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Stromquist

In her article, the author discusses the influence of poverty on education in Latin America. In particular, she examines the question of what this means for women and girls, and she comes to the conclusion that gender is a social construct that plays a considerable part at various levels in the disadvantages suffered by women and girls. While gender-based discrimination remains, poverty cannot be combated effectively. Nelly Stromquist is Professor of International Development Education at the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California. She specializes in equity issues and public policy. This article is reproduced by kind permission of BAICE and Taylor & Francis. It is a shortened version of the article "What poverty does to Girls' Education: the Intersection of Class, Gender and Policy in Latin America" published in COMPARE, Volume 31, Number 1/March 2001, pp. 39-56.

Poverty and Schooling in the Lives of Girls in Latin America

Introduction

Latin America is the region of the world where the colonial mode of social organization remained in force the longest – about 300 years since the arrival of the Spanish conquerors (1492) to the first wars of independence (1810). The social mix of subjugated populations (Indians), African slaves, and a dominant white minority that persisted was not conducive to the establishment of fair relations of social and economic exchange. Large holdings by wealthy descendants of the colonists and subsistence agriculture by the exploited and powerless peasantry still characterize the region. Over time, export-based agrarian capitalism led to the emergence of a powerful landed elite capable of using the power of the state to advance its goals. With current trends toward economic competitiveness and the need to develop comparative advantages among countries, it is likely that Latin America will keep up its agro-industrial production, which does not bode well for the resolution of social disparities.

Poverty increased during the 1980-1990 decade in Latin America, going from 46 percent to 60 percent in urban areas and from 80 to 85 percent in the countryside. Extreme poverty increased from 22 to 27 percent in urban areas and from 50 to 52 percent in rural areas, according to statistics gathered by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, also known as CEPAL. In Brazil, the industrial giant of Latin America, 1990 urban poverty stood at 39 percent, or 9 percent above its 1979 level and 5 percent above its 1987 level. More recently, from 1990 to 1997, according to CEPAL, the proportion of poor households in Latin America dropped from 41 percent to 36 percent. Not only are these gains small but the number of people who are poor increased from 136 million in the 1980s to 207 million in 1997.

In Latin America, thus, poverty is not a question of stubborn pockets of uneducated or untrained people but is rather inherent in the social and economic structure of the region. This structure is both the effect and cause of asymmetrical power relations between urban and rural areas, between indigenous peoples and mestizo subcultures, between men and women, and, of course, between the North and the South.

Intractable Poverty

At one level, poverty is essentially a normative concept, specific to each society. At another level, there is what has been called an "irreducible core of absolute deprivation" comprising starvation, malnutrition, and visible hardship. As is repeatedly stated in both academic and mass media reports – without much horror by now – in the world today about 3 billion people live on US $2 a day or less and some 800 million people suffer from malnutrition.

What else do we know about the lives of the poor as a group? Very little, since beyond a few statistics we do not really have detailed studies of the poor. Nor do we know much about the rich, since they can easily avoid scrutiny. The fact that we know little of the lives of poor people greatly handicaps our understanding of the dynamic nature of poverty and how the lives of the rich and the poor intersect in functional and, often, inescapable ways.

In all countries of the world, we are making progress with key social indicators: life expectancy is going up, infant mortality is down, and illiteracy is also down. Yet poverty remains. What does this suggest in terms of the power of education as a tool for change? Could it be that we are ignoring those forces that indeed determine poverty? Probably we spend too much time defining poverty through statistical indicators while paying insufficient attention to the mechanisms and processes that create and sustain it. Further, currently favored indicators of poverty do not tell us the distribution of income or wealth within the household. Poverty refers to what the poor lack, but their lack may be the result of a condition created or at best uncorrected by the upper and middle classes. Omnipresent as the concept of poverty is, it has not been sufficiently theorized in our understanding of how nations advance socially and politically and whether poverty represents an obstacle or is, on the contrary, a byproduct of unchecked "advancement". Work by feminist scholars questions current initiatives by international organizations that call for "poverty alleviation". In their view, it is not alleviation that is needed, but instead drastic changes in power relations reflected in trade, the external debt, investments, and international development assistance.

