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**ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN AND GIRLS  
TO EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

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\* *The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.*

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Elements of the education section of the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 (thereafter ‘Platform for Action’), found some prominence in the MDG Framework in that indicators for MDG2 are concerned with all girls and boys entering and completing a primary cycle of schooling, indicators for MDG3 are concerned with achieving gender parity in all phases of education and reducing the ratio of illiterate young women, while MDG5, in requiring that births be attended by skilled health personnel, holds out the potential for increased professional or technical training for women. However, the MDGs represent a considerable attenuation of the education aspirations of the Beijing Platform of Action and a significant challenge is to link together the wider gender equality concerns of the Platform for Action with the (possibly) greater traction the MDG Framework has with governments. This needs to be done bearing in mind that the MDGs do not have the same resonance with the women’s movement as the Platform for Action.

In reviewing achievements in the implementation of the Platform of Action and their relevance to the realisation of the MDGs, I want to group strategic objectives B 1& 2 of the Platform for Action as follows:

- a) access, progression and completion
- b) quality of education provision (content and organisation)
- c) addressing inequities.

In each, I will attempt to draw out the ways in which achievement supports or does not explicitly link with realisation of each of the MDGs. In addition I want to explore the relationship of the Platform of Action to the MDG framework posing two questions. Firstly, whether the idea of gender parity in education, which has such prominence in the MDG framework, is an application or abandonment of the objectives of the Platform for Action, and secondly what do the MDGs add to the Platform of Action.

**A. Access, progression and completion**

Since 1990 there has been a considerable expansion in the number of girls and boys enrolled in primary school and improvements in the levels of gender parity of primary and secondary enrolments, and youth literacy and adult literacy (Table 1). However, gender parity in school enrolments or the number of those estimated to be literate, is not an adequate measure of the numbers of girls and boys who have an adequate level of education to protect against poverty and hunger, gain access to adequately remunerated work, participate in decision-making, have enough knowledge to access health services and negotiate health systems, or make demands for clean water and adequate living conditions.

If we look at estimates of the numbers of women and men with little or no education, that is, those who are out of school, do not complete five years of primary school, and are classed as illiterate teenagers or adults, we see that although the total numbers have fallen from 1.218 million in 2002 to 931 million in 2006, the overall proportion of women remains high at over 60 per cent (Table 2). Although estimates of the number of girls out of school have decreased, girls remain a majority of children out of school, and young women aged 15 and above are a majority of those who are classified as illiterate. The only area where the proportion of children at risk of little education has declined is in relation to girls who leave school after less than five years instruction. Thus, most significant progress has been made in enrolling girls in school and retaining them for five years of tuition.

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Enrolment for five years of primary education is usually not a complete cycle and does not indicate anything about what has been learned, but this is one area in which advances have been made and good practice needs to be acknowledged. What has worked appears to be the abolition of school fees, the introduction of school feeding schemes (very significant in studies of children attending school in South Africa, and in some districts in Kenya), the use of conditional cash transfers for primary and secondary attendance (Bangladesh, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Honduras, Turkey), the provision of schooling close to home, i.e. less than 1 km from a habitation (Bangladesh, India), and flexible schemes that allow girls who have had a period out of school to study in evening classes or informal schooling with a view to joining mainstream education later (Tanzania, Bangladesh) (Tomaševski 2003; Herz and Sperling 2004; Dieltiens and Meny-Gibert 2008; Raynor, Sumra et al. 2008; Fiszbein and Schady 2009). It is evident that all of these interventions address not only gender inequalities with regard to enrolment and attendance at school, but also other elements of the MDGs relating to poverty and nutrition. However, the interventions that ‘work’ in relation to improving school enrolment and attendance tend to be less clearly covered by MDG indicators which relate to improving women’s employment, political representation, child and maternal mortality rates (although improved nutrition for children through school feeding may improve maternal health later in life), reduction in mortality from HIV and AIDS, malaria and other major diseases, environmental sustainability, and global partnership.

