The Challenge to Improve *Living Conditions Of Women*

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Women when compared to men have benefited less during the course of economic development resulting in a lowered status of well-being for women within the house, in the workplace and the community\(^1\). It is well established by now that the unequal status between men and women is not due to their biological or physiological differences but a social one connoted as gender inequality. Consequently, social reformers from time to time have attempted to remedy the deeply entrenched notions in the society about women’s position.

In order to alleviate the living condition of women in this broader context financial resources are necessary but not sufficient and changes in social and cultural attitudes play a very important role. The suggestions with positive outcomes on improving women’s living condition are drawn from various country level experiences wherein the use of economic instruments is fewer and the emphasis is more often on creating social and legal institutions. Under these circumstances, it may not always be possible to measure the costs and benefits of these initiatives in monetary units alone. However, an attempt is made to illustrate the likely benefits to the countries when an opportunity to reduce gender gap is put into practice given certain costs in implementing it. Two opportunities are being mentioned here to improve upon the living conditions of women:

1. Reducing the gap between male and female education with emphasis on primary education.
2. Provide childcare facilities to enhance female labour force participation.

**Opportunity I: Reduce the gap between male and female education**

Gaps in education between males and females are rather glaring in many parts of the world. Table 1 shows the gaps that exist between males and females at primary and secondary school level observed among some of the very poor regions of the world. For the least developed countries for every 100 male only 71 females are educated in the new millennium while further region wise classification shows worse gap in South Asia (SA) and West and Central Africa. The gap at the primary school net attendance ratio is less than one but has improved in the past decade while much needs to be done at the

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\(^1\) Boserup (1990) traces the status of women during the course of economic development indicates and how in only a few instances women seem to have benefited while in most other situations their status continued to remain subordinate to men.
secondary school level wherein the boys are disadvantaged as well compared to their counterparts in other developed countries.

Table 1 Summary of Select Education Indicators across Regions of the World

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female as % of Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Saharan Africa</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern and Southern Africa</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West and Central Africa</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East and North Africa</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asia</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Asia and Pacific</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>..</td>
<td>..</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America and Caribbean</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central and Easter Europe</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing countries</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Least developed countries</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: a) Adult Literacy Rate: Percentage of persons aged 15 and over who can read and write.

b) The net primary/secondary school attendance ratio is defined as the percentage of children in the age group that officially corresponds to primary/secondary schooling eligibility who attend primary/secondary school or higher.

c) GPI: Gender Parity Index is calculated as the ratio of female enrolment ratio to male enrolment ratio and are calculated by the author.


More importantly, post secondary education or tertiary education reflects the level of human capital formation resulting in higher returns to education thereby also to high rates of economic growth. The poorer regions of the world form a very small share of those enrolled for tertiary education and expectedly, university graduation ratios are the highest in North America and Western Europe (NAWE) at 33.1% followed by Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) at 29.3%, and some countries in the East Asia and Pacific (EAP) region in 2004 (UIS, 2006). However, women from NAWE and EAP account for 30% each and in CEE about 18% indicating that gender gaps in regions with generally
higher educational attainment as well. Focussing on these countries one further notices huge gaps in the type of tertiary education attained. As shown in Figure 1, women are heavily enrolled among the non-science courses like education; social sciences, business and law; and health and services which account for about 95% for the total of all countries. The field of study at the tertiary education is driven by the preferences in labour demand which in turn are influenced by the cultural and social understanding about gender specific jobs.

**Figure 1 Females as a percent of Total Tertiary Enrolment for each Broad Fields of Tertiary Education, 2004 (%)**

![Bar chart showing female enrollment in various fields of tertiary education.](chart)

Notes: 1) CEE: Central and Eastern Europe, EAP: East Asia and Pacific, NAWE: North America and Western Europe.
2) The countries included within these regions are as per UNESCO (2006).
Source: Author’s calculations based on UIS (2006), Table 15: Enrolments by broad field of education in tertiary education.

Education in itself has other spin-offs. For instance, in Zimbabwe among girls aged 15–18 the secondary school dropouts reported six times higher HIV positive instances compared to those enrolled in schools. In this case, secondary education (supplemented with good school education programs) made them better equipped to recognize the dangers involved in risky behavior and used refusal tactics effectively in difficult sexual situations (UN Millennium Project, 2005).

It is well known that educated women are healthier, less likely to be exploited sexually, participate effectively in household decisions as well as in public sphere, have better access to employment opportunities and less likely to be discriminated in the workplace. On the other hand as mothers they contribute to the well-being of the
household members in terms of improved nutrition and health status of children and also in eliminating discrimination between girls and boys within the household. These micro level benefits can further enhance macro level growth and reduce inter-country inequality. Gender inequality in education accounts for a sizable portion of the empirically observed growth differences between countries and regions (Blackden et al, 2006 and Klasen and Lamanna, 2003). A higher level of human capital formation in the society positively impacts economic performance as does a lower fertility rate among educated women since it raises the per capita resources available. The evidence for this lies in high growth performance among the East Asian economies and continued low performance among several countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (Klasen, 2005).