The State and Education

Most nation-states make an effective and yet paradoxical use of education. On the one hand, education is defended in official discourse as a social good open to all. On the other hand, public education is treated with neglect as budgets are held with a tight rein and the children of the poor receive the lowest quality of education. Unquestionably, the function of education as an easily made promise to reduce poverty serves to foster confidence and stability in society in the meantime.

Now, in the day of the minimalist state, the emphasis is on short-term solutions. Opportunities for the poor are complemented by the state in its subsidiary role of providing certain public goods and income transfers targeted directly at the poorest in society. As public policies to ensure social welfare seem to have reached a nadir, the market is supposed to determine the best set of opportunities for the poor.

The growing social inequality has created a visible demobilization of organized groups and has weakened the influence of labor unions, making it thus difficult for civil society to struggle for the expansion of citizenship rights. In addition, austerity policies have brought reductions to sectors of governmental budgets with the weakest constituencies and yet the greatest potential for addressing the poor: education, health, social security, and public housing.

Social expenditures in Latin America, of which education is traditionally a substantial part, decreased on a per capita basis by more than 20 percent in 1977–81 and again in 1982–85. The situation improved in the 1990s, when education as a percentage of the GNP rose in the region from 2.8 percent in 1990–91 to 3.7 percent in 1996–97 and per capita expenditures in education rose from $251 to $380 in the same period for the population 5–17 years of age.

Schooling and Poverty

Liberal ideology presents education as a system that can do much to further social mobility and redistribution of opportunities, as it presumably works on entirely meritocratic criteria. Liberal ideology also portrays public education as free and compulsory worldwide. This latter assertion is far from reality: it is seldom completely free as parents must buy school materials, books, and uniforms – a substantial expenditure for the poor – and rarely does an educational system in developing countries enforce school attendance.

Educational statistics for Latin America at first glance show an ideal situation with many countries evincing rates of nearly 100 percent in gross primary school enrollment. An examination of secondary school enrollment shows a much lower figure, comparable to that of Africa – which means that a large number of young people leave primary school, often without completing it. When educational statistics are contrasted between urban and rural populations, enrollment rates among the latter populations are consistently much lower.

When the statistics are compared by sex, the degree of access to schooling and retention among girls and boys does not appear to be very different. In fact, in several countries, aggregate data indicate that girls enroll in and complete primary and secondary schooling in greater numbers than boys. If one looks at crude indicators of educational attainment, in seven of nine Latin American countries the rates of primary school enrollment increased in favor of girls during the 1990s and repetition decreased more among girls than boys. In nine out of ten countries, the promotion of girls that finished fourth grade stayed the same or increased, and in eight of those ten countries the proportion of girls that finished sixth grade stayed the same or increased. So, a first impression is that girls are doing even better than boys in schooling.

While most countries rely on UNESCO statistics (which are themselves produced by Member States), there is growing evidence that these statistics grossly underestimate the number of children out of school. These alternative readings of educational participation derive from household surveys, census data, or from computations carried out by UNICEF, whose concern for street children has led it to focus on out-of-school children and children in the labor force. Recognized as a major problem are the low rates of primary school completion.

One of four major regional goals for 2000 (and unlikely to be met) was to attain at least 70 percent primary school completion. There are few educational statistics broken down simultaneously by sex and ethnicity. Those that exist (for Mexico and Peru) show a clear disadvantage for indigenous and particularly school age girls living in poverty.

In the countryside, girls tend to enter primary school slightly older than boys and to leave at earlier grades. The low school participation rates are primarily a function of family or work obligations that render the individual unable to take advantage of available school offerings, but they are also due to a lack of school facilities. In rural areas, there are many single-classroom schools that usually serve only up to third or fourth grade (cases of Peru, Bolivia, Guatemala). The precise features and functioning of these "multigrade" schools remain poorly documented in official statistics. A study focusing on rural schools in Peru found that 90 percent of these schools operated in single rooms and that 37 percent had only one teacher, which suggests a high number of incomplete primary schools. In urban areas, public schools sometimes cannot meet the demand. Thus, one observes the common phenomenon of parents having to stand in line for long hours to ensure that their children will be enrolled before the school reaches its limit (cases of Brazil, Peru, among others).

