Introduction

This article analyzes the role of educational policies as a success factor for girls’ education and focuses in two countries, Mauritania and Guinea, that have successfully addressed this issue. It also briefly mentions the current situation in Burkina Faso and Mali. The key objective of this research effort was to understand and explain the practices that help girl students to succeed in school, and the underlying circumstances. The research revealed that the problems and successes of girls’ schooling are part of a whole dynamic, in which sociocultural, school and institutional factors overlap and interact.

African Educational Policies

In most Sub-Saharan African countries, educational policies are designed and implemented in the context of economic and social crisis. Also, public finances are limited by choices that must be made in terms of allocation and distribution of public funds, which leads to the need to establish priorities in the political agenda in order to achieve education for all children. Being aware that education plays a critical role as a factor of development, many African countries have attempted, with varying degrees of success, to make education a national priority directly linked to economic growth.

However, it should be noted that an imbalance in resource allocation is a reality in most African countries. It is in Africa that, "the generosity of the State with respect to university is the most marked, since spending per student is approximately 44 times higher than in primary education." (Report on World Development, World Bank, 1997). At a time when education for all seems to be a priority, or even a necessity, the significance of intrasectoral choices in this part of the world should turn more towards primary and secondary education. Indeed, in countries where the majority of the population barely has access to basic services, developing primary and/or secondary education seems of the utmost importance. In this respect, educational policies are the result of choices that take into account, to varying degrees, social limitations and economic realities.

Two major trends appear in the way political factors determine the success of girls’ schooling. On one hand, emphasis must be placed on the availability of needed materials and human resources, namely skilled and available teachers, and appropriate academic tools. On the other hand, it is essential to raise awareness among parents and the rest of the community. In this area, public authorities and educational guidance staff can play an important role in winning the support of communities. To move in this direction, a partnership must be established between the government, school administration and populations, and the help of opinion leaders (religious leaders, other important figures, etc.) must be sought to further raise...
awareness of the importance of successfully educating girls. These two trends have been followed with varying degrees of success by the countries in this study.

Beyond the percentages of public spending allotted to the education sector, this study also examines the policies established to address not only sectoral issues but also, more specifically, problems related to girls’ schooling. In this respect, the examples of Mauritania and Guinea are worth noting.

**The Mauritanian Example**

Between 1960 and 1999, the Mauritanian government established five projects for education (Projects I, II, III, IV and V). One of the objectives of the last project, Project V, is to not only raise awareness throughout the country regarding the issues related to girls’ education, but also to support communities in their efforts to improve girls’ schooling. Through the efforts of a governmental team—the Secretariat for the Condition of Girls and Women, the Fund for the Support of Girls and the Secretariat for Literacy—several awareness-raising campaigns have been launched. The most important factors of this project for education are that the proposed solutions are always location- and context-specific and that traditional political and religious leaders participate in the project activities.

Overall, the objectives targeted by these reforms, that is, generalizing education and improving the quality of education, considerably benefit girls’ schooling through measures such as getting schools closer to home, the integration of women in the teaching body and, undoubtedly, curricula content. In addition to general reforms, specific measures that explicitly target the improvement of girls’ access to modern education and girls’ success in school life, have been implemented. Sanctioned through circulars or decisions made at the regional or national level, these measures are beneficial to girls’ schooling in that they assign them priority when awarding grants, access to school cantines or by reassuring conservative parents by separating children by gender in the classroom. Through the measures taken, the gross enrollment rate in primary education rapidly increased in Mauritania from 45.5 percent (39.3 percent of girls) in 1989-90 to 86.2 percent (83.2 percent of girls) in 1997-98.

**The Guinean Example**

In 1989, Guinea implemented a Program of Structural Adjustment in Education, PASE I. This program intended to improve the internal and external effectiveness of the educational system, to make education accessible to all girls in the country, and to correct major disparities between gender as well as between rural and urban areas. Particular emphasis was placed on access to education in land-locked rural areas and in regions where the rates of school enrollment were particularly low.

The synergy between PASE I and other educational programs and projects produced positive results. The gross rate of enrollment at the primary level increased from 21.7 percent to 37 percent between 1990 and 1997. Beginning in 1996, after an evaluation of PASE I, it was decided that the effort should be continued, with some adjustments, in PASE II. The new project prioritized the quality of education, equity and access and, at the present time, results are encouraging. Moreover, the gross enrollment rate in primary education marked a regular progression, increasing from 34.6 percent (21.7 percent of girls) in 1989-90 to 51 percent (36.9 percent of girls) in 1997-98.

In spite of substantial improvement, some problems remain. In 1998, the gross enrollment rate of boys (65.7 percent) was still considerably higher than for girls. The low female enrollment rate was particularly significant in nine land-locked prefectures in the north and north-east parts of the country. Likewise, the disparity between urban and rural areas continues. Indeed, statistics indicate that in 1998, urban enrollment rates were over 53 percent of the school-age population while in rural areas they were only 47 percent.
Mali and Burkina Faso

Both Burkina Faso and Mali developed a ten-year plan or program. In Burkina Faso, the Ten-Year Plan for the Development of Basic Education (PDDEB), established for the period 1998-2007, focuses on basic education, girls’ schooling and literacy. In Mali, the Ten-Year Plan for the Development of Education (PRODEC) was initiated in 1996 and approved in May 1998. One of the primary objectives of the program is to reach a gross enrollment rate of 70 percent of girls by 2008. These two countries could undoubtedly learn from the examples of Mauritania and Guinea.

It should also be noted that the four countries in this study made official their promise to help girls by creating units that are tasked with improving the enrollment rates of girls in basic education. To this end, Mauritania created a State Secretariat for the Condition of Girls and Women within the government, Guinea created an Equity Committee, Burkina Faso a Department for the Promotion of Girls’ Schooling, and Mali a Committee for Girls’ Schooling. These different units are illustrative of the will of the countries concerned to promote girls’ schooling and to integrate this aspect into a broader program for basic education.

Conclusion

Educational policies are often limited by economic growth and the budget available for them. Beyond these constraints, the choices made in educational policy such as the sectoral allocation of the education budget, highlight the priorities of public authorities. In this respect, the case of Mauritania reveals a marked desire to develop girls’ education. In that country, the policies and reforms carried out in national education encourage the schooling of young girls. Guinea is another example where political will was expressed through the reallocation of the education budget to benefit primary education, awareness-raising campaigns, new awareness on the part of the population to the need to send girls to school and, lastly, an increase in the female enrollment rate.

Girls’ schooling requires a formal frame of reference that only national educational policies can provide. Strong political will, followed by clear measures and work to raise the awareness of all players in the educational sector are conditions that are required for the access, maintenance and success of girls in the school system. Mauritania and Guinea are, in this respect, striking examples of synergized actions that led to an increase in girls’ enrollment rates.

This analysis was drawn from a study directed by Aminata Maiga-Toure in four Francophone countries. A condensed version of this experience was provided in Findings 164, August 2000. For more information, please contact the author at Amaiga@worldbank.org