

# Affirmative Action Policies for Girls Education

A strategy that works

By Esme Chipo **Kadzamira**

**T**he social and economic benefits of educating girls have been widely acknowledged by both governments and international agencies. Commitments have been made at various levels including internationally, at the 2000 Dakar conference and the UN General summit, with world leaders committing to eliminating gender disparities in education by 2005 and achieving universal primary education and gender equality in education by 2015. Some governments translated these commitments into action by employing affirmative action policies and strategies. Just how effective have these policies been?

## *Why girls education?*

Research has shown that education raises the productivity of both men and women within and outside the home. The social benefits of educating women are even greater. Female education is associated with improvements in agricultural productivity and health, as well as reductions in fertility and infant and child mortality rates. In addition, it is a well-established fact that children, particularly girls, of educated mothers, are most likely to enrol and complete school.

At the beginning of this century, it was estimated that about 115 million school-age children, mostly from South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa were still not in school and the majority of these (56 percent)<sup>1</sup> were girls. Countries in the Southern Africa region fare bet-



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ter than others in the sub-Saharan Africa region and in many countries in the region; near parity of enrolments have been achieved at primary school. However, in some of these countries access to schooling is still a major problem for girls and gender disparities remain wide right from primary school level.

A significant number of countries in the region have generally high female enrolments with gross enrolment ratios of over 100 percent (e.g. Botswana, Mauritius, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, Namibia, South Africa and Malawi and in several of these countries i.e. Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho and Swaziland girls are more likely to be enrolled in primary schools than boys. However, even in countries where a near or full gender parity has been achieved at primary level, and despite the high enrolment rates for girls, high wastage and underachievement of girls at the point of transition to secondary school have created wide gender gaps at secondary and tertiary levels. For example, girls are more likely to dropout before completing primary school than boys and their share progressively declines as they progress through the primary cycle and for all the countries, gender disparities become more pronounced at subsequent levels with more girls than boys dropping out of school at the transition to secondary or in secondary school. In addition to this, at both secondary and tertiary levels, girls tend to be condensed in female stereotyped courses such as liberal arts and are still underrepresented in scientific, technical and vocational fields.

### ***The constraints***

Extensive literature exists on gender and education highlighting a number of constraints to girls' fully accessing education. The literature has identified multiple social, cultural and economic constraints that adversely affect girls' educational outcomes. However, the reasons for gender differences in schooling outcomes differ from country to country (because of the wide variations in the size and complexity and extensiveness of national educational systems in the region) and within each country they are also wide variations between different locations and settings because the constraints are usually culturally circumscribed.

### ***The remedies***

A variety of strategies, policies and programmes have been implemented in the region to address these constraints. This paper critically analyses affirmative action policies that have been implemented in sub-Saharan Africa with particular reference to the Southern Africa region to improve girls' education and assesses their overall impact and effectiveness in addressing gender issues concerned and towards meeting the EFA goal of gender parity by 2005 and gender equality by 2015 at primary and secondary levels. The affirmative action policies or strategies implemented are either gender specific i.e. specifically targets girls only or are gender neutral i.e. benefit both boys and girls but usually having the greatest impact on girls.

### ***Economic***

Most studies conducted in the region have consistently identified economic factors as key determinants of girls' participation in school. In most of the countries in the region, the direct and indirect costs of schooling have been found to be a major deterrent on girls' enrolment and persistence in school as there is a strong parental preference to educate boys over girls especially amongst the poor households. To mitigate the effects of direct and indirect costs of schooling a number of policies and strategies have been implemented in the region. These include abolishing fees at primary level, school fee waivers targeting girls, bursary and scholarship schemes for girls especially at secondary and tertiary levels.

