

Gender, Education and Economic Development in Africa

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The links between education, human capital accumulation and national development cannot be overemphasized. Education is the most potent factor that significantly changes the life of an individual and empowers him/her to contribute to national development. It is the engine that largely drives the economic development throughout the world as well as facilitates personal success at all times. There is, therefore, a growing consensus that human development through the provision of learning should be at the center of any development process. However, evidence from most parts of Africa suggests that education is yet to be accorded the priority attention in the development process. In Africa (as in most developing regions of the World) educational statistics are scarce. Available evidence shows that generally literacy levels, enrolment rates and the level of schooling completed are relatively low, with a marked gender gap. The most recent statistics compiled by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2002) on Adult literacy rate refers to 1995.

The data revealed that for about one third of countries of Africa, more than half of the population aged 15 and over are illiterate. Yet variation in this indicator depicts Africa as a continent of many educational contrasts. Adult literacy varied from only 14 percent in Niger Republic to 85 percent in Zimbabwe. Most of the countries where, at most, four of every ten adult members of the population are literate are in the West African sub-region. Some of the countries with fairly higher adult literacy rates (70 to 80 percent) are in the South African sub-region.

Throughout Africa, the literacy rate for males exceeds that for females. Evidence reveals that in most countries adult male literacy

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rate is at least 40 percent higher than that of females. Excess male literacy rates of 20 percent or less are found only in Zimbabwe (13), Mauritius (10) and South Africa (0).

Table 1: Literacy Rates in Africa

Country	Male	Female	Both
Kenya	86	70	78
Madagascar	-	-	-
Tanzania	79	57	68
Uganda	74	50	62
Zambia	86	71	78
Zimbabwe	90	80	85
Burkina Faso	29	9	19
Cameroon	75	52	63
Ghana	76	54	65
Niger	21	7	14
Senegal	43	23	33
Egypt	61	39	51
Morocco	-	-	-

To the extent that education is a catalyst for all development processes, better educational opportunities for the young generation, in terms of increased access (reflected in rising enrolment rates and school completion rate) would hold some promise for Africa's future development. Limited access to learning opportunities, on the contrary, would constrain the individual to produce or contribute to national development. The society loses, as it cannot tap the full potentials of its human resources. Data from the demographic and health surveys for many African countries provide an insight into the level of school enrolments in the 90's (Table 2). For countries where available data permit examination of trends during the decade, only Niger Republic and Kenya recorded substantial improvement in school enrolment among the population aged 6-10 years. In Niger Republic, between 1992 and 1998, school enrolment among the age group earlier referred to rose by 44 percent among males and by 50

percent among females. The corresponding improvement in the rate in Kenya between 1993 and 1998 was 22 percent for boys and 24 percent for girls. In some countries there were only marginal increase in the enrolment rate, while in Zambia and Burkina Faso school enrolment deteriorated. Deteriorating school enrolment rate implies worsening access to education - a situation which limits the ability of the individual and society to contribute to or benefit from development.

Changes in gender gap in school enrolment were also observed during the 1990's. The gap narrowed slightly in Cameroon, Niger and Ghana, but widened a bit in other countries such as in Burkina Faso and Egypt.

In respect to level of education attained, the majority of the population aged 6 and above in most African countries went to school up to the primary level. This is true of both the male and female populations, with minimal gender gap. However, in 1998, only about two in every ten household members aged 6 and above in Burkina Faso and Niger Republic completed the primary level of education, and the gender gap was substantial. Education up to the secondary level and above was still largely the privilege of a small proportion of the population of most African countries, and a large gender gap was evident (Table 3).

Statistics available for 1990's show large variation among African countries in the proportion of the that attained secondary and above level of education. While the percentage is less than 10 (among males as well as among females) in countries such as Tanzania, Burkina Faso and Niger Republic, it reaches 40 percent only in Ghana and Egypt. Even so, the gender disparity is enormous in all African countries. For instance, in the early 1990's, at least 50 percent of males reached secondary education or higher in excess of females in Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ghana and Niger Republic. However, except in Madagascar and Tanzania where the gender gap increased slightly during the 1990's, the general trend was a narrowing of the gap across the continent.

Insofar as human resource development is crucial for sustainable development, the above discussion has an implication for national development and the future of Africa. Limited access to education impedes a nation's accumulation of human capital and consequently stunts economic development. Low school enrolment rate and even low completion rate, compounded by gender inequalities, imply that a huge potential resource base would remain ill-equipped, unmotivated and underutilized in the development process. Indeed, unless Africa wins the struggle against illiteracy, the struggle for the continent's development would be futile. Of course, the gender imbalance must be decisively addressed in order to realize the full impact of education as a facilitator in national development. Evidence on the potential impact of female education abound. Its role in inducing declines in population growth rate and in substantially enhancing child survival rate has been demonstrated in 46 developing countries (UNFPA, nd, Cited in ECA/African Center for Women, 1977). A study of Cote d'Ivoire, Thailand, India and Indonesia show that education can raise a woman's earnings by about 15 percent compared with 11 percent for a man for an equivalent level of education (UNDP, 1995). Thus, the development dividends that accrue from investment on female education are enormous.

