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The Impact of Women Teachers on Girls' Education

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Advocacy Brief

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Introduction

The recruitment of women teachers is an issue that has become increasingly important to Ministries of Education, NGOs and other agencies supporting educational development. This is particularly so because of the impact women teachers can have on girls' enrollment.

The need to increase girls' enrollment is an important reason for giving greater policy and programming attention to women teachers, but it should not be the only reason. Beyond recruitment strategies, there are other issues which have to be addressed if women are going to be empowered in their roles as teachers. These include the lived experiences of women teachers in schools, the accessibility and relevance of teacher training, and both professional and career development opportunities for women. From a gender equality perspective, empowering women as teachers is critical to ensuring that the experience of being a teacher is a positive one for them, and that their work has a sustained impact on gender relations in the community and in society, at large. In some contexts, the feminization of the teaching profession has negative implications. We need to support and encourage women to be effective and inspiring teachers for girls and boys. This means addressing policy and practice to ensure that a feminized education sector can be a high status, respected one in which adequate resources are allocated to ensure the highest professional performance of all teachers - whether they be women or men.

This advocacy brief looks at these issues, drawing on research and practice from different contexts. It highlights the importance of women teachers, and also highlights the need for a broad gender equality perspective when developing policy and programmes for women teachers. Specific strategies are presented for doing so.

Women Teachers: The Impact on Girls Education

One of the most compelling arguments for increasing the number of women teachers in schools relates to the positive impact that doing so has on girls' education. There is evidence to show a correlation between the number of women teachers and girls' enrollment, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. In countries where there are more or less equal numbers of male and female primary teachers, there is close to gender parity in student intake. In contrast, in countries where women constitute only 20% of teachers, there are far more boys than girls entering school.¹ However, as highlighted in recent research from Nepal, such large-scale trends mask more complex patterns at the local level.² The relationship between women teachers and girls' enrollment is more than a simple cause and effect, as there are many factors that prevent girls from attending school some of which also impact on the number of women teachers. Increasing the number of women teachers has to be accompanied by other strategies to promote girls' education, such as ensuring that the timing of the school day fits with girls' domestic workloads, and ensuring a high quality of education in a safe and secure environment.

1 UNESCO, 2003, p. 60.

2 Bista, 2005.

There are different reasons for the generally positive relationships between girls' enrollment and women teachers:

In some conservative communities, parents will not allow their daughters to be taught by a male teacher. This is the case in some areas of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The placement of a woman teacher, therefore, can have an immediate impact on access. Even where the presence of male teachers is not necessarily a barrier to girls' enrollment, parents may prefer women teachers over men. A study in Nepal, for example, indicates that mothers feel more comfortable talking about their children with a woman teacher, and in India - an environment where local politics is often considered to be about contacts, favours and inside-dealings - women teachers are considered "more sincere" because they are less likely to be involved in local politics.³

The presence of women in schools can also impact positively on girls' retention in school and on their achievement. Studies have shown a positive impact from women teachers on girls' (and boys') achievement.⁴ A female role model can support and encourage girls to successfully complete their studies and maybe even continue studying to become teachers, themselves. She can also be there to listen to any problems and provide guidance when necessary. In schools where girls are in the minority, especially, the presence of one or more female teacher may also ensure protection for girls from unwanted attention from boys or male teachers, and even from sexual abuse and exploitation.

At the school policy level, women teachers may act as advocates for girls, representing their perspectives and needs, and promoting more girl-friendly learning. For example, women teachers may be able to advocate for better toilet and washing facilities. These are of particular importance to adolescent girls who are menstruating, and whose active participation in school during their monthly periods may depend on access to clean toilets separate from those used by boys and a water supply. In terms of menstruation, puberty, sex and reproductive health education, women teachers have an important role to play in providing girls in school with accurate information about their own bodies and how to look after them.

Women teachers provide new and different role models for girls especially those in rural and conservative communities. They point to possibilities for women to be active outside the home and to be agents in community development. They play key roles in educating and socializing children beyond gender stereotypes, and so are crucial agents of change.

Why Are There Often Few Women Teachers?

There is little systematic research on the specific reasons in particular contexts, but there are various different reasons to explain low numbers of women teachers in schools. There may simply be no educated women to become teachers. This is especially the case in rural communities and amongst indigenous and minority populations. In Lao PDR, for example, there are few qualified women teachers from ethnic minorities, amongst whom (despite recent increases) the number of girls completing school remains low. If there are few girls attending school and completing their education, then there will be few young women

³ UNESCO PROAP, 2000.