Life in rural schools, for both students and teachers, tends to be harsh. A large number of these schools have no water, electricity, or sanitation facilities. Girls are frequently called upon to perform domestic tasks for teachers. Teachers in rural areas in Peru are usually younger and less experienced than urban teachers and not trained to deal with multigrade classrooms; their average stay in the poorest rural areas is about two years. The school year is much shorter than officially planned due to absences by both teachers and students. The learning hours per day are also shorter than they should be as time is spent in tangential activities such as long breaks or preparations for various extra-curricular events. While boys and girls are equally affected by these practices, domestic and school factors combine to produce more women than men without schooling or with incomplete primary. In the case of Peru, data for 1997 show that while 28 percent of rural men 15-24 years of age have no schooling or incomplete primary, the figure reaches 39 percent in the case of women.

At the macro level, there exists a strong tie between the inequity in educational capital distribution and the inequality of income distribution. In other words, population groups tend to have levels of school attainment proportional to their income. Most poor and extremely poor children in the region have parents with less than nine years of schooling (72 and 96 percent, respectively).

The assumption of causality between poverty and education may be misread. It is not that parents are poor because they have no education, rather, they have no education because they are poor. Moreover, it appears that education in Latin America increasingly needs more years of schooling to be marketable in the labor force. According to studies by CEPAL, it is necessary to have 10 years of schooling, and in many cases complete secondary, to have an income above the poverty line. The level of education needed for a well-paying job will probably increase because globalization trends in the labor force build upon differentiated schooling: university-level education, especially with technical and scientific degrees, for the high-paying occupations and low levels of schooling for the provision of semi-skilled services in low-paying jobs.

Poor Families and Schooling

Public education at primary and secondary levels, not being free beyond tuition and the provision of some textbooks, represents high expenditures for low-income families. In principle, all families recognize the importance of education. Poor families try to give their children at least several years of education, but in the end withdraw them early. Since the children of the poor attend low-quality and incomplete primary schools, they tend to withdraw from school without having reached a solid literacy threshold; thus, many of them regress in their reading and numeracy skills.

Low educational attainment not always occurs because children are taken out of school. Often, it happens because the children fall behind in their studies, as in cases when members of the family fall ill and children have to help in their care, or when the children themselves get sick and parents have to take them out of school to pay for medicine. Students from poor backgrounds, especially in cases where father abandonment is coupled with poverty, also develop serious emotional and social needs. Children of rural parents sometimes lack birth certificates and without such papers they have a difficult time enrolling in school. Teachers of the poor often report having students who come to school tired, withdrawn, or overly aggressive. In many urban centers, it is common for teachers to find children who show up unannounced on the school's doorstep, their educational history a mystery, or cases where they leave with little or no notice, never to be seen again. These problems affect both girls and boys.

Teachers and Poor Children

It is sometimes forgotten that teachers of poor children are often poor themselves. In Bolivia and Ecuador, 65 to 70 percent of the teachers live in either poor or vulnerable homes. In Mexico and Paraguay, 35 to 40 percent of teachers live in vulnerable homes.

For many years, one of the strongest conflicts regarding public education has concerned the salary of teachers who, compared to people in occupations with similar years of schooling, end up earning much less. In the past seven years, Latin American teachers have received significant raises, as about 70–80 percent of the (modest) increase in educational budgets have gone to better salaries for primary and secondary school teachers. Yet, the fact remains that teachers' salaries are seldom sufficient to have comfortable lives.

The public/private divide in education has significant consequences upon teacher salaries and consequently on the quality of education that is provided to poor as well as non-poor students. On the average, private teachers earn more than public school teachers in primary schools by 10–20 percent; this gap increases to about 30–45 percent in secondary schools (data for Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Paraguay). The wage differential between public and private is substantial enough to foster a migration of the best qualified teachers toward the private system, thus augmenting the difficulties experienced by poor children. According to 1993 data, one-third of the region's teachers lack professional certificates or degrees. It is well known that these teachers are usually assigned to work in rural areas, thus compounding the negative effects of poverty among rural children.