Indeed, it is lack of attention to gender equality in progression and completion of schooling that contributes to a wide disjuncture between the objectives of the Platform for Action and the MDG framework. The focus in the MDG framework on gender parity in primary, secondary and tertiary enrolments obscures the fact that in some regions (Africa and parts of South and West Asia) only 20 per cent of girls go on to secondary schooling and there is a very sharp dropout at the end of the primary cycle with the onset of puberty. The absence of an indicator related to adult literacy also has allowed the challenge of the very large numbers of adults (older than 24) without education to be overlooked.

While in some countries women now outnumber men in secondary and tertiary education, this generally does not translate into women’s adequate employment levels or representation in decision-making positions. Where progress has been made in increasing access to secondary and tertiary education this has been through conditional cash transfers in a large number of countries (Fiszbein and Schady, 2009). In some countries, for example Bangladesh and some states of India, specific programmes have evolved to raise the number of women in professional teacher education and work (Kirk, 2008). In a number of countries affirmative action programmes for women have been established to facilitate entry to university courses, although there is some controversy about the implementation of such policies and whether socio-economic status is considered together with gender (Morley, Leach et al 2008; Leathwood and Read, 2009).

In a number of schools or education projects (documented in India, Brazil, and Zambia for example) inclusive programmes have been put in place that explicitly set out to challenge gender-based discrimination (Doggett, 2005; Bajaj, 2009; McCowan 2009) The programmes that appear to work best are those where there is both an intervention (e.g. train more women teachers) and an attempt to challenge institutional forms of gender-based discrimination, for example in hiring and promotion practices. The challenges in doing this are considerable as experienced in the PROMOTE programme in Bangladesh indicated (Raynor and Unterhalter 2008) and all too often one intervention, for example making places available for more female students, does not link up with additional work on employment or challenging sexism

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within the institution (Morley, Leach et al. 2008). Similar observations can be made about other interventions. While provision of sanitation facilities, organisation of girls' clubs (such as the Tuseme programme initiated by FAWE), training of peer educators in relation to HIV, revision of textbooks, and mobilisation of women's organisations to support school enrolment are all valuable in themselves, generally these initiatives are undertaken in isolation from connected initiatives in social policy that address wider gender equality or social development concerns. Hence, while provision of better sanitation facilities at school is important, but if this is undertaken without consideration of some of the bullying and gender-based violence that has been documented as occurring around school toilets (Brookes and Higson Smith, 2004; Dunne 2006), other problems such as sexual harassment, possible pregnancy, exposure to HIV risk, and lowered self esteem remain unaddressed. Some small scale interventions that link community mobilisation with consideration of gender equality issues and a focus on the quality of schooling have been documented (Gordon 2008; De Jaeghere and Miske 2009; Diaw, 2009) and a number are in development (Parkes et al, 2009; Unterhalter et al, 2009). Generally, however, interventions neglect the links between education provision, improved health, nutrition, overcoming poverty, access to employment and decision-making (Molyneux 2006; Chant 2007; Stromquist 2009; Unterhalter 2009). The question of violence against girls and women in or associated with schooling is not systematically documented (Leach and Mitchell 2006), although in a number of countries (South Africa, Tanzania, Botswana) more stringent school management regimes have been developed and there is more openness in discussing these issues (Dunne 2006).

**B. Quality of education provision (content and organisation)**

While the linkages between the MDG and Beijing agendas has led to considerable policy attention aimed at expanding access to primary school, and to some extent the gender equality aspects of education provision at secondary level, much less attention has been given to questions of what is taught, relationships between teachers and learners, forms of school governance and organisation of education departments, all of which are addressed in the Platform for Action. In all these areas, examples of good practice are available, but there is little systematic monitoring of how these efforts link with access, progression and completion, particularly for the poorest children, or with other aspects of the MDG agenda.