Based on these issues the following section illustrates the benefit cost ratio of reducing gender gap keeping EAP as the benchmark which has successfully reduced the gender gap at a very fast pace.

**Benefit-Cost ratios for the reducing gender gap in Education: an Illustration**

For the purpose of calculating the costs, the intervention costs from the Bangladesh Food for Education (FFE) program are used (UN Millennium Project, 2005). These estimates are for the year 2000 and the latest values available for such an intervention. FFE in Bangladesh improved primary enrolment by 48% for girls compared to 25% for boys. The annual cost per child is $36 for Bangladesh and the same figures are used for South Asia and also for Sub-Saharan Africa due to lack of similar cost figures for these regions as a whole. Total annual cost of intervention for the year 2000 is calculated using existing Gender Parity Index (UIS, 2006), the number of girls in primary school age (UIS, 2006) and the cost of intervention per child. For the benefits, the estimates of additional GDP growth due to the reduction in gender gap for both South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa are used from Klasen and Lamanna (2003). The additional GDP growth rates are with reference to the EAP region where the gender gap is much lower than that observed in South Asia (SA) and Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Since the benefits are due to interventions at primary level of education, two additional cost scenarios – with 50% and 100% cost escalations compared to the base value of $36- are also considered for benefit cost calculations. These scenarios are assumed to capture the higher cost of intervention required for secondary and tertiary levels of education.

The benefit of intervention in year 2000 is assumed to manifest after a gap of 15 years (when the child attains 20 years of age). Furthermore, the benefits are considered
for a 10 year and a 40 year stream in two separate scenarios. Three separate
discount rates – 3%, 6% and 10% - are used for calculating the present value of benefits.
Table 2 reports benefit-cost ratios for South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

**Table 2 Benefit/Cost Ratios for Education Intervention for South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, 2000**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Discount Rates</th>
<th>South Asia</th>
<th>Sub-Saharan Africa</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cost/child/year (USD)</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenario 1: Benefits Accrue up to 10 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenario 2: Benefits Accrue up to 40 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s own calculations based on UN Millennium Project (2005) and Klasen and Lamanna (2003)

The estimates of the benefit cost-ratios decline with discount rates and increase in
cost of education as expected. It also increases with the extent of benefit stream that is,
smaller period of accrual results in lower benefit-cost ratios. Since SSA has fewer number
of children this results in its lower cost but also the gender imparity is higher which
brings down the benefit. Further, the growth rate in SSA is not that strongly affected by
education variables and other variables have a larger weight which naturally brings down
the benefit of reducing the gender imparity, compared to SA.

The limitations of these calculations lie in several assumptions and can at best
serve as an illustration.
Opportunity II: Improve access and affordability to childcare facilities to enhance higher rate of female labour force participation (FLFP).

On the one hand female education does result in better status and empowerment but not all of it translates into her ability to make decisions and other facilitating conditions are required. One of these is the choice to participate in the labour market. Not all countries provide reliable data on labour force and wherever available, the data may often not be comparable across regions. Across OECD countries there is wide variation in FLFP rates (age 15-64 years) ranging from 27% in Turkey, 42% in Mexico to 76% each in Denmark and Sweden and significantly lower gaps in male-female participation among the high female participation rate countries (OECD, 2005). Similarly, Middle East and South Asian countries are among the lower end while East Asian countries are with the highest FLFP rates in Asia (UNHDR, 2005).

While it is acknowledged that higher education enables higher FLFP Lee and Cho (2005) in a comparative study between Argentina and Republic of Korea show that higher average years of education among the Korean women did not translate into higher work participation rates (Lee and Cho, 2005). In Republic of Korea large proportion of pre-school enrolment is in private schools and the overall pre-school enrolment is relatively lower compared to Argentina (see Table 3 below). The authors infer that this is primarily due to lack of child care facilities provided by the state in Korea. This consequently results in an M-shaped curve in FLFP rates for Korea across age groups with a dip in participation observed at the age of 20-24 continuing up to 30-39 years while it is an inverted U-shaped curve for Argentina.

Table 3 FLFP and Pre-school enrolment in Republic of Korea and Argentina

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average level of education (years)</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FLFP rates for elementary education and under (%)</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>54.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FLFP rates College and higher education (%)</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>87.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-school enrolment Ratio (%)</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>53.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Schools’ share of total enrolment (%)</td>
<td>78.0</td>
<td>26.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Lee and Cho (2005)
That there are socio-cultural differences in FLFP is further illustrated in the case of Switzerland which comprises of three cultural regions: French, Germanic and Italian (Losa and Origoni, 2005). Married women with young children are least likely to participate in the labour market compared to women in other status. Among such women the French speaking regions show higher participation rates compared to the Italian and German speaking regions. It is observed that an emphasis on the role of women as homemaker in the Italian speaking region appears to influence the lower public provision of child care facilities compared to the French speaking region.

