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## INCREASING EDUCATION AND OTHER OPPORTUNITIES FOR GIRLS AND WOMEN WITH WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE

*At the UNICEF Meeting on "Education for All" held in New York last September, Brendan A. Doyle, Sr. Project Officer WES, raised some key issues regarding water, sanitation and hygiene when planning education programmes.*

**Of the 130 million children estimated to have no access to primary education in 1990, more than 81 million were girls. And of the nearly one billion adults in the world who are illiterate, two-thirds are estimated to be women. Although there have been gains in numbers of children enrolled in primary school in the past thirty years, boys continue to get preference for education, and the gender gaps persist. Women continue to lag behind men in literacy and are likely to continue doing so unless development efforts include actions in programming which contribute to changes in women's status.**

Deprived of a basic education in childhood, girls enter adolescence and womanhood without having realised their full potential. This loss is aggregated through each stage of the life cycle, contributing to women having less confidence in themselves. Lack of education also affects women's abilities to take advantage of further opportunities such as basic rights, access to loans, job opportunities, higher education, full participation in political decision-making and advancing the health and educational status of their children. Although education alone does not magically increase these opportunities, it is a vital part of the process.

### **What are the reasons?**

There are many, interrelated reasons why more girls than boys are held back from getting a basic education:

***Poverty and female status*** are the most important. Where the household is poor, girls are needed more at home in traditionally allocated roles to alleviate domestic tasks. Collecting water and firewood, minding other children, producing and preparing food and cleaning are usually classified as "girls" or "women's" work. This leaves girls with a disproportionate amount of work to do over boys. In Nepal for example, girls are estimated to spend almost twice as long as boys in doing chores. In addition girls may be needed to directly contribute to the household income through cottage industry labour or hawking at the marketplace. And because of social attitudes (that girls do not need education) and lack of skilled job opportunities for females, if there is any money for school fees, boys of the poor tend to be given preference to go to school.

***The distance of the school from home.*** Where the school is far, parents worry for their daughter's safety. They may also be reluctant to have girls spend additional time away from time-consuming work at home, especially fetching water and firewood. In parts of Africa, it can take as many as six hours for one trip to a water source and several trips may be required depending on family needs.

This leaves little time for going to school.

***Inappropriate school facilities for girls.*** In addition to sharing classrooms, the sharing of sanitary facilities with males or the outright lack of toilets or latrines discourages parents from sending girls to school. The lack of privacy may also contribute to drop-out of girls, especially around the age of puberty (when girls may become more self-conscious or additional taboos are placed on them). Further, the lack of private sanitary facilities may be a contributing factor to fewer women teachers, who are needed to encourage girls to attend school.

***Disease and accident burden.*** Young girls are often fed less, given less nutritious food, provided less health care but given more work to do than boys. They are therefore more susceptible to diarrhoeal disease, respiratory infections and work-related hazards. This may leave many girls exhausted or sick and with less than optimal mental development or alertness, contributing to poor attendance and performance at school.

Many women are unable to take advantage of opportunities for literacy for the same reasons girls are held back from schooling. Especially because of ***poverty and low status*** women spend extraordinary efforts, time and energy obtaining basic services such as water and health, are expected by tradition to work more and longer at domestic tasks and are unaware of their own abilities and possibilities for change. In addition the adolescent and adult woman incurs greater health risks and domestic responsibilities during her child bearing years.

### **How can sanitation, hygiene and water make a difference?**

It is now recognised that to enhance girls and women's conditions, their status must be improved. And this must happen throughout their lives, not just during infancy or childhood, or upon adolescence or womanhood. It is necessary to meet girls and women's practical as well as strategic gender needs. Meeting practical gender needs would include for example; improving the technology women or girls use in order to save labour and time such as: improved cooking stoves or utensils, food preparation or agricultural equipment such grain de-huskers, or by bringing a water supply closer to the home. Strategic gender needs would include for example; capacity building through training in areas such as decision-making, planning or management which would better equip women with skills to play a greater role in domestic or community decision-making and affairs. While the practical entails provision of basic services and access to resources, this must come hand in hand with opportunities for participation in decision-making, awareness of needs and rights, control over resources and in social, political and economic development.

Hygiene education, sanitation and water programmes need to place greater emphasis on social as well as physical components which:

***Provide education on hygiene at home and in the schools.*** Just as services without participation are insufficient for sustainability, water and sanitation facilities cannot be maintained without hygiene education and capacity-building for decision-making and management and operation of services.

Hygiene education includes personal hygiene (such as hand-washing and appropriate food preparation), household cleanliness, human excreta management and solid and liquid waste management. It includes capacity-building for management and maintenance of water sources (including micro-watershed management) and sanitation facilities and environmental sanitation. This capacity-building contributes to the overall sustainability of such programmes.

*Bring water sources closer to homes and schools.* The proximity reduces the time girls and women spend collecting water, reducing their energy expenditure. Water at school and home enables hygiene education to be put into practice, preventing disease and subsequent additional resources spent caring for the sick. It contributes to the relevance of education at school by allowing them for example to put hygiene education in practice. The combination of increased water availability, improvements in sanitation and hygiene education reduces disease burdens (providing more time in optimal health and improved mental alertness). More water for home and school food production provides opportunities for nutritional and economic improvements through small-scale gardening. Such contributions to household food security can lead to other economic improvements. Emphasis on women's participation in decision-making and greater managerial control over water resources both at home and in schools contributes to empowerment, opportunities for active women role-models for girls and a context for the need for girl's education. In and of itself women's participation in water programmes may not be sufficient to change her status on the macro-level. However such participation and control of resources can be planned with other sectors, especially if this is deliberately highlighted during the situation analysis, to provide an entry point for wider human, social and economic parity with men.

*Improve sanitation in homes, at school and within the community.* The provision of appropriate facilities at schools, such as latrines or toilets, not only decreases disease but instills confidence in parents, girls and women teachers that the school is concerned about privacy and protection. It also allows health, biology and domestic science education to be put into practice. At home, latrines and toilets combined with provision of water and hygiene education, contributes to disease reduction. Women in their role as mothers play a vital part in teaching children, including about sanitation and hygiene practices. Providing sanitation and water facilities along with education and opportunities for girl's and women's participation in planning and management, allows good sanitation practices as well as involvement in public issues, to become widespread and enduring habits.

The following diagram shows linkages between hygiene education, sanitation and an increased safe reliable water supply with various World Summit for Children goals, including those for education. It may be of particular use in obtaining greater synergy from inter-sectoral planning during country programme planning and programme implementation.

# Linkages Between WES and Other Child Survival, Protection and Development Goals

