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## More, But Not Yet Better: USAID's Programs and Policies to Improve Girls' Education

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### Summary

During the 1990s the nations of the world formally recognized that no country had emerged from third world status without educating its citizens. They further acknowledged that girls' and women's education is strongly associated with increased economic productivity, smaller family size, improved health and nutritional status, and education of the next generation of children.

USAID was one of the first donors to invest in girls' education. The Agency gave the issue visibility in international forums such as the 1990 World Conference on Education for All: Meeting Basic Learning Needs, in Jomtien, Thailand. To inform an active dialog within USAID about best practices and strategies to ensure that all girls as well as boys get a good basic education, the Agency's Center for Development Information and Evaluation (CDIE) conducted an evaluation in 1997–98 of USAID's efforts. It consisted of five field studies (Guatemala, Guinea, Malawi, Nepal, and Pakistan), a country desk study (Egypt), issue-oriented research on Bolivia and Thailand, and an extensive literature review. The evaluation was guided by five fundamental questions that consistently resurfaced during interviews with dozens of USAID technical and senior management staff:

- What are the best ways to get girls into schools?
- How can the quality of girls' education be improved?

- What are the best ways to help girls complete a basic education?
- How are boys affected by efforts to improve girls' education?
- What are the critical features of approaches that lead to sustainable outcomes?

To get more girls into school, USAID encouraged host nations to increase the proportion of their investments in primary education, to design schools that are acceptable for girls, and to increase the supply of schools near girls. The Agency also engaged local communities to participate in their schools. Where possible, the Agency tried to strengthen institutions responsible for primary education, both public and private. And it encouraged school systems to eliminate or minimize obstacles to girls' participation, such as threats to their security, costs for their schooling, and regulations that excluded them. All of those measures contributed to enrolling more girls in school. But a rapid increase of enrollments comes with a price.

The evidence from the case study countries suggests that when the supply of schools expands rapidly, education systems struggle to manage the complexities of recruiting, training, and supervising large numbers of new teachers. Also complicated are the logistics of providing instructional materials, school construction, maintenance, and supplies. As a result, educational quality stagnates or declines, especially in the earliest grades, where the surge in enrollments is highest.

USAID's efforts to improve school quality often had limited impact, owing to the difficulty of reaching a consensus with host country educators on the precise nature of school quality or how to achieve it.

Many more girls enroll in primary school than complete it. Most education systems in the case study countries had previously been selective—designed to weed out rather than include most students. Role models, support from traditional and local leaders, school acceptance of married girls, and (most important) control of violence toward and sexual harassment of girls underpinned efforts to improve completion rates. Community involvement in schools seemed to reduce repetition. Finally, a mother's role in her children's education is widely acknowledged. A small study found that the children of women in literacy and empowerment programs in Nepal repeated grades less often than other children, possibly because their mothers gave them time and support for study.

Boys clearly and consistently benefited from initiatives aimed at meeting girls' schooling needs. Where governments undertook system reforms and initiatives in girls' education, boys' enrollment rates increased. Girls' education initiatives benefited all children by training teachers, supplying instructional materials, and expanding the supply of school places and school options, especially in underserved areas where vulnerable girls and boys did not have access to school. Even some specific initiatives that targeted girls benefited boys, such as the scholarships given to girls in Guatemalan schools, where boys' achievements improved correspondingly.

It is too early to assess the sustainability of achievements. But USAID's record to date suggests that sustaining the positive trends in girls' primary schooling may depend both on political will in host countries and on continued donor commitment to promoting and investing in universal basic education.

## Background

Most developing countries have made substantial progress since 1960 in increasing primary and secondary school enrollment rates. Nevertheless, many countries have far to go to reach universal enrollment even at the primary level. Many more girls than boys are out of school. Although total enrollments have risen

in every region of the developing world, the difference in boys' and girls' enrollment rates—the gender gap—has narrowed only slightly overall for primary education and virtually not at all for secondary and tertiary education.

USAID has made serious efforts in the past decade to address the basic learning needs of the world's girls. During 1990–96 the Agency spent nearly \$200 million on improving girls' and women's education. Over those years the commitment increased steadily. In 1996 alone, USAID committed more than \$51 million to improving girls' education in 22 countries.

## Findings

The study indicated that the *demand for education* is not the critical constraint to educating most of the world's girls. Modernization, urbanization, transportation, and communications have brought the global market to remote villages. Parents in every country learn their children's challenges are different from what they themselves experienced as children. Parents want their children—including girls—to be prepared for the rigors of the world, and that means educating them.

