Chapter 2: Women and Education

Chapter Summary

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This chapter discusses the right to education and provides several examples of non-profit organizations that are working towards enhancing education among women. Education escalated as a global priority during the 1990s, featured at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, and the 2000 Millennium Summit. Prior to the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), evidence of the economic and social benefits resulting from educating women and girls began to accumulate. The links were clear: educated women are more likely to have fewer, healthier, and better-educated children that will survive into adulthood and ultimately contribute to economic growth. According to UNESCO, in 2008 there were 96 and 95 girls per
100 boys in primary and secondary school, respectively. While the chapter does not discuss tertiary education, additional resources below will fill in statistics on gender gaps in post-secondary, which continue to vary at national and regional levels; women outnumber men in the post-secondary environment of developed countries by a significant margin, yet are still underrepresented in high-paying disciplines such as science and engineering and constitute only 30 percent of researchers.

The chapter examines several organizations working to improve women’s education from the standpoints of both community organizing and technology education. Bahia Street was founded by Rita Conceição in the informal communities of Salvador, Brazil. It began as a lunch program and evolved into a community centre conducting social-justice education among black women and girls on racism, gender-based violence, and reproductive rights. In rural Senegal, the international organization Tostan formed the Community Empowerment Program (CEP) to integrate mobile technology into writing and literacy programs. This initiative was developed in Wolof, the local language, and the program’s exercises in learning to use mobile phones are carried out using culturally appropriate and recognizable symbols. Tostan also initiated the Rural Energy Foundation, a community-based project to provide solar-powered charging stations for mobile phones.

Key Terms

- Bahia Street
- Community Empowerment Program (CEP)
- Democracy
- Education
- Gender-based violence
- Gender
- Health
- International non-governmental organization (INGO)
- Literacy
- Jokko Initiative
- Non-formal education
- Non-governmental organization (NGO)
- Non-profit organization
- Race
- Reproduction
- Rights
- Sexual violence
- SMS
- Rita Conceição
- Rural Energy Foundation
- United Nations Children’s Rights and Emergency Relief Organization (UNICEF)
- United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)
By Lori S. Ashford

The right to education for all has been an international goal for decades, but since the 1990s, women’s education and empowerment have come into sharp focus. Several landmark conferences, including the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo, and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, placed these issues at the center of development efforts.

The Millennium Development Goals — agreed to by world leaders at the U.N. Millennium Summit in 2000 — call for universal primary education and for closing the gender gap in secondary and higher education. These high-level agreements spawned initiatives around the world to increase girls’ school enrollments. Changes since 1990 have been remarkable, considering the barriers that had to be overcome in developing countries.

In many traditional societies, girls are prevented from attaining their full potential because of lower priority placed on educating daughters (who marry and leave the family) and the lower status of girls and women in general. Families may also have concerns about the school fees, girls being taught by male teachers and girls’ safety away from home. Governments and communities have begun to break down these barriers, however, because of overwhelming evidence of the benefits of educating girls.
Figure 2.2: A woman in Bangladesh studies in an adult literacy class in a rural village. The teacher is from the village and trained at a college nearby.

Why educating girls matters

Few investments have as large a payoff as girls’ education. Household surveys in developing countries have consistently shown that women with more education have smaller, healthier and better-educated families. The linkages are clear: Educated women are more likely to take care of their health, desire fewer children and educate them well, which, in turn, makes it more likely their children will survive and thrive into adulthood.

Research by the World Bank and other organizations has shown that increasing girls’ schooling boosts women’s wages and leads to faster economic growth than educating only boys. Moreover, when women earn more money, they are more likely to invest it in their children and households, enhancing family wealth and well-being. Other benefits of women’s education captured in studies include lower levels of HIV infection, domestic violence and harmful practices toward women, such as female genital cutting and bride burning.
How girls and women have fared since Beijing

Advances in girls’ education worldwide have been a success story in development. According to UNESCO, 96 girls were enrolled in primary school for every 100 boys in 2008, up from 84 girls per 100 boys in 1995. The ratio for secondary school is close behind, at 95 girls to 100 boys in 2008. By 2005, nearly two-thirds of countries had closed the gap between girls’ and boys’ school enrollments. Girls still lag behind boys in university-level education worldwide, but the gap is closing over time.