With regard to curriculum change, a number of countries have given some prominence to teaching about gender equality, for example in Life Orientation in South Africa, Life Planning Skills in Botswana, through a general curriculum revision in Uganda, or a combination of teaching about health, reproductive rights and empowerment in Nepal (Kakuru 2006; Stromquist 2009) Often, such efforts have been prompted by the AIDS epidemic and have concentrated on questions of reproductive rights. And sometimes, these efforts have come close to stereotyping women and girls as victims and casting men and boys in general as perpetrators of gender-based violence (Aikman, Unterhalter and Boler, 2008). Nonetheless, these initiatives represent an important opportunity to, at least, open a discussion about forms of gender inequality and how to address them. These opportunities are, however, often accompanied by minimal training or support for teachers, lack a 'whole school' approach to gender equality issues, and pay inadequate attention to questions of masculinity and gender as a relational issue, not just a question of reproductive rights (Kakuru 2006; Morrell, Epstein et al. 2009).

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In many international comparisons of student attainment (Southern African Consortium on Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ), OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)) there are no noticeable national gender gaps. In fact, in some subjects girls perform better than boys. For example, in analysis of the SACMEQ data on reading scores in 14 countries, boys did better than girls in three countries (Tanzania, Mozambique and Malawi), while girls did better than boys in three countries (Seychelles, Mauritius and South Africa). In all the other countries there was no difference. However the data have not always been analysed to see whether there are marked gender gaps in quality and distribution of education, and in students' socio-economic status. The potential to do this is illustrated in work by Saito on a number of SACMEQ countries (Saito 1998; Saito 2004) and by Onsomu, Kosimbei, and Ngware (2006) on Kenya. These studies show how regional disparities, level of training of teachers and conditions at home, interact to yield lower reading and mathematics scores for girls. The SACMEQ data also show how countries with good levels of school enrolment (e.g. South Africa, Tanzania) do not achieve well in relation to other countries in the region, pointing to concerns with the quality of education provision.

The PISA study of mean scores for 15 year-olds in 57 countries generally showed girls excelling in literacy, while boys achieved highly in mathematics and did slightly better than girls in science. An assessment of all the trends in PISA testing since 2000 maintain this general conclusion, and also point out how girls report less enjoyment in mathematics than boys, and perform less well in explaining scientific phenomena, but better in identifying issues. This report identifies that girls appear less equally prepared for aspects of life concerned with access to the labour market and careers in science (OECD 2007).

The data from SACMEQ and PISA indicate that when girls are in schools with well trained and well-supported teachers, their achievement is as good as boys', but that regional disparities in school provision and under-investment in the education of teachers will have gender-specific impacts on educational attainment, to the disadvantage of girls. This is a matter of particular concern as some of the increases in enrolment and attendance, in which there has been success against the MDG indicators, have been achieved through the employment of a huge number of underpaid and undertrained para-teachers, many of whom are women (Marphatia, 2010; Lawal, 2007).

There is inadequate research on how aspects of poverty, nutrition, family composition and health interact with gender and attainment, but the range of variables analysed in some of the SACMEQ data and in school surveys in South Africa (Fleisch and Perry 2007) suggest that realisation of other MDGs are of as much importance for gender equitable outcomes in education as vice versa.

The Platform of Action called for enhanced presence of women in decision-making at all levels of education. In many countries provision has been made for a significant presence of women in village, or school education committees (India, Pakistan, South Africa, Tanzania), and in local (district) level decision-making bodies that oversee education provision (India, Pakistan). In some countries gender focal points at provincial level have responsibility for maintaining a focus on gender equality issues (South Africa, Laos, Vietnam), and a number of countries have a gender unit or equivalent high-level structure in the Department of Education (South Africa, Kenya, Ghana, Laos.) In a number of countries women have taken positions in the senior levels of university administration (Leathwood and Read 2009).