In short, poverty not only prevents poor children from gaining access to schooling, but it imposes limits on the number of years of school attainment. The state contributes to this situation by the provision of incomplete primary schools and inexperienced teachers in the countryside.

Poverty and Women

Feminist perspectives assert and have empirically demonstrated that gender is an element of social relationships that operates at multiple levels, affecting everyday interactions, public institutions, work, and the household. The consequences of gender distinctions are reflected in political, economic, and cultural spheres. Within the cultural sphere, gender asymmetries are expressed and reproduced through definitions of femininity and masculinity (including prescribed types and range of emotions) supported by such mechanisms as ideology, sexuality, language, law, schooling, and the mass media, among many others.

Feminist perspectives maintain that gender is a social marker that affects men and women. They also maintain that it affects all women negatively regardless of social class and ethnicity. Rather than argue which social marker is the strongest discriminator, feminist views are sensitive to the effects of the interaction of these markers and do not underestimate the specificity of gender.

Some societies defend gender differences on the basis of their own cultural values and preferences. But as several observers have noted, culture not only shapes perceptions but also the allocation of resources. For instance, in societies influenced by fundamentalist religious beliefs, culture tends to create norms that restrict women's physical and mental space. Across social classes, girls tend to have less physical mobility than boys and thus less freedom to move to larger towns or other countries to continue their education. Norms of femininity and masculinity restrict their choice of fields of study and later their choice of occupations. Women receive less remuneration for their years of education than men. Finally, women tend to aspire to political positions of less prestige and responsibility than men.

Among poor families, especially those in the rural areas, the sexual division of labor is of fundamental importance. Because girls in poor homes and in rural areas conduct the bulk of the domestic chores, parents perceive school knowledge as moving their daughters away from essential tasks. In communities lacking basic domestic technologies (e.g., electricity, potable water, sanitation facilities, garbage collection), girls and women assume these services. Since the poor have less possibility of regular medical attention, typically women and girls must assume these services, which usually translate into special diets and rest for the ill members of the family. In indigenous areas of Latin America, it is women who traditionally weave the clothing for their families. This is an activity that demands considerable skill and time. Its direct and indirect consequence on the availability of rural girls for schooling has not been analyzed.

Poverty, in the Latin American context, also reflects itself in migration, from rural areas to major cities within the country or to foreign countries. Challenged by poverty, the cultural norm of women's restricted mobility has weakened. A major reason women migrate is to improve the quality of life for themselves and their families. In some cases, this is accomplished by taking menial jobs, in which case education levels are of relative unimportance. In fewer cases, women are forced to engage in prostitution, which, again, has no particular educational correlate.

While human capital assumes that salaries are a good measure of productivity, there is mounting evidence that women are given lower salaries than men for similar years of schooling. It has been asserted that women earn less because they are in fields that are less important and thus less well remunerated, but this is itself a reflection of societal values that discriminate against women's work. Another argument explaining these differences has been that women tend to work fewer hours than men, but a 1992 study comparing salary levels in terms of value per working hour found that women in urban areas earned between 66 and 80 percent of men's salaries with same levels of education in eight of ten countries analyzed.

Education certainly helps women, but studies conducted by CEPAL several years ago found that, on average, a woman needed four more years of education than a man to earn a comparable salary. It should be observed that this statistic was presented at that time as an interesting finding rather than as a major social problem. Education is statistically associated with sociocultural background and with income. The first association (sociocultural

background and education) indicates that education is not completely meritocratic; the second (education and income) suggests that education nonetheless is an important tool for social mobility. Competition in the labor market is imperfect and, thus, women need to be protected by labor legislation if their education is to be instrumental to their advancement.

While far from a perfect correlation, higher levels of education generally lead to higher levels of income for women. On the other hand, improvement in the economic well-being of women does not necessarily translate into greater autonomy and decision making in the domestic sphere, especially concerning decisions over their own body. This disjuncture suggests that higher levels of schooling are not a sufficient ingredient to foster autonomy and self-assertiveness in women; thus, it would appear that there is a need to work on the content and experience of schooling to make education more responsive to women's feelings and practice of empowerment.