The most common obstacle to girls' education and the emphasis of USAID's efforts is the *supply of schools*—the quantity, their quality, their suitability for girls, and their costs.

## What Are the Best Ways To Get Girls Into Schools?

### *Strategy: Increase the Supply Of Primary Schools*

Countries that have low enrollment rates for both sexes in their primary schools but do not make increasing the supply of primary education a priority are unlikely to succeed in significantly expanding girls' enrollments. The greatest constraint to girls' education in all of the field study countries was an absolute lack of primary school places for girls. To help countries increase their supply of schools, USAID's assistance concentrated on

■ *Increasing government investment in primary education.* The Agency negotiated policy reforms and

increased government investment in primary education as conditions for major grants. Education sector budgets or allocations to primary education increased in all countries studied; in some cases both increased.

■ *Restructuring and strengthening education systems.* The Agency helped education ministries restructure the institutions and management of their primary schools and strengthen their information systems to better plan, manage, and track progress toward reform and expansion. Managing data better has improved transparency, which can spotlight and inhibit the misuse or leakage of resources from the system. Where a teacher shortage was a constraint, the following actions were taken: teacher recruitment policies were revised to attract and include more women, hiring norms and terms of service were changed, and teacher training programs were streamlined. The result: dramatic increases in the number of teachers. However, with little attention devoted to quality,\* most of these teachers were ill equipped to provide a high-quality education.

■ *Working with the private sector to offer girls education.* In all countries studied, USAID's support to the private sector has contributed to increasing the school supply and getting more girls enrolled. By designing new models and approaches to educating girls—especially girls in hard-to-reach communities or those unable to attend government schools because of hours, distance, fees, or cultural barriers—private sector involvement has opened school places for children government systems had not been serving well.

### ***Strategy: Shape the Supply of Schools To Meet the Needs of Girls and Their Parents***

Simply expanding primary education without specific regard to the factors affecting girls is insufficient

to increase girls' enrollment and diminish gender disparity. When primary schools increase, the first outcome is a climb in enrollment rates for girls and boys. This happens because latent demand for schooling (demand unexpressed until supply becomes available) is being met in places where no schools previously were available. But once the "early acceptors" have been absorbed, the growth of enrollments slows and weaker demand for girls' schooling than for boys' results in continued gender disparities. To help shape the supply of schools to better meet the needs of girls and their parents, USAID supported

■ *Locating schools near girls.* The farther school is from a girl's home (and from immediate parental supervision), the greater the family's fear she will be harassed, molested, raped, or abducted while in school or en route. In some countries, establishing schools in girls' villages has fueled surging enrollments.

■ *Staffing schools with female teachers.* Parents' concerns for the safety of their daughters in the hands of male teachers have kept many girls out of school. Female teachers have an immediate and direct influence on girls' access to school because their presence can allay parents' fears about their daughters' security in school. Once female teachers were in place in some countries studied, the number of girls enrolled soared.

■ *Strengthening community ownership and participation.* Community oversight and involvement in day-to-day school operations and management increases parents' confidence in their daughters' safety, demystifies school, and increases parents' understanding of and support for their daughters' academic pursuits.

■ *Instituting girl-friendly regulations.* In some countries where early sexual activity is the norm and early marriages are common, policies forbid girls to return to school after marriage or childbirth. Many USAID-assisted countries revised their pregnancy policies to allow girls to study. These policy changes

***‘Simply expanding primary education without specific regard to the factors affecting girls is insufficient to increase girls’ enrollment.’***

\*Donors and international researchers have often defined quality in education in terms of *inputs* (how well the education system is supplied with teachers, schools, curricula, materials, training, and supervision), *outputs* (student learning reflected in knowledge, skills, and productivity after leaving school), and *processes* (the effectiveness of teaching and learning in the classroom).

are understood as a message from the government about the importance of basic education for all girls.

- *Reducing schooling costs.* Direct costs of schooling have a more negative impact on girls' enrollment than on boys' because families expect the return on their investment in a daughter's education will be less than on a son's. The opportunity costs for girls are higher too, since their household labor typically is needed more than boys' labor. Strategies to reduce the costs of schooling for girls included scholarships, fee waivers, free books, and not requiring uniforms.