Experience from the region shows that abolishing school fees at primary level can lead to significant increases in enrolments that benefits both girls and boys. In Malawi, Lesotho and Tanzania for example, enrolments increased significantly after fees were abol-

ished. However, evidence indicates that rapid increase in enrolments as a result of abolition of fees has had serious consequences on quality as has been the case in Malawi, which may have repercussions on the retention of girls in school. Research evidence suggests that school quality is important for both boys and girls but is of particular importance for girls.<sup>2</sup> Parents are more likely to withdraw their girls from school if the quality of schooling is very poor and they do not see the benefits of sending girls to school.

Scholarships and bursaries for girls are another common approach which governments have used to reduce direct and indirect costs of schooling and they have proved effective in ensuring that girls who would not otherwise attend secondary school do so. Scholarships and bursaries are more successful in reducing the burden of costs of schooling faced by parents but may not be effective measures to improve girls' enrolment and achieve gender parity at secondary school level as they tend to be small scale and have high unit costs. And in cases where they are not carefully targeted, they may lead to resentment and benefit those who do not really deserve them and thus not realise their intended objective.

In Zimbabwe for example, the Cambridge Female Education (CAMFED) project offered financial support in the form of a stipend to meet all direct costs of education including school fees, stationery and school uniforms to girls in primary and secondary schools from rural communities. Similarly, in Tanzania, girls were offered a bursary to attend secondary school under the Girls Secondary School Programme (GSES). The positive outcome of both programmes was that attendance rates were quite high while attrition rates were lower than the national average (Odaga and Heneveld 1995, Swainson 2000).

In Malawi a scholarship scheme was introduced for girls attending secondary school, and was initially targeting needy girls only. Later, due to problems in identifying needy students, the scheme extended to all girls attending public secondary schools in the country. The move was retrogressive as the scholarship benefited girls from wealthier families while boys from poorer homes were not assisted and as a result the policy created resentment and backlash from parents and boys. The main objective of the scholarship programme was to improve retention and achievement of girls in primary schools, based on the general evidence in the literature that secondary school scholarships not only lead

to increased enrolments but also create incentives for girls to complete primary school.<sup>3</sup>

On the contrary, retention and achievement rates barely changed during the period the scholarship scheme was offered. This demonstrates the need for multiple interventions to address the various constraints facing girls' education. A myriad of other factors such as low levels of achievement, early marriages and pregnancies, poor school quality which were not addressed by the secondary school scholarship programme affected primary school retention rates.

### *Special quotas*

A second set of policies and strategies aim at increasing access and persistence of girls in school and some of the strategies and policies implemented in the region include quota systems (preferential selection) for secondary and university selection, social mobilisation campaigns, re-entry programmes for teenage mothers and community schools.

As indicated there are wide and persistent gender gaps at secondary and tertiary levels in most of the countries in the region. To improve girls' enrolment at these levels, quota policies or positive discrimination favouring girls have been used as a strategy to increase access into secondary and tertiary levels. This usually involves reserving a certain percentage of school places for girls and selecting girls on lower aggregate scores than boys.

However, where quota policies have been implemented they have had mixed and limited impact on improving access to girls education, especially where they fall short of aiming for full gender parity. For example, quota policies for selection of students into secondary school were introduced in 1972 in Malawi and reserved 30 percent of secondary school places for girls. Though enrolment of girls compared to that of boys increased, progress towards gender equity in enrolments was slow and never realised<sup>4</sup> and the policy ensured that girls remain a minority in secondary schools since the architectural design of schools reflected the quota policy with only a third of the boarding places made available for girls.

Thus, quota policies have the potential of limiting or acting as a brake on girls' enrolment in the long run. In addition, they do not address the underlying causes of low enrolments at secondary and tertiary levels, which are underachievement and high dropout rates of girls at the point of transition to secondary and tertiary levels. Selecting girls on lower aggregate scores also

tend to reinforce the perception that girls are academically weaker. Clearly, quota policies are only useful as a short term measure to improve access and their implementation should be accompanied by other strategies that address the causes of girls' underachievement and poor performance.

