

The silent emergency

One Millennium Development Goal set a 2005 target for getting girls into school. Louise Tickle explains why the target won't be met and what needs to be done.

Gone are the days I was poor, No one thought my life would be transformed

Though her primary school results were among the best in the whole of Zimbabwe, Angeline Mugwendere recalls crying painful tears when she heard the good news. In the face of such a bright future, she perfectly understood that her family's poverty would prevent her from ever going to secondary school.

"My parents were subsistence farmers with little or no surplus to sell for basics, let alone school fees. Now, more fees were needed than the primary fees my parents had struggled and scratched to get," she explains.

It was at this point that CAMFED (Campaign for Female Education) committed to supporting Angeline through her secondary schooling. Now aged 25, and the director of CAMA, a network of young Zimbabwean women who are uniting to develop their communities, she knows that this support transformed her life. But she also says that the distribution of such funds must be made accountable to communities on the ground.

Yakuba Memuna, 25, from Ghana, makes the same point more bluntly. In an address to the UK Chancellor, Gordon Brown, on 26 January 2005 she explained, "it is vitally important that scholarships are provided transparently, and that parents know what girls are entitled to. Girls are vulnerable. Sometimes you can wonder why it is that the most beautiful girl in the school has the scholarship. It is because she has been identified by a teacher or a headmaster for a scholarship and she is paying for her education in exchange for a sexual relationship with him. Scholarship programmes must be planned carefully."

The simple bleakness of this scenario powerfully distils the impacts on girls of poverty, sexual exploitation, gender discrimination and the unfeasibly high cost of accessing education in many developing countries.

The problems are well-known and well-rehearsed: girls access to education is limited by school fees and other educational costs; it is seen as poor value to educate girls because boys are more likely to get jobs; violence on the way to and within school makes parents reluctant to let girls enrol; discrimination in the classroom and curriculum means girls education is often compromised; and traditionally 'female' duties mean girls don't have time to attend school, or time to do their homework, which means they fall behind. These are just a few of the factors which, combined, mean that today, the right to an

education is denied to 58 million girls across the world at primary school level alone.

Given that the benefits of educating girls and women are profoundly significant in terms of the future welfare of their communities, this is considered by many in the education and development field as an emergency requiring urgent action – action that the international community has so far failed to take.

When heads of state met in September 2000 to agree on eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), two goals were specifically geared to improving the situation of women. While seven of the eight goals were to be met by 2015, one goal in particular, to “promote gender equality and empower women” had a target of gender parity in primary and secondary education set for 2005.

Seventy-five countries are likely to miss this goal and, on current trends, more than 40 per cent of all targeted countries are at risk of failing to meet it by 2015. In response, DFID recently published a strategy paper entitled *Girls' Education – Towards a Better Future For All*, in which it was announced that £1.4 billion would be spent on improving education in developing countries.

But while this early failure to meet a vital MDG may have galvanised some in government to take notice of the issue of girls' education, development education experts say that missing the 2005 goal is an indictment of international political will in addressing gender equality.

Dr Elaine Unterhalter, Senior Lecturer in Education and International Development at London's Institute of Education offers two suggestions for why the MDG will not be met.

“My first answer is that I'm not sure that empowering of women and gender equality is something that the whole world lines up behind, in the same way they do in an emergency like the tsunami. It's a silent emergency – it's kind of accepted that girls are discriminated against.

“The 'cool' answer is, there's not enough money, no political leadership, that the barriers are enmeshed in people's anxieties about their daughters' sexuality and in fears about modernisation. These are very complex processes, and so they needed huge amounts of mobilisation. But my sense is that internationally it's been seen as needing just a 'little bit' extra.”

DFID makes it clear that its strategy is offered as support to the UN agencies whose role is to drive forward the work on MDGs. But while he welcomes the UK government's commitment to taking girls' education seriously, ActionAid's head of international education David Archer is scathing about the UN's attitude to the failure to meet this particular MDG.

"If you look at the MDG Task Force reports, we were pretty shocked at the fact that of all the goals – and there was only one set for 2005, and it was set then for a good reason – they pretty well covered up and ignored the failure to achieve it."

Expressing dismay at the relaxed attitude of Kofi Annan's gender adviser to the evident failure to meet the 2005 target, highlighted in a January press statement airily entitled "World moves towards gender parity in basic education", Mr Archer notes that in the context of such complacency, the publication of DFID's strategy paper was particularly timely.

But he fears that the UN will not frame its crucial MDG Summit this September around the failure to achieve the 2005 goal, "and yet actually the credibility of the entire MDG framework depends on them doing something really substantial at that conference."