## How Can the Quality of Girls' Education Be Improved?

In many countries, rapid expansion of primary schools seems to diminish overall educational quality. Class sizes rise, supervision loads rise, levels of teacher training and experience fall, and systems for production and distribution of instructional materials are overtaxed. Education expansion brings into schools students who may come from poor, illiterate households and have greater learning-support needs than the more privileged students who previously constituted the majority of school populations. Quality of education declines (or at least stagnates), especially in the earliest grades where the surge in enrollments is highest. Low quality of schools weakens household demand for education, especially for girls.

### *Strategy: Improve the Components Of Educational Quality*

International experience suggests that for quality to improve, three major components of educational delivery systems (learning materials, teacher behavior, and testing) need to be addressed concurrently and attuned to a common purpose. Most of USAID's quality-improvement efforts have emphasized only one or two components. The modest results of USAID-supported quality-improvement efforts come as no surprise. The Agency, host country counterparts, and local stakeholders had differing visions of quality schools for girls. For access initiatives, there was a shared vision (more girls in school) and shared goals. But there have not been shared visions and policy frameworks to institutionalize and sustain quality improvements.

**LEARNING MATERIALS.** International and comparative research has consistently shown that *availability of textbooks* to students is one of the strongest predictors of educational attainment. By extension, better textbooks and a supply of learning materials are viewed as essential to improving the quality of education. USAID provided support for this component, and in several cases the result was reorganized production of improved learning materials. In the two cases that used reliable testing, children using the USAID-funded materials improved their achievement levels. However, distribution of the materials was erratic or restricted to pilot schools. An explicit policy framework in which regulations and incentives were restructured to facilitate and reward agreed-upon quality improvements might have prevented such inefficient outcomes.

**TEACHER TRAINING.** In most of the countries studied, support for this component was necessary to meet the staffing needs of new schools and prepare new female teachers for classrooms. In every country except Guatemala, the emphasis on expanding access and implementing a rapid training course for new recruits took precedence over improving quality. Teachers' unions were not involved in any USAID initiatives. Entrenched teacher-training establishments were not changed. Thus there was little dialog about the process or sustainability of changing teaching practices.

**TESTING.** Examining assessment means calling attention to teachers' instructional practices. This concentration serves to reshape teachers' goals. Yet classroom testing systems are one quality component that has been largely neglected in USAID programs. Exams are a politically volatile aspect of educational systems, since students' futures depend upon them. Efforts to change examination systems therefore entail not only complex technical inputs but also careful consideration of the social and political implications of changes. Among the cases studied, only Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province developed and piloted a new examination system using a "criterion referenced" approach (testing for mastery of specified knowledge and skills) instead of the more prevalent system of "norm referenced" testing (in which student scores are compared with one another to determine grades or ranks). The results of criterion-referenced student-achievement testing demonstrated that although girls' and boys' levels of achievement varied at different grade levels and in different subjects, girls were achieving as much as boys overall. The tests were the key to meaningful

evaluation of changes in academic achievement, but they have not replaced the Primary School Leaving Exam or other end-of-cycle tests that continue to be based on norm referencing.

**INTEGRATING LEARNING MATERIALS, TEACHER TRAINING, AND TESTING.** Among the field studies, only the demonstration project Nueva Escuela Unitaria (loosely translated as New Multigrade School) in Guatemala addressed all three quality components in an integrated program of teaching and learning. NEU is a student-centered approach to basic education that encourages student participation and active learning in the classroom. In NEU schools, boys and girls both showed gains in participation and achievement. Girls benefited even more than boys. Over the long term the greater attainment of NEU students leads to greater efficiency and cost savings, as compared with the standard public school program. Yet despite the demonstrated success of this approach, NEU was not scaled up in the government system.

**Strategy: Improve Gender-Specific Quality**

In addition to advocating general quality improvements, USAID supported aspects of some gender-specific quality efforts. These efforts were hampered by implementation and design problems; thus their potential for impact on quality could not be evaluated.

**GENDER-NEUTRAL MATERIALS.** Worldwide analysis has shown a consistent gender bias in textbooks. Women are represented far less often than men. When they are represented, it usually is in highly stereotyped domestic roles. In several countries studied, USAID supported the revision or creation of materials with gender-balanced, positive portrayals of women and girls.