### *Re-entry policies*

Pregnancy has been cited as a major cause of dropout amongst adolescent girls in upper primary and secondary levels across the region. In the past, girls in the majority of countries faced permanent expulsion from school once found to be pregnant. Several of the countries have now introduced policies of readmission that allow teenage mothers to complete school. In Botswana Zambia and Malawi for example, pregnancy policy has been reviewed to allow girls to go back to school after delivery.

However, there is evidence that where this policy has been implemented, it has been more of a reactive than a preventive strategy.<sup>5</sup> It is not well known to what extent girls are taking advantage of this policy initiative and return to school after giving birth. An assessment of the new pregnancy policy revealed that the policy was not adequate in dealing with the problem of teenage pregnancy. In the case of Malawi, it was not widely publicised and also failed to meet the needs of teenage mothers, including counselling and sex education needs.<sup>6</sup>

### *Awareness raising: a problem known is half solved*

Social marketing and sensitisation strategies have also been useful in trying to change prevailing attitudes towards girls education. Social mobilisation campaigns using the person-to-person approach and group outreach programmes at community level using a combination of strategies such as ethnographic research, theatre for development and participatory group discussions with key stakeholders in the community has had significant impact on girls' education in Malawi, for example. Girls' enrolments increased, and for the first time, net enrolment ratios of girls surpassed that of boys and the issues raised during the campaign helped to put girls' issues high on the national agenda. In Tanzania, a social marketing campaign using multimedia strategies such as radio, folk plays, film and newspapers to disseminate messages as well as involvement of national and local officials and organisations and popular participation successfully mobilised women for literacy instruction.<sup>7</sup>

### “Girls only” is better

Research evidence indicates that girls generally have better educational outcomes if taught in single sex schools or gender segregated classes.<sup>8</sup> The performance of girls in single sex schools surpasses that of girls in co-educational schools, though their performance level is still below that of boys. In particular, girls from single sex schools perform better than girls in co-educational schools in science and mathematics. Though single sex schools exist in most of the Southern African countries, their existence is attributed to religious factors (most are owned by faith based organisations), they were not necessarily established as a strategy to improve girls education.

Further, school initiated experiments with streaming by gender in co-educational secondary schools in Malawi for mathematics and science subjects have demonstrated that girls’ performance improved greatly when taught in single sex settings.<sup>9</sup> The experiments showed that both boys and girls performance improved when taught in single sex classes, but the improvements were greater for girls. A pilot on gender streaming conducted at primary level produced similar results and gender streaming was successful in improving achievement of girls and boys at primary school level.<sup>10</sup>

### Dealing with the content

Ensuring gender-sensitive curricula is another strategy that has been shown to improve girls learning outcomes. In some countries in the region, including Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi some school textbooks have been revised or developed which portray women positively and these have replaced gender-stereotyped materials which tended to portray girls in traditionally caring roles. This strategy can be effective if is accompanied by gender training for teachers and gender training needs to be an integral part of teacher training.

### Conclusion

The constraints to girls’ access, persistence and achievement in school are complex, multiple and inter-related. As Kane (2004) argues multiple-process driven interventions are needed to help girls achieve in primary and secondary education and single and piecemeal interventions will only have limited impact. A strategy that works to improve girls’ education outcomes is the one that attempts to tackle all the main factors constraining girls’ participation in school. Gender

specific interventions on their own will not necessarily lead to better educational outcomes for girls; there is need for system wide interventions as well. ■

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### Endnotes

- 1 [www.developmentgoals.org/Education.htm](http://www.developmentgoals.org/Education.htm).
- 2 Kane 2004.
- 3 Global Campaign for Education, 2003.
- 4 Swainson et al 1998.
- 5 Byaona and Kandji-Muragi n.d.
- 6 Byaona and Kandji-Muragi n.d, Kadzamira 1996.
- 7 Tietjen 1991.
- 8 Hyde 1994, Tietjen 1991, Hiddleston 2000.
- 9 Hyde 1993.
- 10 Hiddleston 2000.