Highlighting the connection between poverty and women's education, the following points can be made:

1. Poverty is a strong manifestation of inequity in society but it is not the only one. Gender differences operate in extremely important ways and serve to create and sustain poverty in society.
2. In Latin America, men and women do not seem to show drastically different rates of enrollment and educational attainment compared to other regions of the Third World, but when analyses are made considering ethnicity and high levels of poverty, Latin American women are certainly at a disadvantage compared to men in terms of access to and completion of schooling.
3. Owing to the current course of technological development and the presence of foreign firms with greater sense of gender equality in many developing countries, some new opportunities are being opened to women, but gender inequity is not going away; it is being reinscribed in new ways. For instance, more women are moving into low-tech jobs regardless of social class.
4. In debating the demands for greater access by girls to schools, it is usually forgotten by policy-makers that what is actually learned in school tends to be quite gendered. Gendered knowledge is acquired via the formal and the hidden curriculum – conditions that exist in all schools regardless of the quality of schooling. There is very little research of an ethnographic nature documenting the lived experience of girls and boys in Latin American schools.
5. Contrary to the argument that it is quality of schooling that causes poor girls to drop out, poor girls are much more likely to leave school because domestic responsibilities at home do not allow them the free time necessary for schooling and because poor families must rely on the labor of their children from early years. Poor parents rarely know enough of what goes on in schools to be able to judge their quality. If quality were a factor, this would affect boys more than girls, since it is the schooling of boys that tends to be seen as an investment. In some cases, the "relevance" of what is learned in school may be contested by rural families. The school's lack of relevance, however, is not prominent in decisions to take girls out of school.
6. It is incorrect to see women as merely one among several disadvantaged groups, next to rural, unemployed, street children, handicapped, etc. and to limit gender policies to the plight of poor women. This characterization ignores the gender dimension of disadvantage and sees it as a less ingrained and pervasive social distinction.
7. It is important to move away from identifying symptoms that affect the participation of girls in schooling and try, instead, to understand and correct the underlying causes of gender asymmetries in power. This implies a substantial use of feminist theory to move toward an understanding of the fundamental and interrelated causes of gender-based discrimination in society and an examination of schooling as a site where gender asymmetry is reproduced and yet may also be contested.

The Role of Governmental Policies

Education is considered a universal right in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. It is also a legal obligation since there is a convention that sustains this principle, the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child. Surprisingly, no state in the Third World has been sued by its citizens for failing to provide schooling to children, a right also enshrined in most constitutions.

In an ideal world, economic policies that protect fair wages and fair terms of trade for products and services would obviate the need for special measures to ensure the minimum social welfare of citizens. In other words, in a fair economic world, social policies would be redundant. But if the world is not ideal, compensatory policies and their concomitant programs for the poor are needed.

Several Latin American governments have enacted policies to address the question of equity. These policies include:

- Increasing subsidies and resources to schools for their day-to-day functioning (being attempted in Bolivia, Chile, Mexico, Peru)
- Lengthening the school day in schools that perform poorly in achievement tests and increasing the number of hours per week attending basic and intermediate education (carried out in Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Peru)
- Transferring [presumably trained and credentialed] teachers to critical areas
- Expanding school meals and scholarships (Chile)
- Developing field-oriented schools in various disciplines (scientific, technical, artistic)

As can be seen, all of these measures seek to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of schools. Yet they are gender-blind, focusing primarily on poor communities and their schools. To undertake analyses that examine the distribution of education only by income levels and to fail to look at finer studies that consider the compound effects of gender and ethnicity is tantamount to considering social class as the key determinant of social outcomes and to ignore the role of ideology (regarding gender, ethnic and "racial" differences) in the formation of social distinctions. The disregard of gender and "racial" variables has proved a major weakness in current theories of national development and social change.