**GENDER SENSITIVITY FOR TEACHERS.** In Malawi, USAID supported training teacher-trainers in gender sensitivity. But lack of funding and the transportation needed to reach teachers have prevented gender awareness from permeating classrooms. In Guatemala, USAID supported the production of teacher’s guides and instructional materials to help motivate girls’ participation in the classroom. However, the materials and guides offered no direction how to correct for

gender inequities in textbooks, how to integrate self-esteem building and other activities with subject matter, or how to include girls’ interests, needs, and life stories in daily lessons.

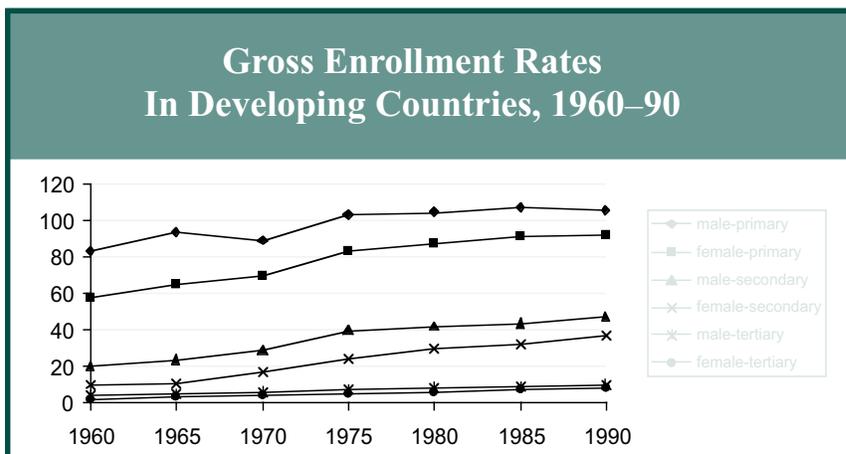
**MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION.** The international literature shows that instruction in the mother tongue is the most effective and rapid approach for children to achieve initial literacy. This is especially germane to girls, because in most societies girls are more restricted than boys to the domestic domain and therefore have less exposure to the official language of instruction before entering school. In practice, though, maintaining effective systems for instruction in two or more languages is complex and expensive. Because of this and also for political reasons, many countries opt for one language of instruction.

**What Are the Best Ways To Help Girls Complete a Basic Education?**

Far fewer girls than boys complete school. When girls do complete one cycle of education, they are less likely to enter the next (see figure). The same factors that determine girls’ initial entry also influence persistence throughout and completion of the primary cycle. The most important investments to keep older girls in school are lowering costs, providing schools near their homes, improving the quality of schooling, and eliminating sexual harassment and threats to their safety.

**Strategy: Change the School Culture From Selection to Inclusion**

A decade ago, school systems were selective, designed to identify high-achieving, high-status students



and screen out the rest. High rates of failure and repetition were the norm, leading also to high dropout rates. These patterns persist today in most systems, many of which are struggling to evolve from a selective structure to an inclusive one.

**ADDING KINDERGARTEN.** Universal education draws in a society's least advantaged children. Yet, in the countries studied, schools were not designed and teachers were not trained to prepare children from illiterate households for academic learning. International studies suggest that school *readiness* among poor and rural children (girls and boys both) would probably reduce repetition and dropout. Efforts to promote school readiness—such as adding kindergarten—might contribute to improving girls' persistence, attainment, and achievement in primary school. But such an effort was made in only one country, where it was not done well. Pakistan tried introducing a formal kindergarten year prior to first grade in its Balochistan province. Unfortunately, the kindergarten curriculum the provincial system used was not a preparatory or readiness approach, but simply half of the first grade curriculum expanded over an additional year. The curriculum was developmentally inappropriate for young children, and failure rates did not decline.

**NEARBY SCHOOLS WITH FULL CYCLE.** One reason for low completion rates is structure. In many countries, village schools consist of one multigrade classroom that ends at third grade. To complete the full basic cycle, rural students must travel long distances. That is impossible for most girls. Increasing accessibility of full-cycle schools would encourage participation.

**PRIMARY SCHOOLS DESIGNED FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS.** Because of delayed school entry and high grade repetition, it is not unusual for girls to reach puberty while still in elementary school. For young women in some countries, puberty is accompanied by more stringent requirements for boundary walls, private latrines, and other services to protect them. All too often girls are subject to sexual harassment and predation by teachers and fellow students. To retain girls in school, these threats must be eliminated.