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Gender-responsive budgeting has been introduced in the area of education provision at national level in Rwanda and at school level in Malawi. While there are educational gender equality components in some Poverty Reductions Strategy Papers (PRSPs), the related requirements are not always adhered to rigorously (Budlender et al., 2002 ; Molyneux, 2007; Budlender, 2007)

The success of these gender mainstreaming initiatives is uneven. In some contexts they are credited with ensuring a transparent flow of money to schools and more robust discussion of health and education issues locally (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004), or encouraging girls' enrolment and retention (Anwar 2007). In others, they are credited with raising issues about sexual harassment and supporting school or university-level concerns about gender equality and quality in education (Leathwood and Read 2009). But there are also a number of critical studies which highlight the inadequate resources in time, money and prestige accorded to provincial-level gender focal points (Karlsson 2009; Onsongo 2009), the ways in which women in senior positions in university administration may not be attentive enough to gender issues and socio-economic exclusions (Morley et al., 2008), and the inability of national mechanisms for gender equality to effectively promote and support the full implementation of the Platform for Action (Dieltiens, Letsatsi et al. 2009 forthcoming).

Where concerted attention has been given to increase the number of women at decision-making level and promoting reforms to achieve gender equality in education, there have been gains relating to access and quality of education provision. But all too often, gender mainstreaming in the educational sector has been conducted as a token exercise where a few women or gender equality advocates are given posts that are not adequately resourced, partnerships with women's rights organisations are fragmented or non-existent, and with insufficient information flows on gender equality, poverty and other issues of exclusion and marginalization. The gender mainstreaming strategy and tools such as gender-responsive budgeting present important opportunities in the management of education provision, but without adequate resources cannot by themselves deliver the full vision of the Platform of Action and contribute to the achievement of the MDGs.

**C. Addressing inequities**

The Platform of Action envisages the achievement of gender equality in education through the development of non-discriminatory education and training, and where the inequalities between richer and poorer countries are coming to an end. Improved methods of data collection and analysis however now point to an increase in regional and socio-economic inequalities as they pertain to women and men, and widening global inequalities, particularly with regard to higher education and the migration of skilled labour.

In many countries aggregated national statistics mask marked gender inequalities in access, progression and completion. Thus, for example, while more girls than boys are in school and complete a primary cycle in the south eastern districts of Nigeria, the pattern is the opposite in the north (Nigeria, 2008; TEGINT, 2009). Similarly, while Tanzania has expanded enrolment considerably across the whole country, girls in some northern districts perform markedly less well than boys in examinations at the end of primary school (Raynor, Sumra et al. 2008; TEGINT 2009). Although there appear to be a number of overgeneralisations regarding ethnic and linguistic diversity in one assessment (Lewis and Lockheed ) that these findings link with a reproduction of gender inequalities in education, their work does highlight the importance of looking closely at regional and other inequalities in order to

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understand the persistence of gender inequalities in education. A number of programmes have been established to try to address inequities in specific regions or for particular groups and some aim at integrated community development models that bring together a focus on participatory planning, health, education and livelihood interventions. (Dunkle and Jewkes, 2007; Pappas et al, 2008) These merit careful evaluation and consideration for scaling up.

Lastly, it appears that a range of processes associated with globalisation are accelerating gender inequalities as gaps widen between richer and poorer countries. Thus the growth of free trade regimes, high levels of labour mobility for some groups, changes in relations of production associated with commercial agriculture, and rural-urban migration appear to have particularly disadvantageous effects for women. Lack of investment in adult literacy, increase in trafficking women, the out- migration of highly qualified teachers and nurses, and the relocation of many poor women to urban neighbourhoods with inadequate educational infrastructure are just some effects associated with these developments. Monitoring a narrowing of inequalities between countries (or difficulties in achieving this), as advocated in the Platform of Action may have significant results in supporting efforts for the achievement of the MDGs.

**Conclusion**

This paper has highlighted how particular interventions to implement the Platform of Action can help develop policy and practice in relation to the achievement of the MDGs. It also highlights a tendency to single out particular interventions that support access, rather than those that build towards completion, attainment, secure employment and/or protection against poverty and hunger, protection against violence, participation in decision-making, or improved health.

