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**Research Report**

## Advancing female education by improving democratic institutions and women's political representation

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## Advancing Female Education by Improving Democratic Institutions and Women's Political Representation

### Summary

Reducing gender gaps in education, employment and political decision making, among other dimensions, has long been an important development objective. This is confirmed by the international consensus reached over Millennium Development Goal 3 (MDG 3): "Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women". Ensuring equal access to education, in particular, is a central component of this effort, as reflected in the goal's target, which is to eliminate gender disparities in education by 2015.

Are countries that have adopted democratic political institutions more successful at reducing the gender gap in education? And can higher levels of political representation of women contribute to achieving this objective?

Democracy advances the cause of women's education in the absolute, although there is no conclusive evidence on whether it improves women's situation relative to men's. When it comes to political representation, the evidence is clear: larger numbers of women in politics and elected office improve overall educational outcomes and reduce the gender gap in education.

What lessons can be learnt regarding the linkages between democratic institutions, women's political representation and the gender gap in education?

- The fact that democracies have a better track record than autocratic regimes when it comes to education and development provides additional justification for development cooperation policies that support gradual political opening in autocracies as well as the stabilisation and consolidation of democracy in

countries that have chosen to go down this path. Moreover, it suggests that the adoption of specific democratic institutions, such as allowing women to run for office, can make a difference, even in countries that are not formally democratic.

- Multiple policy objectives could be reached with one policy tool: women's political representation. Progress in this dimension improves not only girls' education but also health and political participation, among other outcomes.
- Policy-makers and international donors should exercise caution in adopting and supporting the implementation of quick fixes to increase women's political representation, such as gender quotas. In countries with high levels of gender inequality, such as India, quotas alone are likely to have limited effects. Instead, these should be integrated into a larger set of interventions aimed at diminishing gender gaps in employment, assets and decision making.

Overall, these arguments speak directly to the current debate on the post-2015 agenda. The ratio of girls to boys in education and the proportion of seats held by women in national parliament are two indicators for MDG 3. As these topics are also likely to be central in the post-2015 agenda, it is important to consider the studies showing that making progress in the second indicator advances the first one. This, in fact, can help when analysing the feasibility of these objectives and in the planning of the resources required to achieve them. Moreover, these findings point to the importance of including governance in the global development agenda.

### Gender inequality in education

Substantial gender disparities in education continue to exist. Achieving gender equity in education is important not only because of its intrinsic value but also because it has important implications for development prospects. In fact, as several studies show, increases in women's educational attainment levels can help reduce poverty, improve health outcomes and increase women's participation in the labour market, and therefore contribute to economic growth.

Figure 1 shows the number of girls enrolled for every boy in the five major developing regions in 2012. Enrolment levels for girls are still well below the MDG 3 target of 0.97 in sub-Saharan Africa, especially in secondary and tertiary education. Outside this region, the gap was still below the target in secondary education in Europe and Central Asia, in primary and secondary education in the Middle East and North Africa, and in secondary and tertiary education in South Asia.

This briefing paper examines the role that democratic governance can play in reducing gender inequality in education. More specifically, it addresses two interrelated questions: Are countries that have adopted democratic political institutions more successful at reducing the gender gap in education? Can higher levels of political representation of women within democracies contribute to achieving this important objective?