In summary, much has been written on factors that affect the education industry and those that contribute to the gender disparity in Africa. Different solutions have also been proffered. To help address the problem, UNICEF, World Bank and UNESCO in 1996 designated Africa as a priority region and offered support for basic education for girls. While international co-operation and financial assistance can facilitate actions for change, national governments have unique obligation to muster strong political will and commitment to ensure equal and easy access to quality education. Naturally, other legitimate and urgent needs do compete for available limited resources, but provision of the learning needs of the population should not be compromised, otherwise generations would be wasted and whole segments of the population excluded from the development process. What is needed is for national governments to reorder their priorities

in resource allocation in order to free more funds for the education sector. Equally expedient are policies and deliberate actions that will promote gender equity in access to education so as to provide every individual the opportunity to fulfill his/her human potential and contribute to shaping their society.

Table2: School Enrolment by Age and Sex in the 1990's for some African Countries

Country/Year	Age Group By Sex								
	Male				Female				
	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-24	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-24	
Kenya	1993	67.1	88.9	43.5	8.6	66.3	87.1	35.6	5.8
	1998	82.0	89.9	46.8	8.5	82.5	86.9	35.4	3.7
Madagascar	1992	53.5	54.8	16.1	7.6	56.1	51.7	13.1	5.9
	1997	57.6	52.7	16.3	5.8	59.7	49.5	11.4	3.2
Tanzania	1992	24.4	72.4	25.1	3.7	27.9	69.0	11.6	1.4
	1997	25.1	71.3	31.1	4.8	29.5	71.2	17.8	1.4
Uganda	1995	65.1	77.4	38.5	12.4	62.5	67.9	14.3	3.1
Zambia	1992	61.7	80.8	45.9	8.2	65.6	73.8	22.9	1.5
	1998	48.3	73.9	42.4	9.2	49.3	71.2	23.3	2.6
Zimbabwe	1994	9.6	88.4	44.2	10.7	80.1	86.1	26.6	4.0
Burkina Faso	1992	30.3	31.0	16.8	7.3	22.7	19.9	9.4	3.3
	1998	28.9	26.5	13.8	7.1	20.7	19.2	7.0	2.6
Cameroon	1991	68.2	76.2	48.0	27.5	59.4	69.2	23.9	12.2
	1998	70.7	78.1	42.7	18.9	69.7	70.8	27.2	11.4
Ghana	1993	75.3	77.4	40.1	12.2	73.1	71.1	20.2	4.7
	1998	74.0	78.0	36.8	12.7	75.3	75.6	23.2	3.5
Niger	1992	16.7	25.4	11.0	5.0	10.6	12.8	5.1	1.7
	1998	24.0	28.3	10.4	6.2	16.8	20.0	4.3	2.5
Senegal	1992	31.6	39.7	21.8	13.0	25.3	28.2	9.7	6.5
Egypt	1992	88.5	77.9	50.4	15.0	77.8	68.3	36.7	7.7
	1995	89.1	79.3	48.1	16.1	79.0	69.0	34.3	7.7
Morocco	1992	55.3	54.3	29.9	12.1	42.1	36.9	19.8	7.0

Source <http://www.measuredhs.com>

Table 3: Percent Distribution of de-facto Household Population Aged 6+ by Highest Level of Education Attained: Some African Countries, 1990's

Country/Year	Level of Education By Sex						Gender gap in the 1990's	
	Male			Female				
	No. Educ.	Prim	Sec+	No. Educ.	Prim	sec+		
Kenya	1993	16.5	65.0	17.5	27.1	60.1	11.6	Narrowed
	1998	10.4	66.4	22.6	19.3	64.1	15.6	
Madagascar	1992	23.5	53.9	17.0	27.8	54.6	15.9	Widened
	1997	24.5	55.3	18.3	28.6	54.2	16.6	
Tanzania	1992	34.4	60.9	4.4	46.1	51.0	2.5	Widened
	1997	31.6	62.0	5.0	41.7	54.3	2.8	
Uganda	1995	18.7	67.4	12.7	35.6	56.1	7.4	
Zambia	1992	15.3	59.4	24.5	24.4	61.4	13.7	Narrowed
	1996	17.7	57.1	24.7	25.1	58.2	16.1	
Zimbabwe	1994	9.4	58.5	31.3	15.5	59.8	24.2	
	Burkina Faso	1992	71.1	21.8	6.6	82.7	13.6	
Cameroon	1998	72.1	21.1	6.1	83.9	12.3	3.3	Narrowed
	1991	30.2	48.3	21.1	46.6	39.0	14.1	
Ghana	1998	21.0	51.8	25.9	34.9	45.2	18.6	Narrowed
	1993	26.2	62.9	10.8	38.3	56.0	5.7	
Niger	1998	20.6	32.9	45.7	34.0	31.9	33.4	Narrowed
	1992	79.6	15.2	4.2	88.6	8.6	1.9	
Senegal	1998	72.7	19.5	6.1	83.6	12.1	3.2	Narrowed
	1992	60.9	26.2	11.1	74.0	19.2	5.4	
Egypt	1992	19.8	35.9	44.2	38.7	31.2	30.2	Narrowed
	1995	17.5	35.1	47.4	35.4	30.9	33.7	
Morocco	1992	43.9	33.9	21.7	64.9	21.5	13.0	

Source: <http://www.measuredhs.com>

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