Paradoxically, today gender equity is an accepted term and focus in public policy. There is new legislation on issues such as domestic violence, rape, and representation quotas favoring women candidates for public office. There are also numerous initiatives to foster awareness of the use of contraceptives and of the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. But in the area of formal education, there still prevails the narrow vision of looking at it as the provision of access for women, particularly to basic education. Schooling as a fundamental site for the formation of gender ideologies passes unquestioned and thus governments do not seek to reform its overt and hidden curriculum or to train teachers for non-sexist and anti-sexist practices. In fact, the first step in any kind of public policy development – the procurement of data – is missing. There is a serious need to acquire more data disaggregating gender by social class, ethnicity, and residence (rural/urban).

Two fundamental challenges to the successful design and implementation of public policies on gender come from within and outside Latin American countries.

The Challenge from Within: A Bifurcated Educational System

The imitation of upper-class norms has resulted in the existence of private schooling for groups who aspire to social mobility or who seek to keep their high status. In all countries of Latin America, there is a bifurcated educational system, with private elite schools catering to the wealthy classes and to middle-classes seeking higher mobility, and public schools serving mostly poor children. The higher-quality academic circuits function in a very closed manner, with entry usually beginning from pre-school in private and very selective institutions and moving into similarly exclusive universities. The continuous deterioration of the public school system (persistently subjected to very low resource allocations) has also led to the emergence of non-elite private schools, attended by children of middle- and low-income families. De facto, this means that public schools in Latin America increasingly serve poor children whose families have low leverage on the political system.

The Challenge from Without: Missing Global Equity

Attempts to solve the problem of poverty cannot avoid dealing with structural factors; otherwise, we will continue indefinitely the pretense of taking poverty seriously. To "alleviate" poverty, several Latin American countries have established emergency funds and social investment funds in areas of health, education, and water and sewage systems. These funds, which have been established at different times, from 1971 onwards, have had a limited role in establishing long-term anti-poverty programs.

To address structural poverty, certain changes are needed in the global market and would be complementary to other government sectors at the national level. In the case of Latin America, as is true for several African and Asian countries, the terms of trade that render agricultural products increasingly less valuable compared to technology-rich products place poor countries in a losing battle for the creation of national wealth. The burdens of excessive external debt further render national budgets very weak in social welfare. Unequal terms of trade create differential living standards across countries; with globalization, emigration of highly educated personnel out of the Third World is facilitated by constant demand in major industrial countries to enhance their industrial competitiveness. In addition to improving the terms of trade, DAWN – a major global feminist NGO – proposes: changing the taxation system and making its functioning more effective, engaging in agrarian reform, and fostering the existence of NGOs as active counter-hegemonic elements of civil society.

For compensatory educational policies to succeed, it is essential to affect other areas of the economy, particularly those pertaining to employment and health. Making the design of public policy even more difficult is the realization that labor-intensive growth strategies will benefit poor women only if efforts are made to address the sexual division of labor at home and in the marketplace. If no other social mechanisms for equalization obtain, problems of over-education, devaluation of educational credentials, and competition for education "goods" emerge. And if educational policies do not remain in place until a stable solution is attained, good efforts may be short-lived.

Political Action from Civil Society

The first ones to take on the politics of poverty seriously will have to be the poor themselves. This requires that groups within civil society must be organized to put pressure on the state to implement corrective public policies and to engage in self-support initiatives. To present a claim by pacific means requires a very strong knowledge foundation. One has to know the conditions that affect oneself as a poor person or poor group and the conditions that more privileged groups enjoy in order to develop some awareness of inequality and thus of injustice.

It has been remarked by some political observers and several feminists (activists and scholars) in the region, that the transition toward democracy in several Latin American countries was dominated by political parties and elite actors, a condition that, as a whole, has retarded the development of nongovernmental organizations and grassroots groups. In several cases, notably Chile and Argentina, women have been incorporated into the state bureaucracy but under the state's parameters that women should be professionals and technical experts, not advocates of feminist issues. International support for the more democratic states has been increased by withdrawing and transferring support from NGOs, including the women-led NGOs.

The potential for women-led NGOs to address formal education is significant if we recognize the multi-class composition of the feminist movement and its many organized groups. A major challenge for the feminist movement is to become more aware of formal education as a major political terrain and become more active in it.