However, there is some question about whether the MDG of gender equality itself is well served by one of the very targets by which it is measured; that of gender parity of girls and boys enrolling in school.

Dr Unterhalter explains the problem. "I can see that girls' education is the issue on which you'll get maximum consensus, so there's a political benefit to putting it that way round, but if you don't fundamentally deal with gender equality, that doesn't necessarily work very well. Under the Taliban, there was gender parity, but nobody was going to school. You can have 10 per cent of all children in school, but that doesn't necessarily mean a lot for the gender equality goal."

She points out that it while it is claimed that educating girls makes society more equal, the equation is not always so simple. "Just look at Western Europe. There is still a lot of discrimination. And Latin America shows it graphically – there's been a huge expansion in girls' education in the last 20 years, and yet you have hardly any women in prominent positions, and the job market is still highly discriminatory."

At Save the Children, education adviser Katy Webley agrees. Focusing simply on getting the same number of girls and boys into school misses much of the point, she says. "I think one of the things that's so hard on gender equality is that it's so multi-dimensional. You can't hold one thing up and say 'do this and it'll then be alright.'

"Had we achieved gender equality then we'd be much more likely to achieve parity in education. One of the things Save the Children has been saying is that all the MDGs need to have a gender dimension."

While she is positive about the DFID strategy overall, she says that the plight of girls living in areas of conflict has been internationally neglected. Because fragile states don't collect data, progress towards gender equality cannot be

measured, and so the fact that women and girls in war-torn countries cannot access schooling is almost universally ignored.

“UNESCO has an independent team which writes the Global Monitoring Report, and running through those reports is a real neglect of conflict. Not many people are working on education in those countries and DFID currently doesn’t target money for education in those countries.”

Clearly, getting to school in the middle of a war will also be hard for boys, but Ms Webley points out that if girls are vulnerable in poor countries generally, their situation deteriorates drastically in conflict areas.

So what are the priorities for the short and longer-term?

DFID’s strategy outlines five central challenges – the cost of education; poor school environments; the weak position of women; conflict; social exclusion. It also commits to six actions ranging from strengthening UNICEF’s capacity and using the UK government’s special political clout during 2005, to providing more money, working with civil society and offering practical support for countries that want to prioritise girls education.

Are these commitments sufficient? The overwhelming response is that the £1.4 billion, while welcome, is not enough unless there is a great deal of diplomatic effort running alongside. Attitudes will have to be transformed on a global scale, and development experts indicate that the UK government has a crucial role to play this year in galvanising the international community through its Presidency of the G8.

How loud DFID’s money can talk to other donors will also be critical. £1.4 billion represents the UK’s internationally designated ‘Fair Share’ of funding for education in development, and Katy Webley hopes that this commitment will encourage other donor countries to cough up as well.

There are a number of questions about how this money should best be spent. For instance, there is tension between funding NGOs or in-country programme work as against offering direct budgetary support to governments, and ‘trusting’ them to use it for girls’ education. It is a clearly sensitive topic. Elaine Unterhalter thinks that some conditionality on gender issues should be built into direct budgetary support. ActionAid’s David Archer believes that “it’s immensely important that all of it goes through governments in countries, not through NGOs, but there’s a very important role for civil society organisations to play, in scrutinising, tracking and monitoring what happens to those budgets. There is no point in governments being accountable to donors, it skews the power dynamic; this is an opportunity for governments to become more accountable to their people.” And yet it is also acknowledged that NGOs such as CAMFED do uniquely valuable work in developing best practice on a micro-level that governments can learn from, though they could not aspire to supporting themselves.

Highlighting grassroots concerns, CAMFED director Ann Cotton emphasises that as funding is dispersed, communities will need to know what it is being spent on.

“I’d want to promote transparency. People in poverty are often treated like children, and their poverty is maintained by a psychological process of them not getting access to information. Girls have the least political clout, the least social status, and the quietest voice. So that means that political impetus now is very top down. Schools and parents must know what they are entitled to receive in the education of their children.”

If there is to be a hope of meeting the MDG of gender equality by the revised date of 2015, then policy experts and women working at grassroots warn that all the profile in the world will have no effect if political will does not continue beyond this year. There is plenty of passion on the ground, as Yakuba Memuna demonstrated when she told the Chancellor, “I am now a role model. Girls want to be like me. I am leading a network of 900 girls and young women in Ghana. We are dedicated to getting more girls into school. We will not stop until that is achieved.”

More information at

[CAMFED International](#)

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[United Nations Girls' Education Initiative: Beyond Access](#)

<http://www.developments.org.uk/data/issue29/silent.htm>