⁴ The use of the word "risk" indicates here perception based on widely known experience.

adequately qualified to become teachers. In Cambodia, for example, a policy to raise the entry requirements for teachers from 10 to 12 years of basic education resulted in very low recruitment of women from rural areas, where there are few upper secondary schools.⁵

Where a pool of women with appropriate qualifications to become teachers do exist, there are other barriers and discouragements. These include the belief that it is men who should teach and run schools, as well as women's family and household workloads/commitments, more lucrative employment or other income-generating possibilities elsewhere, and inaccessible (often residential) training programmes. Husbands and family members may also not feel comfortable with women teaching in schools that are dominated by men. As highlighted in a recent study in Nepal, traditional beliefs about women's exclusion during menstruation and pregnancy also impact negatively on their opportunities to become teachers.⁶

If women are recruited and assigned to positions in rural areas, they often face multiple obstacles when working away from their home, family and/or husband. Traveling long distances alone is often culturally unacceptable and unsafe for women, and travel by public transport is both difficult and costly. Women may be teased and harassed by men en route or in the villages where they teach.⁷

Challenging Assumptions about Women Teachers

Whilst recognizing the positive roles that women can play, recent research from Uganda⁸ also reminds us that we cannot make assumptions that women are necessarily always supportive of girls in schools or will make the school environment any more girl-friendly. Women teachers are not necessarily very aware of gender equality concepts, and are often subject to the same gender assumptions, discrimination and even sexual harassment and abuse that girls face in schools. Frequently, this makes it very difficult for them to acknowledge and act on gender inequalities affecting girl students and other women teachers. Women teachers may have their own personal concerns and priorities, and so may not have the time or inclination to provide any additional time or energy to give to girl students. A study in Pakistan⁹ also raises awareness about the fact that the unconscious attitudes and assumptions of women teachers towards boy and girl students may also reinforce gender stereotypes. Women's preference for teaching girls because they are quieter and less demanding than the boys makes it difficult to imagine how they might encourage girls to be more active and to participate fully in class.

Another important issue is that women are often marginalized to low status positions within schools, usually teaching the lower grade classes and subjects considered 'soft.' This means that men still dominate higher status positions, teaching higher grade classes and subjects with a higher prestige, such as math and science. These low status positions mean that women teachers' voices may be either excluded from policy and decision-making processes, or they may not be taken seriously. It may be impossible for women to influence school policy and, therefore, meet the expectations that they can make a positive difference for

5 Geeves and Bredenberg, 2005.

6 Bista, for UNESCO Kathmandu, 2005

7 Warwick and Reimer, 1995.

8 Mirembe and Davies.

9 Kirk, J., CER, 2004.

girls. This is especially so where there are only one or two women on a large male staff. The role model potential of women teachers is compromised if they are seen by girls (and boys) as always subordinate to men and are only assigned to low status roles within the school. Moreover, the assignment of women to roles that are seen to relate to their nurturing and caring abilities and their natural affinities for young children, rather than to their intellectual and pedagogical capacities, may serve to reinforce gender stereotypes. Ironically, pastoral responsibility for girls a task which is often given to senior women teachers in schools may be precisely the sort of responsibility that is assigned to women based on stereotypical assumptions and not given the value it deserves within the school (for example, it is rare for women to be given any workload adjustment to compensate for extra time spent in this role). A small study conducted in Sri Lanka highlighted the fact that compared to the male teachers in schools, women teachers usually do menial and low status tasks, not only during the regular school day, but also at special events such as school concerts and prize giving evenings.¹⁰

Another important issue for policy makers to consider is the fact that in some contexts - for example in Central Asia, North America and the Caribbean - some primary schools, especially, are so dominated by women that it is thought that this can have a negative effect, alienating boys from educational activities and impacting on attendance, retention and performance. While this may not be an issue of immediate concern for policy makers in many countries, awareness of this situation will ensure that strategies used to promote gender equality in education also have a positive impact for boys. As highlighted in a recent study in Kazakhstan,¹¹ other negative impacts from the feminization of the teaching force can include a lowering of the teaching profession's status, low resource allocations to pre-service and in-service professional development and an overall reduction in the creative dimension of teachers' work.

