

*Gender differences emerge sharply with the onset of puberty, affecting the life trajectories of girls and boys in profoundly different ways. Governments have a range of policy levers to counter the inequalities in opportunities, capabilities, and second chances of young women and men. Some policies are not targeted—they equalize opportunities indirectly by addressing constraints. But disadvantaged from the start, many young women also need directly targeted programs to help them catch up.*

### **Life trajectories diverge early—and permanently—for adolescent girls and boys**

Initiation rites in puberty, which vary from circumcision ceremonies in some African societies to debutante balls in the Americas, signal the break with the homogeneity of childhood and the emergence of gender-based expectations for girls and boys. With these rites of passage, the lives of young men and women begin to follow social trajectories defined by gender. Gender-defined roles and responsibilities tend to curtail girls' opportunities and decision-making capabilities but broaden those of boys. In some societies girls are married very young. In others, families severely restrict girls' freedom to protect their virginity before marriage.<sup>1</sup> In still others, adolescent girls often become pregnant and have children outside marriage.<sup>2</sup> These gendered trajectories for young women and men are revealed in gender differences in youth outcomes.

The interplay of differences in sex (biology) and gender (society) also shapes the different disease burdens for adolescent boys and girls. In addition to health risks associated with early and frequent childbearing, young women ages 15–29 suffer disproportionately from HIV/AIDS, unipolar depressive disorders, panic disorders, and fires. Rape and domestic violence account for 5–16 percent of healthy years of life lost by women of reproductive age.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, young men suffer more from disabilities related to violence, alcohol use, and accidents,<sup>4</sup> patterns similar to those in high-income countries, suggesting common risk-taking behaviors and underscoring the global nature of the problems of violence and drugs in adolescent males.

In education, the trend has been toward gender convergence, marking one area where girls' transition to adulthood has

undergone significant change. Across countries, school attendance and labor force participation rates have risen faster for young women than young men, in both the 15–19 and 20–24 age groups.<sup>5</sup> However, the schooling experience can still be gender-sensitive. For example, in Kenya where adolescents attend mixed schools and are fairly free to associate with the opposite sex, teachers view girls negatively, often saying that they are too lazy or less capable than boys are to learn.<sup>6</sup>

Time-use studies indicate other differences in the lives of adolescent girls and boys. The amount of time devoted to work, paid or unpaid, rises with age for boys and girls, but girls tend to work more hours than boys, spending long hours fetching water and firewood, cleaning and cooking, and minding younger siblings.<sup>7</sup> Time-use studies in Kenya, India, Nicaragua, Pakistan, and South Africa show that, on average, girls ages 15–29 work about one hour more a day than boys.<sup>8</sup>

For young women in many regions, the transition from school to work does not take place or is interrupted because of marriage and childbearing or because it is socially unacceptable for them to work for pay. Compared to young women, men are more likely to work for pay—especially if they are not enrolled in school—and to work less on domestic chores and unpaid economic activities.<sup>9</sup> The pressures on boys to earn income may explain the rise in school dropout rates for boys.<sup>10</sup> Girls who are not in school are more likely to participate in unpaid domestic work and household surveys may not capture such work. This is evident, for example, in the percentage of “idle” girls in many developing countries: by age 14 the proportion of girls who are absent from both school and paid employment in six developing countries ranged from 6 percent in Nepal to 44 percent in the Republic of Yemen.<sup>11</sup>

### **Programs that equalize opportunities can reduce gender disparities**

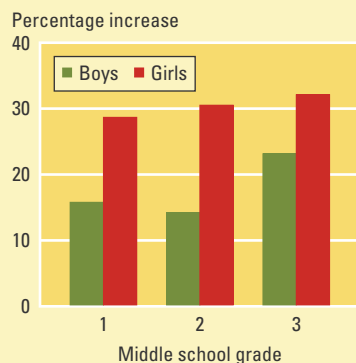
Broadening opportunities so that young men and women have better access to services will reduce gender disparities. Governments have a range of policy levers—pricing policies, legal and regulatory reform, better designed service delivery, selected investments in infrastructure—that could have equalizing effects even without gender-based targeting. How? Through alleviating the constraints that disadvantage girls. Some could reduce the relative costs associated with investing in girls' productive skills. Others could increase the information to counter labor market biases against girls, or increase infrastructure investments that ease the burden of household work for girls.

Consider the gender-specific impact of an ostensibly gender-neutral program, such as building more schools in rural areas. More schools should benefit both boys and girls, but studies show different effects for boys and girls. In countries as diverse as Pakistan and Ghana, reducing the distance to a secondary school elicits greater responsiveness in schooling for girls than for boys, partly because girls' enrollment is lower to begin with and because distance is a bigger constraint for girls, for whom personal security is a concern for parents.<sup>12</sup>

Trade policies also can have disproportionately larger effects on young women's employment opportunities. Take Bangladesh, where young women joined the export-driven textile sector in large numbers, increasing their wages dramatically. The increase in women's employment and earnings enhanced their bargaining power within their households.<sup>13</sup> Gender-informed health safety in the workplace and other regulations to ensure good employment conditions for female workers should increase the gains for young women even more—and



**Percentage increase in middle school enrollment due to Oportunidades in rural areas in Mexico by sex and grade, 1997–2001**



Source: Parker (2003).

counter the consequences of their inexperience in the workforce.

In addition to general policies and programs, gender-targeted programs must be implemented especially because gender-defined transitions to adulthood often severely limit girls' voice or exposure to information. When low-income families are forced to ration spending on education,

health care, and nutrition, girls and young women tend to bear much of the costs. As household incomes rise, spending on these items also rises, with girls and young women often benefiting proportionately. For example, giving larger cash transfers to families to send and keep girls in schools, as with Oportunidades in Mexico, has increased enrollment for girls (see the figure).

A pilot education project in the province of Balochistan, Pakistan, subsidized the establishment of private neighborhood schools. Parents were given the financial resources and technical assistance to contract a school operator to open a neighborhood private school, with the financial resources being tied to the number of girls enrolled in the new school. Opening a new neighborhood school increased girls' enrollments by 33 percentage points, a far larger effect than on boys' enrollments. This project was for primary education. Because distance to school is an even greater worry for secondary school girls in Pakistan, the relative gains for girls of greater school availability at secondary level is likely to be even higher.<sup>14</sup>

Facilitating young women's school-to-work transition requires targeted training programs and labor intermediation services. To attract young women, Chile Joven, an employment training and traineeship program for low-income, high-risk youth, included awareness campaigns for the business sector to recruit women, offered child care services, provided gender training for trainers, and expanded the traineeships in firms for young women. Sixty-five percent of participants found a job on finishing the program, and 70 percent of them found a job in their area of study, proportions much higher than for the control group, and the returns to labor market performance were better for women than for men.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the youth job training program ProJoven in Peru—created in 1997 to help economically disadvantaged youths ages 16–24 to enter the formal labor market—increased real incomes and reduced the gender wage gap. Fifty-four percent of the participants were young women. Before the program, young men were earning 45 percent more than women—after, only 2.7 percent more.<sup>16</sup>