Childcare provision enables women to not only join the labour market but also reduces absenteeism, improves their chances of retaining the job, allowing them to opt for full-time rather than part-time jobs (Gelbach (2002), Blau and Tekin (2003), Jaumotte (2003), Lokshin and Fong (2006)). China has very high FLFP rates at about 80% in 2000 compared to the world total of about 60% which has been possible due to not just universal child care policies but support in encouraging women to work and ensuring that wage gap between male and female is minimised (Jiang et al, 2004).

Unlike the previous opportunity, this challenge concerns many developed nations as well. While this policy is undergoing major restructuring to improve access, affordability, awareness and quality of service in developed countries it is in the initial phases among several developing nations. For this opportunity benefit cost ratios could not be calculated due to inadequate information on intervention costs and potential benefits. However an attempt has been made to present the available evidence on benefits and costs separately.

**Benefits:**

+ Meyers, et al (2002) show that when the probability of subsidy receipt increases from 0.0 to 0.5 in USA, the employment probability rises from 0.21 to 0.73 (controlling for other regressors).
+ Similarly, for USA Gelbach (2002) finds that the probability of receiving assistance has positive effects on hours of work per week, weeks worked per year, and wage-salary income.
+ A fall in child care cost help mothers (single or low-income in particular) to move away from welfare dependence resulting in a sustained remuneration for the household and thereby improving the well-being of the household members (Jaumotte, 2003).
+ Improving economic self-sufficiency and access to gainful employment and reducing child poverty are among the reasons cited for introducing child care
particularly for single mothers in USA (Adams, et. al, 2006) and UK (Viitanen, 2005).

+ Countries with low fertility rates find that providing child care improves fertility rate as in Italy (Del Boca, 2002) while higher subsidies in a progressive manner are provided to families with more children in Sweden (Government of Sweden, 2000).

+ In developing countries, child care facilities also serve as protection measure for problems like child labour, school drop outs, child prostitution, outreach for medical and health program and female literacy (GOI, 2005).

+ Early child care in particular after two years seems to have beneficial impact on child growth and development and hence policy interest is evinced in developing countries.

Costs:

Childcare provision being part of social policy is either provided largely by state as in Sweden where the parents share at most 20% of the cost or 1-3% of the total family income (Government of Sweden, 2000). On the other hand countries like USA and UK provide child care subsidy for the lower income families particularly for single mothers, at a subsidized rate while others have to pay a much higher price. Given that efficiency in targeting is low in several developing countries for most social policies and with limited resources available for social spending a mix of private and public expenditure is the likely option.

- Depending on the framework of political economy of the country the cost sharing between the state and the household is rather disproportionate. The average cost of child care in USA (market-oriented policies) in several states was higher to that of public college tuition fee ranging between $2000-$4000 per year in 2002-2003. Further the services were being underutilized due to such high costs. A case study in Ohio showed that a reduction in co-payments as well as increasing the income cut off to participate in the program had positive impacts on access (Honeck and Lovell, 2004).

- Due to stricter regulations in supply of child care market arising out of quality concerns excess demand for this service is noted in both UK, as the supply of childcare did not respond to the demand (Chevalier and Viitanen, 2002) and Germany (Wrohlich, 2004).

- On the other hand in USA many women did not participate in the subsidized child care program due to lack of awareness about the scheme (Blau and Tekin, 2003).
The providers of child care are usually women from the informal sector (as in Canada and USA). However, denying access to social security benefits or an indexation of wages not only adversely affects such women but also reduces the child care provision.

While it may not be feasible to calculate benefit cost ratios the benefits as stated above could clearly outweigh the costs as the latter is significantly influenced by political will and participation of the civil society.

**Conclusion and Caveat:**

It is to be noted that child care provision or spending more money effectively to improve female education levels are two of the several intervention mechanisms that can bring about much needed improvements in the living condition of women. As illustrated even simple intervention like reducing the gender gap in education will have significant benefits. However several other challenges such as: increasing incidence of sex trafficking, domestic violence, poor attention towards improvement in reproductive health care, clear demarcation in sex roles, substantially larger proportion of time spent on leisure activities by men would need urgent changes in attitudes of both men and women, even if quantitative cost benefit calculations are not feasible.

Even among several welfare states with consciousness towards reducing the exclusion of women from the process of development, women with similar educational attainment often experience discrimination in wage and fail to occupy important positions in both politics and business, emphasising the deep rooted gender biases in the society.
References:


