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Thematic Brief: Gender Roadblocks

from Primary School through Agricultural Vocational Training



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Dr. Maria Elisa Christie discusses gender issues during her research with women farmers in Uganda

Rebecca J. Williams
Sandra L. Russo
Nicola J. Kernaghan

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Introduction

The adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and the Education for All (EFA) goals by nations worldwide in 2000 led to a focus on the improvement of primary school and secondary school enrollment and quality of education. Included in these goals is a focus on closing the gender gap between male and female participation in all levels of education. Since 2000, the primary school gender gap has been closing in every region. In secondary schools, the gender gap has been closing in every region except for sub-Saharan Africa which has remained at the same level since 1999. Despite these improvements, gender biases and barriers persist in education systems worldwide. In some regions, gendered barriers predominantly affect boys. However, in the majority of the world and particularly among the world's poorest children, barriers to education overwhelmingly affect girls. This is particularly true in agricultural education where male students predominate worldwide, due in large part to gendered norms and roles that prevent and discourage women from participating in male dominated fields such as agriculture.

The roadblocks preventing girls from entering the field of agriculture are creating a growing problem for food security and agricultural production, particularly in low and middle-income countries. Analyses of agricultural education and training institutions have found that women “are underrepresented as students, instructors, extension agents, and researchers, and agricultural innovation processes are hardly ever aimed at women.”¹ This, in contrast to evidence showing that women make up an estimated 43% of the agricultural workforce, and that equalizing

women's access to resources could increase agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5-4% - a number that significantly increases when looking at countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.² “Gender insensitivity in agricultural education, research and development programs is now recognized to be a key factor responsible for the stagnation in agricultural production in many African countries, where food crops are grown mainly by women.”³

The loss of women in the education roadmap has significant impacts on agriculture where women make up nearly half of the agricultural workforce.⁴ Gendered differences in education, including access to and quality of education, prevents women from accessing employment opportunities in agriculture, constrains women from accessing markets, and prevents increases in agricultural yield. In cases where agricultural institutions seek to increase female employment, gendered differences in education lead to a lack of qualified women – even when women have been shown to be as capable as men at performing job tasks.⁵



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Challenges and Issues

Barriers to education occur on both the supply and demand side of education. On the supply side barriers include institutional, infrastructure, and school-related factors. Institutional factors include policies and decision making at a governmental level that indirectly or directly prohibit students from attending school such as a lack of women involved in decision-making processes and lack of, or poorly enforced, policies prohibiting early marriage, sexual abuse, and discrimination. Infrastructure factors include the physical school structure such as a lack of basic sanitation facilities in schools or an insufficient number of school facilities nearby which results in children traveling great distances to attend school. Distance traveled by girls is both a social and security concern of parents. School-related factors include barriers that occur while in the classroom or while traveling to school such as a gender-based violence, gender discrimination by the instructor, sexual harassment by the instructor or staff, biased course materials, and lack of relevance of the curriculum.

On the demand side of education, barriers include socio-cultural and socio-economic factors. Socio-cultural issues refer to the norms, roles, and responsibilities that prevent a person from attending school such as a traditional view of a women's role in society, pregnancy and early marriage, and a negative perception of girls' education. Socio-economic factors refer to the direct or indirect cost of schooling including school fees, poverty, early workforce entry, and a mismatch between education and labor market demands. Again, distance to school and the perception of the safety at the school are perceptions that drive parental decisions about whether girls may attend school.

The causes of gender disparities in education from primary through technical vocational education and training (TVET) education overwhelmingly adversely affect females, although this varies some by region and level of schooling. These causes are commonly cited as including issues of safety, distance, sex of instructor, curriculum bias, cost, ability to advance, lack of sanitation facilities, early pregnancy, early workforce entry, HIV/AIDS (particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa), and social norms and responsibilities.^{6 7 8} These issues coupled with commonly observed gender norms that push females into gender-stereotyped fields and away from math and science fields, social norms and biases that see agriculture as a "male" field, and perceptions of agriculture as a last-resort field, result in considerable roadblocks for females who wish to pursue agricultural education.