Girls lag farthest behind in the poorest countries, such as Afghanistan, Chad, Central African Republic and Mali, where overall school enrollments are low. In Somalia, only half as many girls are enrolled in school as boys: 23 percent of girls compared to 42 percent of boys in 2008, according to UNESCO. Girls’ schooling and literacy lag well behind boys in much of sub-Saharan Africa and Western and Southern Asia, where much work remains to be done.

At the other end of the spectrum, in countries with high levels of school enrollment, girls often fare better than boys. In much of Latin America, Europe, East Asia and in the United States, girls’ enrollments in secondary and higher education have surpassed those of their male peers, demonstrating what girls and women can achieve once the barriers to education have been overcome.

Still, women account for two-thirds of the world’s illiterate adults, because older women are less likely to have attended school than their younger counterparts. They are also much more likely to be illiterate if they are poor and live in rural areas. Literacy programs and continuing education exist, but the efforts are not systematically reported across countries. In addition, girls and women are disadvantaged when it comes to technical and vocational education, in fields such as science and technology that have long been dominated by men.

What can we learn from successful efforts?

Many gains in women’s education can be attributed to special interventions such as the elimination of school fees, scholarships, community schools for girls and the training of women teachers. Such targeted efforts have translated into higher girls’ school enrollments in countries as diverse as Bangladesh, Yemen, Morocco, Uganda and Brazil. Political commitment is essential for raising the profile of the issue and increasing girls’ access to schooling. Mexico pioneered a major social program — now replicated in impoverished communities in the United States and other countries — that pays families to keep their children, particularly girls, in school.

Because the gender gap is wider at higher levels of education, it will not be enough for girls to merely sign up for school; they need to stay in school. Governments, educators and communities must address issues such as gender stereotypes that reinforce women’s lower status, poor school quality, and early marriage and childbearing, which often cut short women’s education. Also, the mismatch between education and the skills needed for today’s workforce must be corrected. These steps may ensure that girls reap the greatest benefits from education. Countries that are committed to gender equality will not only see better report cards in education, they’ll be healthier and wealthier as well.
Lori S. Ashford, a freelance consultant, has written about global population, health and women’s issues for 20 years. Formerly with the Population Reference Bureau (PRB), she authored the widely disseminated PRB “Women of Our World” data sheets and “New Population Policies: Advancing Women’s Health and Rights” for the Population Bulletin, among other publications.

PROFILE: Rita Conceição – Bahia Street

By Margaret Willson

Figure 2.4: After growing up poor in Brazil, Rita Conceição saw education as the path out of poverty. Her determination got her to university, and her desire to help other women led her to found Bahia Street.

Born in one of the vast shantytowns of Salvador, Brazil, Rita Conceição knew at an early age the realities of violence, poverty and death. She also knew she wanted something different.

“My mother had lots of children and a hard life. She died young, so I brought up my brothers and sisters. I knew I didn’t want that life.”

With great determination, Rita traveled more than an hour each way by public bus to a school where she could learn to read and write. She loved the arts and took up photography. While still a teenager, Rita took courageous photos of protests against the then-ruling Brazilian military dictatorship.
“I didn’t think of a black or gender consciousness,” she says. “People never talked about racism then.” But all around her she saw women like herself working as maids for slave wages, the only job (except prostitution) open to them.

Rita decided she wanted to go to university, an almost impossible dream for someone from the shantytowns. While working a full-time job, she tried the difficult university entrance exam three times and failed. Refusing to give up, she took it a fourth time and passed, gaining entrance into the Federal University of Bahia, the best in her state.

When I first met Rita in 1991, she had earned her university degree in sociology. Once she had a chance to leave the shantytown where she was born, Rita, unlike any other person I ever met there, decided instead to stay and fight the inequality she knew so well. So in 1996, when she invited me to join her in working for equality for the people of her communities, I committed to help in any way I could. From this partnership the nonprofit Bahia Street was born.

