

Women's Education Worldwide: Recent Progress, Current Challenges and Hope for the Future

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In recent centuries, women's political and economical status has experienced remarkable progress in various social segments. Representation of women has steadily risen in nearly all industries. As shown in the latest statistics made available by Business Week, the labor-market participation rate for women 25 to 44 years of age, the average child bearing years, rose from less than 20% of 1900 to more than 75% of 1999. Women now own more than 47% of the stocks (Source: Peter Hart and NASD and the Investment Institute) and are projected to acquire over 85% of the \$12 trillion growth of U.S. private wealth between 1995 and 2010 (Source: Marti Barletta of TrendSight Group).

Among other factors, education has remained a critical indicator of women's well-being. According to studies published by NCES (National Centre of Education Statistics), women in developed countries have surpassed men at many levels of education. For example, in the United States in 2005/2006, women earned 62% of Associate's degrees, 58% of Bachelor's degrees, 60% of Master's degrees, and 50% of Doctorates. However, contrasting the progress in the developed world, women's education in developing countries still poses challenges that must be addressed with more effective measures.

Significance of Education for Women

Although new opportunities are increasingly becoming available to women even in developing countries, a significant number of women in those societies are not in a position to seize them. A number of factors are responsible for the special difficulty faced by women in traditional societies, such as cultural and financial constraints that unfortunately result in fewer women entering into secondary and tertiary education. This constitutes a severe social setback for both men and women in that a low percentage of women having access to tertiary education social productivity in both political and economic sectors. Therefore, professional education for women is key to promoting sustainable development in this age of science and technology. For the long-term stability and prosperity of civil society, every country must cultivate resources that contribute to competent female leadership through higher education.

Improvement in women's educational situation will lead to higher quality of life and national economic development in a number of significant ways:

- Higher industrial productivity;
- Improvement in hygiene and nutritional practices;
- Reduction of child and maternal mortality;
- Reduction and control of sexually transmitted diseases;
- Effective population control.

Socio-cultural Difficulties and Challenges

Despite the progress in gender equality in recent decades, United Nations studies have indicated the severity of the problems encountered in the process of promoting women's rightful access to education:

- Of the world's nearly one billion illiterate adults, two-thirds are women.
- Two-thirds of the 130 million children worldwide who are not in school are girls.

- During the past two decades the combined primary and secondary enrollment ratio for girls in developing countries increased from 38 per cent to 78 per cent.

The factors hindering female education are many. Poverty, or inadequate financial resources, has so far remained the primary challenge. Economy plays a key role in family decisions on educational costs, including tuition fees, cost of textbooks, uniforms, transportation and other expenses. Especially in families with many children, when these costs exceed the income of the family, girls are the first to be denied schooling.

Furthermore, gender stereotyping continues to prevail in almost all countries particularly among scientific and technical fields. Although an increasing number of women are choosing professions conventionally regarded as “male,” women remain over-represented in traditionally “female” jobs, such as secretaries, nurses, and under represented in jobs invested with executive authority. Even in new sectors of Information Technology, there exists an imbalance in the representation of men and women. For instance, despite the rapid growth of ICT, women employed in this field generally occupy positions towards the bottom of hierarchy.

In traditional societies, the expectation for women to enter into marriage and rear children at an early age has also limited women’s access to education. Due to inadequate education prior to marital age, the health conditions of the woman and of the household suffer further degeneration, which constitutes a vicious cycle. For example, in rural India almost 60 per cent of girls are married before the age of 18. Nearly 60 per cent of married girls bear children before they reach 19. Young girls are thus initiated into sexual life and to reproduction processes at a premature age. Almost one third of all babies are born with low birth weight. Fortunately, the national governments in developing countries are starting to acknowledge these cultural barriers. As the Azda Foundation of India rightly observes, when traditional familial expectations are given priority at the expense of an equitable social order, the society is prevented from effective development and no significant reform may take place.

In addition to family obligations, women in traditional cultures also face personal challenges. Studies done in sub-Saharan Africa have shown that women with higher education and working careers have difficulties in securing marriage in that a highly educated wife does not cohere with traditional views of a spouse. Higher education can thus give women access to working careers, but can also act as a social and structural barrier for women’s social mobility.

A further complicating issue, urban-rural divide, concerns the particular economic and cultural structures in developing countries. Unlike in the developed world, where standards of living are comparatively even across regions, rural residents in developing countries face double challenge of traditional culture and discrimination of urban residents. Children from rural families often find themselves ill prepared to utilize resources and methods of modern education. Obligations of agricultural communal life, which is far from accomplishing industrial modernization, have further discouraged these children—especially when choice has to be made between sons and daughters—from pursuing professional education.

Viable Strategies for Gender Equity in Education

Thanks to social advancement in both technological and cultural realms, an increasing number of new education options are becoming available to women. Experiences in recent years have proven these following strategies to most readily yield palpable results:

- Distance learning;
- Women’s Hostels;

- Integration of domestic practices and health education at school;
- Combating exploitation of child labor;
- Alternative sources of funding for schooling—in particular tertiary education.

As these suggested strategies indicate, the campaign for female literacy is a social development issue that concerns both men and women. According to studies in Nigeria, accessibility to distance learning has become a successful realistic alternative to higher education for women who are unable to leave spouse and children to travel to distant universities. It also provides an opportunity for working urban women to strengthen their professional competence without compromising their job responsibility. India's initiative for establishing girls' hostel has also presented an effective solution to the difficulty faced by girls who otherwise would yield to pressures from their families to conform to conventional social restrictions on women. Understandably, many strategies as yet proposed by various NGOs require a higher level of engagement from society as a whole. Volunteer canvassing from the ground level would thus be crucial to locating funding resources for improving women's education.

