



*African and Diaspora Women Fact Sheet Series:*

## **Gender and Education in Africa**

In Gere Primary School in Uganda, a class full of girls cheer for one of their own, a young mother who recently went back to school.<sup>1</sup> Returning to school after pregnancy might be a challenge for women everywhere, but it is especially so for young, disempowered, African girls. Yet for an African girl, obtaining an education will empower her life and the lives of those around her. According to the Campaign for Female Education (Camfed), she, (an educated girl in Africa) is “*three times less likely to get HIV/AIDS, and is more likely to earn 25 percent more income, reinvest 90 percent in her family, and have a smaller, healthier family.*”<sup>2</sup>

Camfed is not the only organization that has awakened to the value of educating women. At the 2000 World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, countries pledged to achieve the goals of quality and universal education worldwide, in particular eliminating gender disparities in enrollment in primary and secondary education by 2005 and achieving gender equality by 2015.<sup>3</sup>

Although moderate progress was made to reduce gender disparities in elementary education, this goal of complete parity was not achieved by the deadline. As of 2005, 14 out of the 40 countries sampled in the sub-Saharan region had achieved gender parity in primary education, while five countries were close to it. Gender parity is measured by the gender parity index (GPI) of gross enrollment ratio (GER) which is the ratio of female enrollment rate to male enrollment rate for that level of education.<sup>4</sup> Parity is achieved with a GPI between 0.97 and 1.03; GPI below this range indicates that an educational system favor males and GPI above this range level reveals an educational disparity in favor of females.<sup>3</sup>

In the case of primary schooling, unequal access to education in first grade leads to overall differences in school attendance between boys and girls. From 1999 to 2005, the regional GPI of sub-Saharan Africa rose from 0.88 to 0.92, a step forward but still below the global average of 0.95. On the individual country level, although several African countries made significant strides in increasing the enrollment of girls in primary schools, the results are still far from the goal. For instance, Ethiopia had an impressive 30 percent increase in its GPI between 1999 to 2006 but, in Chad, which also made noticeable progress, as of 2005 there were still 80 or less girls enrolling in school for every 100 boys.<sup>3</sup> Once enrolled, whether female students were more likely to complete primary school than their male counterparts varied depending on which African country they live in. In ten countries in sub-Saharan Africa, girls are more likely to finish elementary school rather than boys but in 11 countries, girls are at a disadvantage.

As children move on to secondary and tertiary educational levels, the gender gap greatly widens. In particular from 1999 to 2005, the overall gender gap in sub-Saharan Africa between females and males in secondary education worsened—studies showed that there was greater disparity in favor of boys in 2005 than in 1999. Only two countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Mauritius and Seychelles, achieved the goal of gender parity in both primary and secondary education by the deadline, according to the 2008 Education for All Global Monitoring Report.

Many factors contribute to the girls' inferior educational opportunities and experiences. Within a country, gender disparities are more prevalent in poor, rural or urban slum areas than in more affluent and developed urban areas. For instance, in Mali girls from poor households are four times less likely to attend primary school than those from rich households; this figure rises to eight times at the secondary level.<sup>5</sup> In post-primary education, other issues such as the lack of a safe learning environment, gender-based violence and discrimination, poor sanitation facilities, the burden of caring for HIV/AIDS family members, and biased teaching acutely constrain girls' access to or the quality of education received. Many girls express legitimate fears of being sexually assaulted by teachers or male students in public latrines. Thirteen year old Alice Maseko, a student in Malawi, says her school's latrines don't have any doors and fears that her male students can see and attack her there.<sup>6</sup>

In Uganda, as in several other places in Africa, early marriages, pregnancies, sexual violence and circumstances related to HIV/AIDS are harsh realities that very often thwart a girls' attempt at getting an education.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, grassroots and advocacy groups such as the Ugandan chapter for the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWEU) are improving the situation of girls' education. The FAWEU is one of 35 FAWE chapters on the continent.<sup>8</sup> FAWEU supports the Ugandan government's efforts in creating awareness of adolescent sexual and reproductive rights through community intervention and the empowering youth.<sup>7</sup> The Uganda FAWE chapter prepares students, teachers and the greater community by training them to better support girls' education. Also, through girls clubs, female students develop solidarity and can take ownership of their education: girls draw up actions plans to promote their education and follow up on their absent classmates.

The Girls' Education Movement (GEM) clubs, a particular type of girls' club, has encouraged both genders to share their educational experience. GEM clubs are a grassroots initiative funded by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in partnership with several African nations. In each country, each GEM chapter encourages local ownership through the participation of students and the greater community to help improve the local educational realities of girls and boys. For instance, in Botswana, the GEM club facilitates the "Telling Your Story" project, a discussion series on girls' education. The initiative provides a safe space for students to share their narratives, work toward positive solutions under the supervision of young adults, and interact with female role models.<sup>9</sup> In particular, the "Telling Your Story" project has given a voice to voiceless girls, especially victims of abuse.

Promoting gender equality in education is a salient issue that is being pushed by African governments, advocacy groups and the students themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Picture caption from the Forum for African Women Educationalist Uganda chapter. <http://www.faweu.or.ug/advocacy.html>

<sup>2</sup> Camfed is a grassroots campaign launched in 1993, to financially assist girls to attend school in Zimbabwe. The program now includes communities in Zambia, Ghana, Malawi and Tanzania. [http://us.camfed.org/site/PageServer?pagename=home\\_index](http://us.camfed.org/site/PageServer?pagename=home_index)

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Educational for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report 2008. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001547/154743e.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> According to UNESCO, “GER is the number of pupils enrolled in a given level of education regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the population in the theoretical age group for that level of education.”

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Educational for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report 2009. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0017/001776/177609e.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Hunter-Gault, Charlayne. “The Missed Education of African Girls.” National Public Radio (NPR). Radio transcript. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5627794>

<sup>7</sup> “Advocacy for Educating Girls.” The FAWE Uganda Chapter. <http://www.faweu.or.ug/advocacy.html>

<sup>8</sup> The Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) is a pan-African NGO consisting of “ministers of education, university vice-chancellors, education policy-makers, researchers, gender specialists and human rights activists” advocating for gender equality for African girls at all educational levels. They achieve this goal by pushing for more gender responsive government policies, encouraging government and educational institutions to adopt best practices, and sensitizing the public about the importance of educating girls.

<sup>9</sup> The UN Girls’ Educational Initiative. “Botswana: ‘Telling the Story of Girls’ Education.” [http://www.ungei.org/gaproject/botswana\\_376.html](http://www.ungei.org/gaproject/botswana_376.html)

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