Listening to what the people in her community told her answered their dire need for expression and opened a strong avenue for change. Rita initiated a quality education program for girls that would allow them to enter university and change their futures. Rita drew on her own struggles, using the strengths that propelled her from a shantytown to university. She incorporated race and gender consciousness into the Bahia Street classes. Seeing that the girls could not study because they were half starving, she began a lunch program, cooking and buying the food herself until she could find someone to help her. She knew that most girls from these shantytowns get pregnant by age 14, so she began teaching the girls about reproduction, sexual violence and self-esteem.

“As I was growing up,” she says, “the girls in my family were never valued as much as the boys. This still exists in our society, but I say to the girls that their roots are their reality. I pass on to them the importance of ethics, self-respect and the solidarity of women. They see in me the difference it makes — what choices you make in your life — and also the strength it takes. If women are to become equal, these qualities and knowledge are vital.”

After years of renting or borrowing tiny rooms for its classes, Bahia Street was finally able to buy a building. The only problem was that the building was falling down. Rita saw this as no problem at all. She employed local men and oversaw its complete reconstruction. To save money, the men mixed the cement in wheelbarrows and poured it by hand. Rita roamed the city, looking for sales; she negotiated with merchants to donate materials that she then brought back on public bus, since she had no car. Slowly, the building took shape. When the first floor was mostly finished, Rita, her staff and the girls moved in.
The five-story Bahia Street Center is now complete, with classrooms, kitchen, library, computer lab and much more. In addition to education and support programs for the girls, Bahia Street now offers classes for the girls’ caregivers and other community members. It has become a haven for the girls and a community gathering place.

“We teach the girls to take care of others in their lives as well. Women take care of the children, and in that is the future of our society. The work we do is a form of black resistance. We are working for the survival of the black people in Bahia, showing that as black women, we can have equality and shape the future. In Bahia Street, we are giving girls the chance my mother never had.”

When people talk with her about her remarkable achievements, Rita is humble and realistic. “In Bahia Street,” she says, “I really found my identity. Managing to create Bahia Street continues to be an amazing process, and I have learned a consciousness myself through this process.”

Recently, Bahia Street graduate Daza completed university with a journalism degree. In Daza, shantytown residents have a voice they never had before. And the long-term Bahia Street vision of fostering equality for shantytown women is becoming a reality.

Rita laughs with a smile that, in its brightness, knows suffering, love and strength. “And the work continues. That is the way for all of us. If we are to make a better world, the work is what we do.”

Margaret Willson is co-founder and international director of Bahia Street. She is affiliate assistant professor in anthropology at the University of Washington. Her most recent book is Dance Lest We All Fall Down: Breaking Cycles of Poverty in Brazil and Beyond (University of Washington Press, 2010).
Mobile technology is improving the lives of illiterate women and girls in rural Senegal, and educating them in the process, thanks to an organization that teaches them to use mobile phones.

Astou watches as the photographer raises his camera to capture the crowded village classroom. She adjusts her nursing infant and turns her own camera on him — only hers is a mobile phone. For the past few weeks, Astou has been participating in a community-led mobile technology course taught in her local language of Wolof. She and hundreds of other women and girls throughout rural Senegal have learned how to make and receive calls, compose and send SMS messages and use phone functions such as calculators, alarms and, yes, sometimes even cameras.

Astou is a bright 24-year-old mother of four children. She had seen her husband use a mobile phone, but prior to this class she had never touched one herself. “Before, he would not let me use the phone because he feared I would waste the credit,” she laughs, “but now he asks me to teach him and we are saving to buy another for me.”

Two years ago, Astou was not only unfamiliar with how to use a mobile phone, but she was illiterate. Composing or reading an SMS text message would have been impossible for her. Like most of the women and girls in her village in the region of Vélingara, Senegal, Astou never attended school. Household responsibilities and the cost of schooling prevented her from receiving a formal education. She married at 16 years of age — the average age for girls in rural Senegal.