International Cooperation and Gender-Sensitive Education

International agencies, with the collaboration of many NGOs, took a very positive step when they endorsed universal primary education, crystallized later in the Education for All Declaration, signed in Jomtien, 1990. While the declaration acknowledged that two-thirds of the illiterate adults were women and stated among its key strategies that "the most urgent priority is to ensure access to, and improve the quality of, education of girls and women and to remove every obstacle that hampers their active participation", the government and donor agency action that ensued was not sufficient to meet either quantitative or qualitative goals. The World Education Forum, which met in Dakar in April 2000 to renew commitment to EFA, reiterated commitment to formal education for women, stating as a [repeated] goal: "eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality." It remains unclear how the new timelines will enable countries to satisfy commitments not honored in the past.

Literacy and adult basic education programs, which are those most likely to be needed by the poor, have received very little attention. Weakening the possibilities for transforming the educational situation confronting poor women is the fact that structural adjustment programs have also reduced national education priorities to cover only basic education and only for ages 7–14 years of age. This has been observed particularly in the case of Brazil, the Latin American country with the largest number of illiterates. Agencies such as the World Bank, which play leading roles in shaping educational policies in the Third World, have adopted a view that illiteracy is a problem of the past and that as long as we keep making younger generations more able to go to school, illiteracy problems will disappear.

Conclusions

Poverty is endemic in Latin America and affects a large segment of its population. While the region is more democratic than in the past, it has also become more unequal. With globalization, there has been a revival of the importance of education; this education is framed in terms of economic competitiveness, not social justice. In fact, however, the need for highly trained technical personnel may not create the atmosphere required to increase attention to poor and disadvantaged groups.

After years of considerable neglect, education in Latin America is emerging as a major policy concern. This concern, unfortunately, is framed in terms of efficiency and evinces a narrow definition of quality. By no means is quality being defined in terms of developing civic understanding in youth and adults, not to mention understanding of inequities and inequalities in society. Under such circumstances, it must be concluded that new educational policies emerging in Latin America are gender-blind.

Problems of access and attainment are still present and affect mostly rural areas, most of which are inhabited by groups of Indian or African (in the case of Brazil) descent. Much work remains to provide them with complete primary schools of good quality. Nonetheless, the fundamental educational problem women face – whether poor or rich – concerns the unquestioned, non-problematized gender-biased nature of schooling. Educational statistics focusing on access are not only likely to be overstated but they fail to capture the dynamics of discrimination that girls and women continue to face in the educational systems of their respective countries in terms of their everyday experience and what is learned in school. In this regard, more studies based on qualitative research methods are urgently needed.

Governmental policies in education have tended to respond to demand forces, albeit mostly urban, for greater access to schooling. These responses have not met the ambitious quantitative goals set by Jomtien but have permitted greater participation by the poor. Simultaneously, the expansion of schooling has not been accompanied by explicit recognition of the underlying factors that create the disadvantage in access and completion of rural and indigenous women, and have not been characterized by interventions to modify significantly the gendered nature of textbooks, teaching, and the overall schooling experience.

Access, completion, and quality goals for the schooling of poor girls remain unfulfilled. While compensatory policies focusing on the poor make sense, as they prioritize the group most in need, policies that focus on poor girls have the effect of circumscribing gender problems only to the poor. Further, policies that concentrate on school access and completion, while reasonable from the perspective of social equality, leave the school untouched as a venue where undemocratic forms of femininity and masculinity are created and sustained.

Countries suffering structural poverty, such as those in Latin America, require a more comprehensive prescription. Education, as a form of socially legitimated knowledge, certainly helps individuals to obtain better jobs and higher salaries. But in bifurcated educational systems such as those characterizing the region, education brings disproportionately higher rewards to the wealthier social classes. For schooling to make a substantial difference in the lives of poor women, not only does it have to be redesigned but it has to be accompanied by measures in other sectors of social and economic life, some national and some international.

Available from:
IIZ/DVV
Obere Wilhelmstrasse 32
D-53225 Bonn
Phone: +49 228 975 69-0
Fax: +49 228 975 69-5
E-mail: iiz-dvv@iiz-dvv.de
Internet: www.iiz-dvv.de