### ***Strategy: Mobilize Parental And Community Involvement***

Another approach to reducing repetition and dropout is to create better environments of support for

children's learning outside of school. International research shows that parental involvement in education is a powerful determinant of children's schooling success. Notable among that research is the higher achievement of girls found in some village-based school programs. There is evidence from a small sample in Nepal suggesting that children of mothers who participate in literacy and empowerment programs are substantially less likely to repeat grades and more likely to receive support from their mothers.

### ***Strategy: Reduce Costs to Families For Girls' Education***

Minimizing costs for schooling is important for increasing girls' enrollment and completion, since families are generally less willing to incur costs or forgo income in order to keep daughters in school.

**FEE WAIVERS TO ELIMINATE COST BARRIERS.** There is no clearer evidence of the effectiveness of fee waivers to increase access than the response to them in Malawi. After fee waivers were introduced there, girls' enrollments soared. But the success of increased enrollments compromised quality, which in turn has caused achievement and persistence rates to fall. The decline of quality constitutes a new obstacle over the long term to girls' completing basic education.

**SCHOLARSHIPS TO SUPPORT GIRLS' ATTENDANCE IN PRIMARY SCHOOL.** The Agency's assistance in Guatemala supported scholarships for girls to help offset direct and opportunity costs families incur for allowing their daughters to complete school. The effect of a \$4.30-per-month scholarship for girls in rural Guatemala was significant. The rates of attendance, promotion, and completion for girls who received scholarships were better than for control groups and overall national statistics.

### **How Do Improvements To Girls' Education Affect Boys?**

Boys have benefited from the initiatives to improve girls' education. Their enrollments have increased in every country studied, and they have benefited from initiatives to improve school quality. When systems are geared up to solve the problems that keep girls out of school or prevent them from learning in school, the solutions have broad applicability and relevance to both

sexes. Boys, especially those belonging to vulnerable groups or who live in remote rural areas, face many of the same problems as girls meeting their basic learning needs: lack of nearby schools, poor school quality, and lack of parental resources, support, or participation in a child's education. Some of the ways girls' initiatives have benefited boys include

- *Strengthened investment and capacity of primary education institutions.* Because girls are concentrated in the earliest grades, public and private institutions that support primary education were strengthened to carry out girls' education initiatives. The increased investment in the primary education sector and strengthened capacity of education ministries to supply primary schooling directly benefited all school children, not just girls.
- *Increased supply of primary schools.* Increasing schools and teachers resulted in higher enrollments for boys and girls—even in areas with single-sex schooling. In Pakistan's single-sex school system, additional girls' schools led many parents to withdraw their daughters from boys' schools, which reduced overcrowding in classrooms. Boys also were given more schooling options. Younger boys were enrolled by their parents in so-called girls' schools, where the parents believed they would be less subject to abuse.
- *Staffing schools with female teachers.* Recruiting female teachers has benefited boys. In Pakistan's Balochistan province, for example, parents consider women more nurturing than men and better suited to teach younger children. Educators also acknowledge that male teachers rely heavily on corporal punishment and that boys are frequently abused, both sexually and with punishments disproportionate to their misbehavior. Parents have moved young boys into girls' schools to evade these problems.
- *Reduced schooling costs.* Though girls are more likely to be excluded from school because of costs, expense also often leads parents to hold out or withdraw sons from school. In Malawi, public enthusiasm for fee waivers for girls quickly evolved into public demand for fee waivers for boys. In Guatemala, boys in schools where some girls received scholarships performed better than boys in control schools.

## What Are the Critical Features Of Approaches That Lead To Sustainable Outcomes?

The results of the CDIE evaluation show that the world generally knows how to increase the number of available schools, what characteristics of schools (and teachers) are attractive to girls and their parents, and how to enroll girls in those schools. The number of girls enrolled in school increased rapidly in the past decade. However, many girls are still not in school. Many children still do not have access to basic education. The efforts of USAID and other donors to improve the quality of new and existing schools and retain girls in school until they complete a basic education have thus far fallen short.

Girls' education initiatives are predicated on implicit models of universal primary education systems that, once functioning equitably and efficiently, are expected to generate their own momentum. But in reality, donor funding for girls' education and other basic education initiatives directly and indirectly supports recurrent costs, a situation that does not bode well for sustained programming or investment. Are countries and local communities able or willing to continue these initiatives once donor funding is withdrawn?