In a country with a 41.9 percent literacy rate, Astou is breaking norms and the cyclical trap of poverty. In 2008, Tostan, an international nongovernmental development organization, started the Community Empowerment Program (CEP) — a 30-month human rights-based, nonformal education program — in her village. More than 80 percent of CEP participants are women and girls. They begin the program with sessions on human rights, democracy, health and hygiene and problem-solving. Later, they continue with lessons on literacy, numeracy and project management.

Once participants have achieved basic literacy, however, they often lack a practical means of maintaining it. As a solution, Tostan partnered with UNICEF to launch the Jokko Initiative in 2009 (jokko means "communication" in Wolof). The initiative incorporates mobile technology into CEP as way to reinforce reading and writing skills. The Jokko module teaches participants how to use basic mobile phone functions and SMS texting. It uses interactive visuals and skits that focus on relevant applications and the relative affordability of texting. “I text messages better [than my husband] and that saves us money on expensive calls,” explains Astou.
Outside of the classroom, students circle around a strange arrangement of sticks. With a little explanation, the sticks come to represent a mango tree. Khady, age 52, walks along the “tree branches” and stops at each fork where signs are placed: Contacts, Search, Add Contact. This activity teaches participants how to navigate the phone’s main menu. It is just one example of what makes Tostan’s educational model work: adapting lessons to cultural contexts and using appropriate local references.

“Before, if I wanted to send a text message, I had to ask for help,” Khady says, “but now I am much more independent. Now people come to me and I’m happy to teach them.” When mobile phone technology reaches women and girls, it amplifies their voices and influence in community decisionmaking. They become agents of their own change. Khady continues to explain how the CEP provided her with basic math and management skills. With several boys and girls huddled around, she demonstrates how the phone’s calculator helps her manage her peanut-selling business.

Mobile phone technology has connected women and girls to market information and opportunities, family in the diaspora and, perhaps most fundamentally, to each other. The phones have been critical for community organization and social mobilization. Tostan’s Jokko Initiative has developed a unique social networking platform that allows participants to send an SMS message to a central server, where it is then sent out to an entire community of other users. One participant explains, “It’s when you send multiple messages at once — a cheaper method of communication.” The platform is used for community advocacy campaigns. Women send, for example, reminders of vaccination and school enrollment dates.

The Jokko Initiative has reached 350 villages and continues to grow. Tostan has directly trained about 23,585 people,
but the high demand for knowledge and the eagerness of participants to share information suggests that thousands more have benefited.

In the project’s next phase, Tostan will partner with the Rural Energy Foundation (http://ruralenergy.nl/), a nonprofit organization that helps rural communities gain access to renewable energy. Currently, about 80 percent of rural Senegal lacks electricity, so charging phones often involves risky and inconvenient trips into the nearest small town. To alleviate this, Tostan will pilot community-led, solar-powered charging stations. These telecenters will provide electricity for mobile phones, and the income generated by these microenterprises will be reinvested in other community-led development projects.

Figure 2.7: Women, some of them illiterate, learn to navigate the main menu of a mobile phone through an arrangement of branches on the ground.

Mobile phone use in Africa is growing twice as fast as in any other region in the world. In Senegal, the number of SIM card purchases nearly doubled from 2007 to 2009, up to 6.9 million. But as Tostan has found, absolute numbers alone do not empower communities. Success in low-income countries requires bridging the gender gap. Putting knowledge and technology in the hands of women — literally — is critical to achieving lasting development.
Renee Ho is a volunteer at Tostan International in Dakar, Senegal. Her interests include women and the technology divide in lower-income countries. More information is online at http://www.tostan.org.

