Increasing adolescent girls’ and young women’s access to opportunities is the right thing to do—and the smart thing. Inequalities based solely on biology are not only unfair and unjust, but also inefficient. Equal opportunities for young women to enter productive work will raise their incomes, lift their families from poverty, delay marriage and childbirth, and increase investment in their children’s health and education.

What does this mean for public policy?

- Ensure that young women start the school-to-work transition from an equitable position; trends toward gender equality in secondary school attendance and graduation must be reinforced and accelerated.
- Expand the focus of conditional cash transfer programs to address issues such as school-to-work transitions and early marriage.
- Use training programs to facilitate the entry of young women into nontraditional and more highly-paid occupations in high demand; outplacement and support services for training graduates are particularly important for young women with no previous labor market experience, as are childcare arrangements to facilitate both participation in training and entry into paid work.
- Promote autonomous saving by adolescent girls and young women; these savings can provide a valuable source of start-up or working capital for their businesses.
- Modify inheritance laws that discriminate against girls and women and limit their access to productive assets.

Investing in adolescent girls translates into future gains

Adolescence is a critical time to intervene to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty by helping girls stay in school, resist early pregnancy and marriage, and make a successful transition to employment. Investing in adolescent girls’ economic opportunities can have a large development impact.

- An extra year of secondary schooling for girls can increase their future wages by 10% to 20%.
- In 14 sub-Saharan Africa countries, women with 7-10 years of schooling had from 0.2 to 0.7 fewer children than women with no schooling.
- Cross-country evidence suggests that increases in women’s employment in the apparel industry—where most employees are young women—is associated with lower rates of fertility.
- In Bangladesh, young women who participated in a group-based credit program had higher per capita household expenditures and significantly lower fertility—almost 40% lower when borrowing the mean amount.
- Across Indian states, higher female labor force participation was associated with more rapid growth.

The world is moving quickly toward gender equality in education. Girls’ enrollments are rising quickly, both in absolute terms and relative to boys’. Of 106 countries, 83 achieved the Millennium Development target of parity in primary and secondary education by 2005. But, even as girls’ primary and secondary enrollments rose rapidly over 1990-2006, women’s labor force participation stagnated, both for young women 20-24 and for older women 25-49.

Too many girls are stalled between school and productive work: of girls 15 to 19 years old, 42% in South Asia and 26% in sub-Saharan Africa neither study nor work for pay. Too many adolescent girls become mothers, frequently forcing them to abandon school and face a lifetime of lower earnings. For the progress in education to bring its full benefits—for girls, women, families and societies—more policy attention must go to equality in economic opportunities, especially the transition from school to work.

For more information, go to:www.worldbank.org/gender.
Are gains in enrollment translating into gains in completion?

The gains in primary education—particularly large in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, and South Asia—brought parity in primary enrollment rates by 2006 everywhere except Sub-Saharan Africa. On secondary education, East Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East and North Africa have made impressive strides in increasing girls’ enrollment. South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa girls are much less likely than boys to complete school once enrolled.

Gains in enrollment translated into gains in completion in most regions, but not everywhere. In South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa, girls are much less likely than boys to complete school once enrolled.

More attention to the transition from school to work is imperative, and critical, for building on the achievements in women’s education and sustaining them in the later stages of life—for the benefit of all.

Is adolescent motherhood putting at risk the gains in education and opportunities?

Recent data show that more than 10% of 15- to 19-year-olds are mothers in Sub-Saharan and South Asia, and Latin America. In Bangladesh and Mozambique more than 30% are mothers or pregnant.

Between the early 1990s and 2000, the percentage of adolescent mothers declined in many countries. But that trend is far from universal, with the share increasing in Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Mozambique, Peru, the Philippines, Turkey, and the Republic of Yemen.

Motherhood is a key pathway for transmitting the gains in women’s equality to future generations, with benefits for children’s health and education. But unintended pregnancies, especially for adolescents, can squander progress in education and labor markets.

Young girls either continue unintended pregnancies, giving up opportunities for education and employment, or seek unsafe abortions. Forty percent of abortions are performed on women younger than 25. Child-bearing among teenagers can bring disproportionate health risks to the mother and the baby—maternal mortality, delivery complications, premature delivery, and low birth weight.

When women work, how do their earnings compare with men’s?

In some regions of the world, young women’s hourly earnings significantly trail young men’s hourly earnings. Women aged 15–24 are only 82% and 84% of men’s in sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia/Pacific, respectively. In Latin America/Caribbean and Europe/Central Asia, on the other hand, young women have achieved parity and even have slightly higher hourly earnings than men—four and two percent higher, to be exact.

In all regions, younger women have higher earnings ratios than older women. While older women aged 25–49 are close to achieving parity with men in Latin America and the Caribbean, in no other region does the female-to-male ratio of hourly earnings exceed 0.5 for older women. The fact that young women are closer to earnings parity with men than are older women could reflect gains in female education over the past decade, but it also may be due to wage and earnings losses suffered by older women as a result of time spent out of the labor force raising children.

Does better access to education mean more job opportunities for women?

Progress in education is not matched by higher labor force participation. By age 24, women lag behind men in labor force participation in all regions. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the gap is around 30 percentage points. The gap is even larger in South Asia, where 82% of men are active in the labor market, against just 27% of women.

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