The analysis suggests the importance of formulating policies that specifically address gender inequalities in education as well as intersecting inequalities relating to socio-economic conditions, regional diversity, and multiple factors of discrimination. It highlights how much emphasis has been given to policies associated with enrolment and attendance, often at the expense of quality, broader equalities, and connections with health, nutrition, poverty and participation. The need for policy, research and practice that connect across these different areas of social policy seem paramount. This entails building ownership of the MDG framework at a range of levels, from the bottom up with civil society organisations, within the institutional activities of government at different levels and in everyday discussions and transactions between people. This approach also entails deepening the sense that governments are to be held to account for the whole MDG framework and cannot focus on ‘the low-hanging fruit’ of relatively easily attainable indicators. Lastly this approach draws out the significance of reviewing the meanings of “equity” that focus not only on anti-poverty strategies (understood in terms of income), but also on inequities of power, use of time, and aspects of esteem and dignity, all of which express some of the fuller aspirations for women’s education and the goal of substantive gender equality articulated in the Platform of Action.

Tentatively some instruments that could help effect these are:

- i) Tracking existing indicators, to the extent possible, disaggregated by sex
- ii) Tracking of inequalities within and between countries in relation to salient MDG indicators disaggregated by sex.

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- iii) Inclusion of a gender-sensitive indicator in each MDG. For example for MDG1 (poverty and hunger): extent of school feeding schemes in place at primary and secondary school; number and sex of children from lowest quintile excelling in school examinations.
- iv) Consideration of interventions to secure access to schooling with processes of institutionalisation (attention to curriculum, improved presence of women in decision-making and gender-responsive budgeting) and enhanced opportunities for interaction with organisations that represent women's interests, collective action on behalf of the poorest etc. This might require an expansion of the MDG indicator framework in relation to MDG2.



Appendix 1

Table 1 Gender parity index in primary and secondary enrolment, youth and adult literacy by region c. 1991-2006

	Arab states	C&E Europe	EAsia& Pacific	L.Am& Caribbean	N.Am/W.Eur	S&W Asia	SS Africa
GPI Pr,NER 1991	0.81	0.98	0.97	0.99	1.0	0.67	0.86
GPI PrNER 1999	0.90	0.97	1.0	0.98	1.0	0.84	0.89
GPI PrNER 2006	0.93	0.98	1.0	1.0	1.01	0.95	0.92
GPI Youth lit c.1990*	0.80	0.98	0.96	1.01	1.0	0.69	0.83
GPI Youth lit c.2005*	0.89	0.99	1.0	1.01	1.0	0.88	0.87
GPI adult lit c.1995#	0.66	0.96	0.84	0.98	0.99	0.57	0.71
GPI adult lit c. 2005	0.75	0.97	0.94	0.98	1.0	0.71	0.75
GPI secGER 1991	0.76	0.98	0.83	1.09	1.02	0.60	0.75
GPI sec GER 1999	0.89	0.98	0.96	1.07	0.99	0.75	0.82
GPI sec GER 2006	0.92	0.96	1.01	1.07	1.00	0.85	0.80

Source: UNESCO, 2008, 378-9

\*Youth 15-24; data from most recent year in period (1985-1994 & 2000-2006).

# Adults 15-14; data from most recent year in period 1985-1994 & 2000-2006

Table 2 Numbers of children and adults with little or no education by gender, c. 2002-2006

	2002	2002	2002	2006	2006	2006
	Girls/women 000 (%)	Boys/men 000	Total 000	Girls/women 000 (%)	Boys/men 000	Total 000
Children without primary schooling	54,581 (55)	44,722	99,309	41,347 (55)	33,830	75,177
Youth and adults (over 15) with no schooling	574,598 (64)	329,441	904,038	496,572 (64)	279,322	775,894
Children leaving primary school after 5 years of less	144,155 (67)	110,951	214,621	33,509 (42)	46,026	79,535,00
Total (%)	773,332 (62)	485,114 (38)	1,218	571,428 (61)	359,177	930,606 (39)

Source: (Unterhalter 2007) 157; calculations from UNESCO, 2008

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