The gendered issues affecting access to vocational education mirror those affecting participation in primary and secondary education. For example, a survey of Ethiopian agricultural technical vocational education and training (TVET) programs finds that:



"Low female enrolment and higher than average attrition at [agricultural] TVET colleges is attributed to weak academic background, adverse social conditions, physical violence, a curriculum that does not adequately address gender issues and an extremely low number of female instructors to provide support and serve as role models."⁹

Interventions targeted at increasing participation in primary and secondary education will be particularly valuable in addressing many of the issues faced by students in accessing agricultural education. Furthermore, interventions targeted specifically at women's access to agricultural education are necessary to reduce the gendered roadblocks that are preventing women from participating in agricultural vocational education.

Solutions and Good Practices

Issues that prevent participation in primary and secondary education occur on both the demand and supply side of education. These barriers can vary by world region, by country, and within country borders depending on the context. Examples range from sociocultural and political factors such as early marriage and non-enforcement of marriage age laws to lack of enforcement of school entry ages. Negative perceptions of girls' education, an absence of policies focused on girls' education, under-representation of women in decision making roles, and policies that exclude girls are also obstacles to be faced.



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However, there are several interventions that have been shown to be successful in addressing some of these issues across contexts. Endeavors in these areas focus on changing social perceptions through multiple strategies such as information campaigns to sensitize parents to the benefits of girls' education and increased focus on women's participation in political processes. Enforcing laws on school entry age, marriage age, and sexual abuse and discrimination and creating and enforcing national gender strategies for education are further approaches.

School infrastructure issues are a common barrier to education. Evidence shows that decreasing distance to schools, creating "day" schools rather than requiring boarding, constructing schools for girls in regions where girls and boys are culturally separated in schools, and providing students with night and distance classes, improves participation in education.^{9 10 11} Improving sanitation facilities has been effective in reducing dropouts among adolescent girls, where the presence of toilet facilities allows girls the privacy to manage their menstrual cycles in private.^{12 13}

Interventions at the school level include: ensuring that curriculum is relevant, refrains from gender stereotyping and bias, and is gender sensitive; training teachers in updated teaching methodologies, in gender responsiveness, and in gender-sensitive teaching practices; increasing same-sex teachers, and providing role models for students. Ensuring the safety of students at school is a major issue that must be resolved in most regions. Providing second chances for students to return to school, alternative schooling options, and allowing pregnant girls and mothers to return to school after the birth

of their children are also effective policies in increasing access to and participation in education.

Reducing stereotyping in curriculum and encouraging students to take an active role in their education is important in keeping both boys and girls interested and participating in school.¹⁴ Gender sensitivity training for teachers, training in gender-sensitive teaching practices and methodologies, and increasing the gender parity of teaching staff are interventions that can improve student participation.^{15 16 17}



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The use of role models can be an effective method of keeping girls in schools, particularly in areas where male teachers dominate and where female participation in school is culturally considered to be less valuable.¹⁸ Similarly, the need to provide positive role models for boys in areas such as Latin America and the Caribbean, where female teachers dominate and frequently are reported to be

biased against boys, has been identified as an important intervention to ensure that boys remain in school in these regions.¹⁹

Violence is reported as a barrier to girls' education in every world region. The prevention of violence related risk factors must occur on several fronts including instituting and enforcing policies at the national to the school level that protect girls and women from violence and impose justice on the perpetrators of violence. At the school level, reporting mechanisms must be instituted in which girls can report violence, informal support networks should be established for girls to discuss issues in a safe environment, teachers must participate in gender and sexual harassment and misconduct training, and negative cultural perceptions of women must be addressed through information awareness raising campaigns.^{20 21} Violence towards boys has been identified as an issue in schools in regions such as Latin America and the Caribbean and parts of East Asia where education is dominated by female teachers and students. Attention must be paid at every level of schooling from primary through vocational programs to ensure that both girls and boys can learn in a safe space.