Teacher Training and Professional Development

Even if there are effective strategies in place to recruit women, teacher training rarely pays attention to the different experiences, perspectives, and priorities of women, and assumes the gender neutrality of being a teacher. Few teacher training programmes explicitly include gender equality issues within the curriculum, nor discuss critical issues such as the feminization of the profession. This is the case in India, for example, where researchers describe the way in which women are brought into a teacher training programme that remains exactly the same as it had been for men only. This approach is characteristic of a 'Women in Development' (WID) approach.¹² This is quite different to a Gender and Development (GAD) approach, which implies that the programme would acknowledge gender differences, would aim to meet the sometimes different needs of men and women, and would explicitly address gender equality issues. A WID approach, for example, might increase the number of women teachers in a teacher education programme, but indicators for success would be a numerical count of women relative to men, rather than any measure of the extent to which male and female teachers are empowered to act as agents of gender equality. There are a small number of inspiring examples of teacher education programmes in which the gender nature of teaching

¹⁰ Jayaweera.

¹¹ Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan and Kazakh State Women's Pedagogical Institute. Research Institute of Social and Gender Studies, 2004.

¹² Unterhalter and Dutt, 2001.

and the gender identities of male and female teachers are discussed.¹³ These have not been formally evaluated, but are recognized to make a considerable impact on individual teachers' awareness of gender relations in the classroom, school and wider community, as well as to empower them to use their potential as teachers to address inequities.

Women are rarely found in positions of authority and leadership in schools, and career development for women teachers is rarely prioritized. Even in countries where the percentage of women teachers is high, there are rarely many women head teachers, education officers and managers at the district, regional and national levels. There are systemic constraints for women wishing to develop their career within the education sector, such as negative attitudes towards women's ability to manage and lead schools, lack of female role models, long hours, and commitments that are difficult to reconcile with family and child care responsibilities. There are also constraints within families and communities. For example, a study of women teachers in Papua New Guinea reported that women teachers were reluctant to apply for or take up promotions because they feared their husband's violent reactions.¹⁴ Negative attitudes in the school, family and community inevitably shape women's beliefs about themselves, their capabilities, aptitudes and appropriate roles. In this way, women's own attitudes may be a further block to their career development in education.

The term 'professional development' is used to refer to a wide range of opportunities for teachers to develop their knowledge and skills. It is not limited to traditional teacher training activities, such as workshops and seminars, and may also include more innovative strategies such as mentoring, teachers' meetings, classroom-based trainings (see below). The term 'professional development' also gives a sense of an ongoing process over time. Although there is some overlap and terms are sometimes used interchangeably, the term 'teacher education' is usually used to refer to specific courses which lead towards teacher certification (either pre-service or in-service).

Specific Strategies

Recruitment Strategies

Different strategies have been identified by ministries of education, UN agencies and NGOs to increase recruitment of women teachers. Unfortunately, some of these are never fully implemented, and very few are rigorously evaluated.

Use specific quota targets for women (such as a percentage of the teaching force, or one woman per school). Relax age restrictions for entry into teaching. Develop more flexible teacher training programmes which do not require long periods of absence from home and/or programmes which allow women to take young children and even babysitters with them.

Provide scholarships and incentives to women to attend pre-service teacher training

Other incentives such as food aid (for example cooking oil), clothing and other provisions for children and even husbands may also help.¹⁵

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 13 For example, Bonder, 1992 and Mitchell, 1995.

14 Reported in Bradley.

15 These gifts have been given as incentives to women in South Sudan specifically to reduce resistance from husbands to their wives becoming teachers.

Hire committed local women without the necessary formal qualifications and support them with intensive teacher training and specialized supervision in order to help them quickly develop both their subject content and pedagogical knowledge.

Use creative deployment strategies to ensure that well-qualified women teachers are attracted to rural schools. For example, provide rural incentive allowances, employ two women teachers to work and live together, coordinate with other government departments to allow for husbands' transfers, and encourage communities to set up welcoming support structures for women teachers moving in from the outside.

Work with local women's organizations to encourage them to support potential women teachers, through, for example, sharing childcare responsibilities, cultivation and other tasks such as firewood collection. This can free up time for women to teach.

Develop creative recruitment campaigns in the local media which specifically target women and promote the active role that women can play in education. These should be targeted at secondary school leavers as well as older women in the community, and where needed, to ethnic minorities using local languages and media channels.

The BRAC programme of community girls' schools staffed by local women teachers in Bangladesh is perhaps one of the best known programmes of women teacher recruitment, training and support, and has had a significant impact on increasing enrollment for girls in rural areas of the country. The strategy of training local women to become teachers has been accompanied by programme features such as appropriate timing and location of classes and community input on the curriculum.

