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Closing the Middle East's Education Gender Gap

In the Middle East and North Africa, girls comprise the majority of out-of-school children. Given the many social and economic benefits associated with higher school attendance for girls, the need to address the gender gap in education is obvious.

By Moha Ennaji

Project Syndicate (31.08.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2x8p92e> - FEZ – When it comes to gender parity, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is lagging behind most of the rest of the world. This is undermining the prospects not just of women and girls, but of entire countries as well. And in no area is this reality more acute than in education.

In many MENA countries today, virtually everyone's education is suffering, owing to decades of conflict, displacement, and economic malaise. In South Sudan, for example, at least 2.2 million children are not in school – one of the highest rates globally, according to a new report by the Global Initiative on Out-of-School Children. In many parts of the region – particularly rural, deprived, and overpopulated areas – even children who are in school do not receive a quality education.

But it is girls who bear the brunt of the problem, as they comprise the majority of out-of-school children. Given the many social and economic benefits associated with higher school attendance by girls – including faster GDP growth, reduced poverty, fewer child marriages, lower fertility, and better child health – the need to address the gender gap in education is obvious.

The first step is identifying what underlies the gap. In some countries, educational opportunities simply are not offered to girls as readily as to boys. This is difficult to address, not least because women are often excluded from high-level decision-making. But even where there is no official constraint, girls' attendance rates are disproportionately affected by a wide range of factors, which UNESCO's Institute of Statistics groups into two categories.

The first group includes socioeconomic factors (such as poverty and child marriage) and cultural factors (such as parents' level of education, local attitudes toward girls' education, women's expected role in society, and religious beliefs). The second group covers political and institutional factors, such as education policies determining budget allocation, quality of syllabi, stereotypes in curricula and textbooks, distance from home, adequacy of sanitation facilities, teachers' attitudes and practices, and school security.

For the same reasons, girls who do get an education might still be at a disadvantage relative to boys. A family may, for example, send a boy to a higher-quality private school, while a girl would attend the nearest public school, even if it is of lower quality, because it views a girl's education as less important to her – and the family's – future.

That makes the United Nations Development Programme's prediction that schools in

many MENA countries will increasingly be split into public and private all the more worrying. Such a split, as is happening in Morocco, exacerbates inequality across the board, as the wealthy minority has access to very expensive private schools, while the rest are left to attend lower-quality government schools. But it is likely to hurt girls the most.

To be sure, not all MENA countries have a wide gender gap in education. In Bahrain, the majority of the top 10% of high school graduates are girls, and more women attend university than men. This is no accident. Bahrain, along with Jordan and Tunisia, has made significant political and financial commitments to boosting education, resulting in remarkable progress toward reducing illiteracy and closing the gender gap.

If other MENA countries are to follow suit, they will similarly have to make a sustained political commitment, pursuing major legal and policy reforms focused on guaranteeing equal access to all levels of education. In many countries, broader initiatives aimed at improving access to quality education for low-income families and rural populations will also be needed, though these , too, should include special attention to gender disparities.

In the meantime, campaigns to raise awareness of gender issues among decision-makers, teachers, parents, students, and the general public are needed to push back against deeply entrenched discriminatory attitudes. Such campaigns should carry over to school curricula, as existing curricula often perpetuate traditional gender roles that deny women the opportunity to make their own decisions.

Finally, wealthy countries within and outside the MENA region can step in to support the efforts of their lower-income counterparts to improve education overall, while closing the gender gap. Ensuring accountability, by tracking and reporting progress, will be vital to this effort.

Broadening access to quality education is the most rewarding investment a country can make. For the sake of their countries' economic and social development, not to mention the wellbeing of their women and girls, MENA governments should put closing the education gender gap at the top of their agendas.