The prospects for sustaining and advancing these programs' outcomes are unclear. But the elements of success are clear. Successful efforts are guided by a shared vision, one that is continuously elucidated and promoted from the top of society down to the schoolroom until it becomes a social norm. Political will, catalyzed and sustained by grass-roots demand, is probably the key to sustaining investments in girls' schooling and effects on girls' education. The active engagement of communities, nongovernmental organizations, government institutions, the commercial private sector, and international donors reinforces political will at each level, sustaining program investments and supporting policy initiatives.

## Conclusions and Lessons Learned

*1. Expanding the number of primary schools is a fundamental requirement for raising low enrollment rates among girls.* Shared visions of universal primary

enrollments and active policy dialog about how to achieve the visions led to rapid expansion of schools—and of girls’ enrollments.

In regions where cultural factors require separate schools for the sexes, a lack of available places in girls’ schools directly limits girls’ initial enrollment. Where girls and boys attend the same schools, overcrowding creates pressures to keep additional children out. This affects both sexes, but girls more so.

Where there are too few primary schools or too many girls live far from the ones that exist, girls must travel farther to get to school. This increases their vulnerability to sexual abuse and other dangers while en route—a risk that leads many parents to keep their daughters out of school altogether. Travel time also adds to education’s opportunity cost.

*2. Improving education quality invites higher enrollments and persistence through the educational cycle for girls.* Parents are less likely to send their children to school or keep them there if schools fail to deliver basic literacy, numeracy, and other qualities and skills parents value. Again, this affects girls disproportionately. Parents in the case study countries typically view education as less essential for daughters than for sons, instead placing a higher value on daughters’ roles in the household.

*3. Making gains in girls’ participation in basic education depends heavily on USAID’s ability to persuade governments to increase access and improve quality at the primary level.* For many countries, this means increasing both overall funding for education and the share that goes to primary schools. Defining girl-friendly policies is essential to increasing girls’ participation and to sustaining those increases. Clarity and consistency of vision among diverse stakeholders seems to be an important feature of successful efforts to mobilize political will and invest strategically in girls’ education.

*4. Increasing the number of female teachers boosts girls’ enrollment.* In the case study countries, males far outnumber females both as teachers and as administrators. Female teachers help allay parents’ (often well-justified) concerns about male teachers harassing or abusing their daughters.

*5. Community participation changes social norms, reassures parents that their daughters are safe, allows families to take part in determining the kind of education their children receive, and brings vital human and material resources to schools.* NGOs have played an essential role in mobilizing communities, sometimes in partnership with local governments. Government incentives for increasing girls’ enrollments can ensure that community control fosters gender equity.

*6. Reduced costs for schooling increase girls’ enrollments.* In the countries studied, direct and indirect costs of schooling are a greater barrier to girls’ than to boys’ enrolling and staying in school. Reducing school fees, not requiring uniforms, and offering scholarships or other subsidies are three demonstrated methods.

*7. Boys clearly and consistently benefit from initiatives aimed at meeting girls’ schooling needs.* No tradeoffs, negative effects, or declines in resources for boys were apparent from the case studies. To the contrary, all evidence suggests that whenever new resources are invested in girls, resources for boys also increase.

*8. USAID programs have neglected classroom testing and collaboration with teachers in interventions to improve quality.* High-stakes “leaving” exams are a politically volatile aspect of the educational system, since students’ futures depend on them. Therefore, efforts to change examination systems entail not only complex technical inputs but also careful consideration of the social and political implications of changes. USAID missions’ reluctance to work with teachers’ unions has inhibited the effectiveness of initiatives to systematically improve teaching.

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*This Evaluation Highlights, by Sharon Benoliel of USAID’s Center for Development Information and Evaluation, summarizes the findings of the study More, But Not Yet Better: An Evaluation of USAID’s Programs and Policies to Improve Girls’ Education, by Chloe O’Gara, Sharon Benoliel, Margaret Sutton, and Karen Tietjen, CDIE, USAID Program and Operations Assessment Report No. 25. This report and the individual country Impact Evaluations can be ordered from USAID’s Development Information Services Clearinghouse, 1611 North Kent Street, Suite 200, Arlington, VA 22209; telephone (703) 351-4006; fax (703) 351-4039; e-mail docorder@dec.cdie.org. To access from the Internet, key in www.info.usaid.gov. Click on Publications/Partner Resources, then on USAID Evaluation Publications. Editorial and production services provided by Conwal Incorporated.*

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