Role of the Church

Gender equality is a core value of the Church not only in our post-Enlightenment world but also an invaluable heritage from the first church founders who lived in accordance with Christ's teaching. As clearly stipulated in the mission statement of CBE International (Christians for Biblical Equality), Christians scriptures teach the fundamental equality of men and women of all ethnic groups, economic classes, and all age groups: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:28, *NIV*). Equal opportunity in education for both genders is inextricably connected to a number of core values of Christians committed to biblical relationship:

- Mutual service and loving fellowship;
- Obligation to use God-given spiritual gifts regardless of gender, ethnicity, national origin or socio-economical class.
- Entitlement to the fulfillment of individual potentials by transcending national traditions and culturally-defined roles.
- Commitment above all to the promotion of righteousness and eradication of injustice in all its forms.

The fulfillment of the above social responsibilities of a community of believers requires our conscious recognition of the special status of education as a religious responsibility. The human mind is a sacred gift from God and thus the cultivation of the mind is a sacred endeavor through which the believer incorporates divine wisdom and gospel essence into every sphere of social life. Recent initiatives in various countries have further proven that individual entitlement to this sacred duty is mostly effectively actualized when both genders are given equal access to educational resources and cooperate in constructing a more equitable and hospitable human community. Equal education as a key instrument of social transformation is rooted in the original egalitarian vision of early Christians who lived out the teachings of Jesus Christ. This egalitarian vision gives Christian institutions its essential character. Furthermore, it entrusts all Christian educators, students, parents and communities with high ideals of life that enable them to aspire towards goals of mutual service. Contrasting activists working in the secular sphere, the Christian Church bears the special responsibility of molding citizens who are not only intellectually and professionally competent but also morally responsible and spiritually

committed to the salvation of humanity through service. In particular, by adhering to the Christian essence of hospitality, inclusivity and acceptance, churches are especially well-endowed as facilitators of social integration in conventionally stratified societies such as India.

Starting from the Ground

At the core of our campaign for equal education lies the fundamental need to radically transform perceptions of women's role into a new model that accords well with scientific and moral standards of a modern civil society. Qualitative societal changes will not take effect until education, which is one of the central aspects of norms of morality and culture, remains in the hand of traditionalists who subscribe to a fragmented view of national heritage or human heritage. Towards this goal, disparity between types of social resources available to men and women must be lessened by various means, among which education is indubitably a primary instrument for cultural transformation.

Despite divergence in social and cultural realities among countries, a number of groundwork initiatives have proven effective in actualizing equal education:

- **Advocacy**
It raises social awareness for the need to improve female literacy as an inherent component in achieving society prosperity.
- **Residential schools**
Establishment and funding of residential schools offers full support to children, especially girls, who are otherwise deprived of educational resources due to either cultural or economic barriers.
- **Individual counseling**
It encourages and empowers persons to explore potentials previously disregarded by cultural stereotypes.
- **Group counseling**
It facilitates constructive communication between children and parents, between parents and teachers, who agree to work towards the common goal of realizing the students' well-being in view of societal needs.
- **Community presentation**
It motivates communities to come together as a whole in providing a supportive network for improving educational standards for women.
- **Seminars**
It formally engages all social segments on a large scale in utilizing all types of information and resources crucial to equal education.
- **Special initiative in geographically isolated regions**
It addresses a special need in developing countries in overcoming transportation and communication barriers.
- **Recreational events targeted towards breaking cultural barriers**
For instances, girls' soccer teams in India have played a formidable role in strengthening women's public image.
- **Support for endowments and scholarships**
Creative ways to raise funds remain crucial to the task of supporting vast numbers of women hampered in indigent regions.
- **Support for all social justice initiatives that lessen the impact of poverty.**

Ultimately, all advocates must work towards one common goal of creating a hospitable sustainable human environment in which effective distribution of social resources contributes to the fulfillment of all individual “gifts.”

In final conclusion, deprivation of educational resources for women is a dire hindrance to the prosperity of every society and of humanity as a whole. Empowerment of women through education revitalizes social mobilization and enhancement of the most constructive familial and communal values. Citizens of every nation are invested with a special responsibility for pressuring governments, agencies and institutions to live up to their commitment to ensuring quality education for both genders. Towards our ideal, we strive towards the final removal of all cultural and socio-economical barriers, towards access to education resources for all, and towards a holistic approach with balanced investments in all life cycles of a woman—including early childhood, family planning years and personal enrichment at higher age.

Resources and Links:

UNGEI: United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative

<http://www.ungei.org/index.php>

CBE International: Christians for Biblical Equality

<http://www.cbeinternational.org/>

CARE

<http://www.care.org/>

Global Campaign for Education

<http://www.campaignforeducation.org/>

ASHEWA: Association for Strengthening Higher Education for Women in Africa

<http://www.ashewa.org/ashewa/>

SSA: Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, India’s flagship programme for achievement of Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE)

<http://ssa.nic.in/>

World Education

<http://www.worlded.org/WEIInternet/index.cfm>

Ambassadors’ Girls’ Scholarship Program

<http://agsp.worlded.org/>