Worldwide, girls drop out of school due to pregnancy and in many cases are unable to attending traditional classes, and in many cases due to policies that prevent girls from returning to school and social biases and constraints. In Zambia, efforts to conduct trainings to change the attitudes of local students and teachers against girls' re-entry into school after pregnancy decreased opposition from parents from 53% to 25%. Similarly, prior to the training 69% of teachers were against school re-entry and afterwards 84% were supportive. In addition to emotional support, financial, policy, and academic support must be offered to

pregnant girls and mothers to ensure their return to school.²²

Elimination of school fees and addressing the indirect cost of schooling improves access to education for both girls and boys. Reducing indirect costs to education through conditional cash transfer programs or voucher programs, has been shown to be effective in increasing participation in schools by reducing the need to keep children home for labor activities and reducing the effect of financial shocks on student dropouts. This has been particularly effective in the PROGRESA/OPORTUNIDADES program in Mexico, and in programs in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua,²³ and is showing some small positive benefits in Kenya.²⁴ Similarly, school lunch programs and take-home food ration programs have been shown to be particularly effective in increasing school attendance and performance, worldwide.²⁵

The gendered issues affecting access to vocational education mirror those affecting participation in primary and secondary education, particularly in regards to female participation. As such, interventions targeted at increasing participation in primary and secondary education will be particularly valuable in addressing many of the issues faced by students in accessing agricultural education. In addition to the demand and supply side interventions discussed above, interventions targeted specifically at women's access to agricultural education are necessary to reduce the gendered roadblocks preventing women from participating in agricultural vocational education. The World Bank "Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook"²⁶ outlines key actions needed to address these issues.

Key gender issues in AET and actions to reduce roadblocks

- **Recognize women's roles in agriculture, and remove obstacles to fulfilling them**
- **Give women better opportunities for agricultural learning**
- **Enable women to participate in higher education**
- **Ensure a nondiscriminatory environment for women students and staff in agricultural education and training institutions**
- **Revise the curriculum to reflect current and prospective needs and interests**
- **Promote training markets, which could serve development projects, private extension service providers, and public extension services**

(World Bank, 2009)

The first issue outlined by the World Bank is recognizing women's roles in agriculture, and removing obstacles to fulfilling them. This includes changing the perception of agriculture as a male-dominated field, providing support for women in remote locations including through extension workers and transport systems, and the establishment and enforcement of legal mandates for equal

schooling in primary and secondary levels and for vocational training.²⁷

Providing opportunities for agricultural education is identified as another critical issue. This includes strengthening girls' access to education and women's access to literacy programs, the creation of culturally appropriate agricultural classes targeted to women that would allow them to fulfill science requirements for education, and providing role models and counseling to promote agriculture as a viable career for both men and women.²⁸

Another important focus is a need to provide a safe and non-discriminatory environment for students. This may involve actions such as providing gender training for staff, enforcing policies aimed at eliminating sexual harassment and gender-based violence, and supporting policies that address HIV and AIDS issues. The last major focus area identified by the World Bank is to revise the curriculum for agricultural education institutions to ensure that it is relevant to the needs of women and their roles in agriculture. This may include addressing gender issues in agriculture courses, and including gender training for educators and students.²⁹ We welcome your comments on this and other publications in this series.

Conclusion

There are many gendered roadblocks preventing both male and female students from accessing education from primary school through secondary and vocational school. Removing the barriers to access in primary and secondary school must be addressed if qualified students are to participate and excel in agricultural education at vocational and higher education institutions. In agricultural vocational programs, women particularly face gendered roadblocks due to the perception of agriculture as a field for men even though much of the agricultural labor in the world is done by women and by the associated social norms and constraints that prevent women from pursuing education in science and agriculture. In addition to focusing on the gendered supply and demand barriers that affect participation in primary and secondary education, steps must be taken to encourage women and girls to pursue science and agriculture courses and educational programs.

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Office of International Research Education and Development, Virginia Tech
526 Price's Fork Road (0378) Blacksburg, VA 24061
Website: <http://www.oired.vt.edu/innovate/>
Community of Practice: www.innovate-community.oired.vt.edu
Phone: (540) 231- 6338 Email: innovateprogram@vt.edu



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