**Multiple Choice Questions**

**Questions**

1. According to the chapter, the _______________ established the call for universal primary education and the closing of the gender gap as part of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).
   1. 1994 International Conference on Population and Development
   2. 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing
   3. 2000 Millennium Development Summit
   4. None of the above

2. Educated women are more likely to…
   1. Take care of their health
   2. Desire fewer children
   3. Educate their children well
   4. All of the above

3. Literacy and education rates are among the farthest behind in… [Select all that apply].
   1. Chad
   2. Morocco
   3. Bangladesh
   4. Afghanistan

4. The gender gap is the widest at which level of education?
   1. Primary
   2. Secondary
   3. Tertiary
   4. None of the above

5. Barriers to women’s empowerment through education include…
   1. Older women are less likely to have attended school than their younger counterparts
   2. High-paying majors such as science and technology remain dominated by men
   3. Women living in rural areas have less access to educational services
   4. All of the above

6. Bahia Street….
   1. Engages in community building, gender and race consciousness work.
   2. Provides small-interest loans to allow women in the shantytowns of Salvador to become entrepreneurs
   3. Teaches women to use Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) more efficiently
   4. Helps rural communities gain access to renewable energy

7. Bahia Street was founded by…
8. The Community Empowerment Program (CEP) does NOT teach women and girls about….
   1. The importance of domestic and household responsibilities
   2. Literacy
   3. Numeracy
   4. Project management

9. The initiative that developed a social networking platform via SMS messages for women and girls in Senegal is…
   1. UNICEF
   2. The Community Empowerment Program (CEP)
   3. Free the Children
   4. The Jokko Initiative

10. The Jokko Initiative…
    1. Incorporates mobile technology into CEP as a way to reinforce reading and writing skills
    2. Teaches participants how to use SMS functions
    3. Connects women and girls to market information opportunities
    4. All the above

11. Tostan’s educational model works because it…
    1. Was developed in partnership with the UNICEF
    2. Focuses on rights-based empowerment rather than economic and entrepreneurial capacity building
    3. Adapts lessons to cultural contexts and uses appropriate cultural references
    4. Held focus groups with local government officials instead of community stakeholders

12. The Rural Energy Foundation will…
    1. Fund an increase in the amount of mobile phones in sub-Saharan Africa
    2. Pilot community-led solar-power charging stations for mobile phones
    3. Fund the construction and operation of a solar-energy plant in Vélingara, Senegal
    4. Construct several powerlines to provide energy to rural Senegalese communities

13. The outcomes of the Rural Energy Foundation project will include…
    1. Putting knowledge and technology in the hands of women
    2. More efficient mechanisms to send text messages
    3. More affordable mobile phones for women and children
    4. All of the above

**Answers**

1. The correct answer is C. The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (answer A) and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (answer B) were both milestones in placing women’s
empowerment on the global agenda. However, it was the 2000 Millennium Development Summit (answer C) where world leaders agreed on the target of universal primary education as part of the MDGs.

2. The correct answer is D (all of the above).

3. Answers A and D are correct. Morocco (answer B) and Bangladesh (answer C) are both countries where governments have committed to action and have seen higher enrollment among women and girls in education.

4. Answer C is correct. The gender ratio is the most equal for primary school enrollment (answer A) with 96 girls for every 100 boys, and the ratio for secondary school (answer B) is similar, at 95 girls per 100 boys. The education gap is the widest at the post-secondary, or tertiary, level (answer C).

5. Answer D (all of the above) is correct.

6. Answer A is correct. Bahia Street works to builds solidarity and facilitates consciousness around gender and race among black communities in Salvador, Brazil. The organization is not a microfinance institution (answer B). The Community Empowerment Program (CEP) in Velingara, Senegal, provides capacity building for women to use ICTs (answer C), and the Rural Energy Foundation (answer D) is a non-profit that helps rural communities gain access to renewable energy.

7. The correct answer is D. Bahia Street was founded by Rita Conceição, who grew up in the shantytowns of Salvador and wanted to build community and raise political consciousness among young black girls living in the community. Renee Ho (answer B) was the writer of the chapter on the Community Empowerment Program. Margaret Wilson (answer A) is the co-founder of Bahia Street. Sheryl Sandberg (answer C) is the Chief Operating Officer (COO) of Facebook and the author of the book *Lean In*.

