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Closing the education gender gap

130 million girls currently do not attend school, depriving them of a decent future, and businesses of skilled workers

Completing primary school in Niger was never a certainty for Aishetu Mahmoudu Hama, given all the obstacles that stood in her way. 'It was hard to study,' she recalls. 'We sat on the ground – sometimes on a mat, sometimes just in the dirt.'

But Aishetu persevered, and she is now a 23-year-old university student. Aishetu knows that without school, her life chances would likely be confined to herding, farming, getting married, and having a lot of children. There simply would be no other opportunities for her to pursue.

Like the female teachers who inspired her to learn, Aishetu wants to be a role model to younger girls and her own siblings. She hopes that her story will motivate them to complete their education, too.

Aishetu stands as proof of the difference that education can make for girls and the people around them. But the struggles that Aishetu overcame also remind us that education remains beyond reach for far too many girls.

Consider one appalling statistic: The number of girls not attending school, despite having fallen by 40 per cent since 2000, still stands at 130 million. This helps to explain why women struggle more than men to find meaningful, well-paying work, and why the share of women in the global workforce persistently lags behind that of men.

Making matters worse, even where girls' educational attainment has grown rapidly, commensurate improvements for women in the workforce have remained elusive. According to a 2015 study by the World Economic Forum, 'while more women than men are enrolling at university in 97 countries, women make up the majority of skilled workers in only 68 countries and the majority of leaders in only four.'

These gender gaps represent a major generational challenge for large and

small businesses alike. Worldwide, companies are already struggling to find enough qualified workers for their increasingly automated work processes. The International Commission for Financing Global Education Opportunity reported last year that nearly 40 per cent of employers are having difficulties recruiting workers with the right skills.

Businesses investing in lower-income countries also need their workers to be healthy. This is more likely when mothers are educated: they and their families tend to be healthier than in the case of less educated mothers. In fact, research shows that if all childbearing-age women were to complete secondary education, the number of children dying before age five would drop by about 350,000 each year.

The businesses investing in developing- and emerging-market countries that are home to most out-of-school girls thus have an interest in helping girls get the education they deserve. If educational outcomes improve, we will likely see far more women pursuing the higher-level technical training that today's workplaces are demanding.

To put 130 million additional girls into school, we will have to overcome an array of stubborn barriers. In many countries, educating girls is not considered important, owing to expectations that they will work exclusively at home or on the family farm. Early marriage, sexual assault, a lack of sanitary facilities for menstruating girls, and humanitarian crises are just some of the factors that make completing an education more difficult for girls than for boys. And in remote areas in particular, school fees and arduous commutes pose further challenges.

Even if these cultural, political, and geographic hurdles can be cleared, wealthier countries will need to commit far more resources to educating girls in developing economies than they have in the past. Shockingly, the share of donor countries' overseas development aid that is allocated for education has shrunk over the last six years, and is now smaller than it was in 2010. Donor countries urgently need to reverse that trend.

The Global Partnership for Education has been one of the leading catalysts in educating girls over the past decade and a half. Thanks to GPE funding, an additional 38 million girls in developing countries were enrolled in primary school from 2002 to 2014.

To build on that progress, GPE will hold a financing conference, co-hosted by the Senegalese and French governments, on 8 February, 2018, in Dakar. We are appealing to donors around the world to help us reach $2 billion in annual funds by 2020.

With sufficient funding, GPE can support the education needs of 870 million children in more than 80 countries. And it can help developing countries build education systems that will give girls like Aishetu the chance to realize their potential. When girls and women are empowered through education, they can and do transform the world for the better. Investment in their potential is a bet that can't lose.

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