### What is democracy's track record in female education?

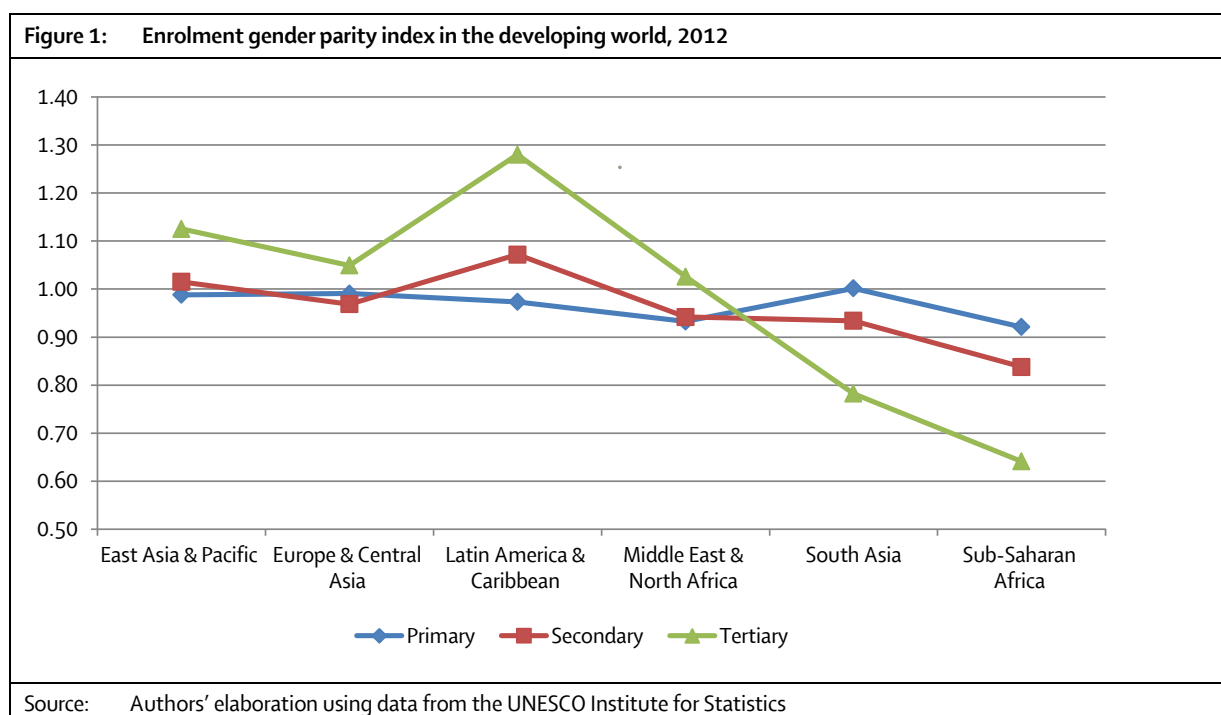
Democracies have a better track record than autocracies when it comes to educational outcomes. The adoption of

democratic institutions is associated with large gains in educational enrolment and attainment levels as well as literacy rates.

When it comes to whether democratic institutions make a difference in the gender gap in education, a recent cross-national DIE study finds that democracies close this gap faster over time than non-democracies (Camacho / Faust / Banholzer 2013). Surprisingly, however, there is little research on this important question, and the few other studies that exist arrive at mixed results. Two studies conclude that democracy has no effect on the gender gap in education; another concludes that the adoption of democratic procedures to recruit and select the executive can help close the gender gap. The use of different data is the main explanation for the diverging results, with the DIE study employing a comprehensive longitudinal dataset.

Thus, although the question remains open as to whether democracy increases women's educational opportunities relative to those of men, there is no evidence to suggest the opposite. In other words, democracy might or might not decrease the gender gap in education, but it certainly does not increase it.

It is quite clear, however, that democracy pays a dividend when it comes to overall educational attainment levels, bringing about gains for girls and boys alike. Finally, the vast amount of evidence regarding democracy's positive effects on various economic and human development outcomes – such as labour and total factor productivity, wages paid to workers, life expectancy, infant mortality and calorie intake – provides additional assurance that women are better off within societies that have adopted democratic institutions.



There are at least two reasons that explain why democratic institutions likely make a difference when it comes to reducing the gender gap in education. First, those governing democracies should be more inclined to provide public goods and services, such as education and health, given that their political fates are ultimately tied to popular support. In contrast, those governing autocracies are able to resort to other strategies to stay in power, such as the provision of targeted favours to key constituencies (e.g. the military or a single party) or outright repression. Better education services, in turn, are likely to benefit women more than men because the lower levels of enrolment of the former make improvements easier to achieve.

Second, democracies provide more *de jure* avenues for women to have a say in political decision making. They allow women to vote, organise for advancing their interests and to stand for office. Whether or not these opportunities translate into actual higher rates of women serving in office is a different matter, which has important implications for the gender gap in education.

### Do women in politics reduce gender inequality in education?

Higher representation levels of women in politics and public office are likely to reduce gender disparities in education. However, everywhere in the developed as well as the developing world, women have lower representation levels than men in political bodies. Because of this, higher numbers of women in national parliaments, local assemblies or ministries are key indicators of healthy and well-functioning democracies.

A 2013 DIE study analysed the influence of women's political representation in Indian districts on primary school completion rates for the overall population, and separately for boys and girls (Burchi 2013). The paper concentrates on the 16 biggest states in India, a country characterised by high levels of gender inequality in several life domains, including education, and a low presence of women in politics. The author concludes that a 10 per cent increase in the number of women involved in district politics leads to an increase of nearly 5.9 per cent in primary school completion rates. Moreover, the study finds striking differences in the results for boys and girls: women's political representation impacts substantially more on the education of girls as compared to that of boys, and therefore contributes towards alleviating the gender gap in education.

