit girls from returning to school once they have given birth, single interventions such as a scholarship program for girls or teacher training are unlikely to have a long-term effect on girls' enrollment and completion rates. Programs will only have an impact if they are combined with efforts to reallocate government resources, increase the national budget for primary education, engage private-sector support for infrastructure improvements, and develop an effective taxation system.

**Girls' and Women's Education Initiative:
Twelve Focus Countries**

USAID's Girls' and Women's Education

Initiative focuses on six emphasis countries and six cooperating countries. In the six emphasis countries—Egypt, Guatemala, Guinea, Mali, Morocco, and Peru—the goal is to increase girls' primary school completion by 20 percent over the next five years. Decision makers from diverse groups are being engaged to assist education authorities in assessing the barriers to girls' education and in designing complementary and cost-effective interventions that will improve girls' educational opportunities.

**Engaging Decision Makers
in Solving Their Country's Problems**

Today, more than 72 percent of the funding for girls' education programs in Guatemala comes from Guatemalan public and private-sector sources. How did this happen? USAID began in 1990 to present the findings on girls' education to the country's public and private-sector leadership. Following a year-long process of analyzing local data on girls' education, presenting the findings to diverse groups in government, business, industry, agriculture, religion, academia, professional organizations, USAID cosponsored a national meeting for decision makers.

As a result of the meeting, the leaders formed the Guatemalan Association for Girls' Education, which mobilized government and private-sector support for girls' education. In 1994, the Government initiated a five-year, nation-wide scholarship program for girls, financed exclusively with Government funds. Private-sector organizations, including the foundations of the Central American Brewery, the Sugar Producers, and the Coffee Producers also began supporting diverse girls' education programs.

USAID has also backed an integrated girls' education program within the Ministry of Education to improve policies, to train teachers, to develop girls' education materials, and to integrate girls' education concepts and strategies into other Ministry programs.

In the six cooperating countries—Benin, Bolivia, Honduras, India, Nepal, and Peru—important analytic studies and pilot programs are underway. One area of study is women's literacy. Despite enormous investments in adult literacy programs by international agencies and national governments over the past fifty years, insufficient attention has been paid to evaluating these programs to determine their impact on social and economic development. Little effort has been made to determine which interventions work best for women; studies are taking place in Bolivia, Nepal, and Honduras to answer these questions. In India, a pilot teacher training program is developing techniques and practices for increasing girls' school participation. In Benin, a pilot mentoring program for girls is being developed. In Peru, a study assessing the impact of the onset of puberty on girls' school dropout will identify policies to reduce the number of dropouts. The findings will be used to better invest resources where they have the greatest effect on increasing girls' and women's educational opportunities.

Working Together: USAID and International Collaboration

USAID has brought together distinguished teams of U.S. and host-country experts to implement the Girls' and Women's Education Initiative. The Institute for International Research (IIR) was awarded a contract to facilitate the creation of national initiatives for girls' education in Egypt, Guatemala, Guinea, Mali, Morocco, and Peru. World Education, Inc., was awarded a contract to implement analytic studies in five countries, and the University of Massachusetts was awarded a contract to implement a pilot girls' education program in India. Creative Associates has begun an eight-country, four-year pilot program that looks at equity in the classroom. Finally, DevTech Systems, Inc., has been providing technical assistance on policy and planning to the Girls' and Women's Education Initiative. Together, these programs will spur dramatic improvements in girls' and women's education over the next five years.

To strengthen public and private-sector partnerships in support of girls' education worldwide, USAID, the Inter-American Development Bank, UNICEF, the World Bank, the Delegation to the European Commission, and the Lewis T. Preston Education Program for Girls are hosting an international conference in Washington, DC, May 6 - 8, 1998. Among other objectives, the conference aims to engage leaders of government, business, religion, academia, and other organizations worldwide in a dialogue on the impact of girls' education on the social and economic development of nations. The conference will examine the role that government, the private sector, religion, and others play in ensuring that girls stay in school. It will also present new information on cost-effective, sustainable ways to increase girls' educational opportunities. The conference, "Educating Girls: A Development Imperative," is being organized by the Academy for Educational Development. Also, Juarez and Associates will present an operational definition of a sustainable girls' education initiative, including indicators to monitor progress toward sustainable results.

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