8. The correct answer is A. The CEP does NOT teach girls about the importance of domestic responsibilities. The program recognizes that unpaid domestic labour among women can prevent them from progressing in formal education and instead teaches skills in literacy (answer B), numeracy (answer C), and project management (answer D).

9. The correct answer is D (the Jokko Initiative). UNICEF (answer A) is a partner in the Jokko project. The CEP (answer B) is also implemented by Tostan but is a rights-based education program.

10. The correct answer is D. (all the above).

11. The correct answer is C. Tostan’s educational model works because it adapts lessons to cultural contexts and uses appropriate cultural references. The CEP focuses on rights-based empowerment (answer B). The Jokko Initiative was developed in partnership with UNICEF (answer A) but was not emphasized by the textbook as the primary reason for the project’s success. Tostan’s model was developed in close consultation with the community, so answer D is incorrect.

12. Answer B is correct. The Rural Energy Foundation will pilot the development of community-led solar-power charging stations for mobile phones in Senegal. Mobile phone ownership rates are rapidly increasing across Africa, but the Foundation will be making this trend more sustainable, rather than simply contributing to the volume of phones (answer A). The Foundation is not supporting the construction of a solar energy plant (answer C) or powerlines (answer D).

13. Answer A is correct. The Rural Energy Foundation will put knowledge and technology in the hands of women as means to achieve long-lasting development. More efficient and affordable text messages (answers B and C) are a product of the Jokko Foundation.

Discussion Questions

1. Rita Conceição names a number of values she incorporates into advice she gives to girls who are a part of Bahia Street. What are some of these values and why do you think they are important to her?

2. Describe some methods Jokko Initiative uses to educate women about technology. Compare and contrast Bahia Street with the Jokko Initiative.
3. Use external research to find the most recent gender ratio for tertiary education. How does this ratio change at national, regional, and global levels?

4. What are the risks of grouping different countries into categories of most and least educated? What trends are included and overlooked when using this approach?

5. How did the emphasis on education from the Millennial Development Goals transfer over to the Sustainable Development Goals? What kind of presence do education, gender, and technology have in the Sustainable Development Goals?

6. What are some examples of the role of technology in political change? Is there a connection between the use of technology for education and its use for broader social movements?

7. What are some examples of how social media has influenced women’s political, social, or economic empowerment?

Essay Questions

1. The textbook notes that “mobile phone use is increasing twice as fast in Africa as in any other region in the world” (p. 37). What are the benefits of having a mobile phone on an individual, organizational, or community level? Are mobile phones or other pieces of information and communication technology simply neutral devices or tools of political influence?

2. What does the Jokko Initiative demonstrate about the benefits of incorporating local knowledge into development programs? What are some ways of ensuring that local symbols, values, and perspectives are integrated into education and capacity-building projects?

3. Rita Conceição, founder of Bahia Street, was quoted saying “we teach the girls to take care of others in their lives as well. Women take care of the children, and that is the future of our society.” What are the implications of this statement in the context of gender norms, care, and domestic labour?

Additional Resources

A New York-based organization that supports the leadership and capacity of women in education technology.

http://edtechwomen.com/

Draws on a multi-country research study to examine women’s individual journeys towards empowerment.


An interview with Dawn Foster, a journalist who writes on gender, politics and social affairs. Her book Lean Out is a response to Sandberg’s Lean In, and takes a more institutional approach to discussing women in the workplace through
a lens of not only gender, but also class, race, and empire.

https://www.opendemocracy.net/dawn-foster-mary-fitzgerald/is-capitalism-destroying-feminism-interview-with-dawn-foster

Perryman, L. & de los Artocs, B. "Women’s Empowerment Through Openness: OER, OEP and the Sustainable Development Goals.” *Open Praxis* 8(2), April – June 2016, 163 – 180. (2016). Based on survey responses from 7,700 educators from 175 countries, this paper explores the ability of Open Education Resources (OERs) to increase women’s voices in education.


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18uDutylDa4


http://www.jceps.com/archives/2347


Updated statistics and baseline indicators on the progress made in achieving the Millennium Development Goals, with data available in national, regional and global contexts.