In refugee schools in Sierra Leone and Guinea, for example, women with lower qualifications than those required to be teachers have been recruited as classroom assistants. Whilst working in the classroom with another teacher, they have the possibility to complete their own schooling and take the necessary teacher training courses to become teachers.

The Government of Nepal has long been running the Feeder Hostel Programme, providing board, lodging, tutorials, and extra-curricular activities for rural girls in order for them to complete their secondary education. The programme also has the objective of increasing the number of women ready to return to their communities as primary school teachers. Such programmes have to be supported with adequate learning and other resources in the hostels, well trained and motivated hostel staff and mobilization strategies to ensure that the graduating girls are prepared to return to their villages to serve as teachers.

Women-Centred, Professional Development Strategies

Ensure that all professional development opportunities are equally accessible to women, by, for example, providing childcare facilities, transport and female trainers.

Use innovative strategies to reach women, such as classroom-based training and distance education. For example, professional development in the form of regular supervision visits from female teacher trainers is one critical component of the support provided by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) to women teachers teaching in their homes in communities in Afghanistan where girls and often boys have no access to formal government schools¹⁸.

Ensure that the content of all teacher training is oriented to the specific experiences, priorities, and concerns of male and female teachers, and that gender equality is a specific topic of study. Gender-aware teacher training will be relevant and empowering to male and female teachers. Specific gender equality content will enable them both to support and encourage girls in schools and to promote gender equality in different ways. This training should include critical discussions of patriarchy, gender and power relations in schools, and should help teachers to better understand themselves and their societal situation and to work towards new definitions of men and women¹⁹. In Rajasthan, India, for example, Mahila Prasikshan Kendras (women's training centres) have been established to create supportive environments for women. For the shikshakarmis (local women teachers), becoming a teacher implies a step towards equality for themselves and for the girls they teach, but also involves a tricky negotiation of family and community expectations and norms, for example, to gain permission to travel to training courses.²⁰

Create local networks of women teachers who can meet on a regular basis to share experiences and provide support to each other. In Rajasthan, the Lok Jumbish Programme has established a Women Teachers' Forum (Adhayapika Manch) to mobilize women teachers and create opportunities to break their isolation, come together in different activities, and promote personal and professional development.

Set up mentoring programmes for new women teachers to be paired with a woman educational leader who will be a role model and encourage/support professional development.

Provide gender training and professional development opportunities for women education leaders to enable them to promote gender equality initiatives in their own schools and to provide appropriate support for women teachers.

Related Policy Development Strategies

Ensure that women teachers are fully involved in decision-making processes and that they participate in all meetings and activities - not just in subordinate roles in school.

Ensure that recruitment is gender-balanced across levels and subject matter. For example, a woman math or science teacher may challenge gender stereotypes and encourage and support girls in subject areas that have been previously considered male domains. Where possible, men should also be recruited to typical female positions in the school, such as lower grade classes.

16 Kirk and Winthrop, 2005.

17 Bista, for UNESCO, 2004.

18 Kirk and Winthrop, 2005.

19 Stacki and Pigozzi, 1995, p. 18.

20 Rajagopal, 2000, and UNESCO, 2003, p. 179.

Ensure that 'safe school' and anti-harassment policies and teacher codes of conduct also address sexual harassment of women teachers, that there are specific reporting and follow up procedures in place and that male teachers are trained to address such issues with male students who may be disrespectful and/or abusive towards women teachers.

C onclusion

More formal evaluations of the specific impacts of such strategies for recruiting and working with women teachers are greatly needed to inform future policy development. It would seem, however, that all may contribute to increased recruitment of women teachers, but they do not work alone. They have to be developed and implemented within a gender equality framework which is also attentive, for example, to gender-responsive teacher training for men and women, to ensuring that schools are women-teacher friendly and to challenging family and community attitudes about women's roles and activities. Such processes have to be mirrored at the highest levels of policy-making in order to ensure that teachers male and female are accorded status and that adequate resources are allocated to provide decent salaries, as well as appropriate training and professional development opportunities.

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Also available are the following advocacy/policy briefs:

1. Single-Sex Schools for Girls and Gender Equality in Education
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7. Impact of Incentives to Increase Girls' Access to and Retention in Basic Education
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9. A Scorecard on Gender Equality and Girls' Education in Asia 1990-2000
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