What are the channels through which these effects take place? The paper argues that this is due to the interplay of two main factors. First, women are more likely than men to care about education: this expectation follows from the disadvantaged social position of women, especially in highly patriarchal societies. Recognising the importance of education as a means of empowerment and being more sensitive to the needs of women and other traditionally

disadvantaged groups, female office holders should push for general improvements in this sector as well as for policies specifically aimed at improving girls' education. Second, higher levels of representation of women are likely to produce improvements via a demonstration effect. Women in office can become role models for other women, increasing their educational aspirations and achievements, and therefore improving female educational attainment levels – without necessarily pushing forward general or gender-sensitive education policies.

Another article supports the "role model" explanation (Beaman et al. 2012). In Indian villages exposed to female political leaders, educational attainment levels among boys are not different from those in male-headed villages, whereas those of girls are significantly higher. In particular, girls' educational and overall aspirations are different in female-headed villages. This suggests that improvements in girls' school attainment levels may be only partially the result of direct policy actions by female political leaders. The presence of women in important political roles itself helps girls and women challenge prevalent stereotypes and increase their ambitions.

Other quantitative and qualitative studies confirm this hypothesis in other low-income countries (e.g. Rwanda), whereas for high-income countries there is only limited evidence from the United States. Cross-country empirical studies show that women's political representation has a higher impact on both school enrolment levels and completion rates in developing countries. The only case examined so far in which there is no evidence of a positive effect is Brazil. Arvate et al. (2014, 6) conclude that in municipalities headed by female mayors, "girls do not become relatively more encouraged to pursue education", thus ruling out a role model effect.

### Policy implications and recommendations

First, the fact that democracies have a better track record than autocratic regimes when it comes to education and development should not be used as an argument for promoting abrupt regime change. Instead, this record provides additional justification for development cooperation policies that support gradual political opening in autocracies as well as the stabilisation and consolidation of democracy in countries that have chosen to go down this path. Moreover, it suggests that promoting the adoption of some specific democratic institutions, such as allowing women to run for office or making officials in charge of public goods provision more accountable to service users, might make a difference, even in countries that are not formally democratic.

Second, an increase in the levels of representation of women may generate multiple benefits, as it ensures a more pluralistic society and is likely to impact on health and political participation. The majority of studies reviewed here also highlight the specific contributions to education indicators, especially among women. This

suggests that multiple policy objectives could be reached with one policy tool, especially in countries such as India, where patriarchal relations permeate society, and women are *de facto* prevented from pursuing political careers. This assumption might not work in the same way everywhere, however. Therefore, policy-makers and international donors looking to boost education and close the gender gap in this sector should take the local political and social contexts seriously.

Third, how can representation levels of women in politics and public office be increased? Policy-makers and international donors/organisations should exercise particular caution in adopting and supporting the implementation of quick fixes such as gender quotas. Typically, gender quotas consist of reserving a number of seats in national parliaments or local assemblies, or a number of local leadership positions for women. Problems could emerge, especially when gender quotas are adopted as a "fast track" in developing countries, i.e. when they are implemented to suddenly boost the number of women in politics in a context where women's participation in this sphere has been minimal. The 20 years of experience in Indian villages of reserving political positions for women and experiences in countries such as Bangladesh show that substantially enhancing women's roles in the political arena cannot simply be achieved by waving the magic wand of gender quotas. Reserving political positions for women is an important affirmative action that can help

women to be heard, but it has to be integrated with multiple interventions aimed at diminishing gender gaps in education, employment opportunities, and access to land and other assets. Absent these policies, quotas could fail to produce substantive improvements in the status of women, as female representatives might continue to serve dominant male and elite interest. All these issues are under debate only in a few countries, among them India, where the Lower House must still make a decision on the Women's Reservation Bill, designed to reserve one-third of the seats in the Lower House and the state assemblies for women for a period of 15 years.

Overall, these findings speak to the current debate on the post-2015 agenda. The ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education, and the proportion of seats held by women in national parliament, are probably the two (out of four) most important indicators used to measure the MDG 3 "Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women". As these topics are likely to be high in the agenda of the post-2015 development framework, we advise giving proper accounts of the existing studies that show how progress in women's political representation helps advance girls' education. Only when moving beyond an isolated view of these goals is it possible to analyse their feasibility and to plan the resources required to attain them. Another direct implication is that, unlike in the MDG framework, governance issues should play a central role in the upcoming development agenda.

## Literature

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