Islam and Gender Inequality in Education

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Abstract

The events of September 11 have reinforced in the public imagery the association of Islam and a limited access to female education. Whereas previous studies have noted the larger gender gap in education in some Islamic countries, there is still the need to understand the reasons for this gap. This research attempts to advance knowledge in this area by investigating the makeup of gender inequality on educational attainment. Using DHS data from 36 developing countries and life table analysis, we provide a rough estimate of the gender gap in secondary school completion in each of these countries and then divide this gap into 3 main sources that include "cultural," "demographic," and "economic" factors. Next, we examine if "cultural" rather demographic and economic factors are responsible for the gender gap in Moslem countries to a greater extent than they would be in other countries with a similar level of gender inequality. The comprehensive comparative country assessment contributes breadth while the qualitative analysis adds depth and richness in efforts to provide efficient policies to address the global educational gender gap.

Preliminary findings

For exploratory purposes, we estimated the effect of Islam as measured by the percentage of Moslems in the population on the size of the gender gap in education at three levels: the primary, the secondary, and the tertiary net of total enrolment rate, GNP, urbanization, and female participation in ministerial positions. We have very interesting results. At the primary level, both the effects of religion and net total enrolment rates are influential, although in opposite directions with religion impacting negatively on gender equality. Surprisingly enough, net total enrolment rate is significant at the 0.01 level while the effect of religion is only significant at the 0.05 level. The same pattern is observed at the secondary level but now both net total enrolment rate and religion are significant at the 0.01 level.

Our results are even more provocative at the tertiary level. Now the effect of GNP is significant at the 0.01 level and in the expected direction while both net enrolment rate and religion are significant at the 0.05 level. These findings are indicative of interacting effects between our independent variables, which will be pursued in our next round of analyses. The thesis of lower educational performance in Moslem countries compared to non-Moslem countries find support in these preliminary quantitative findings.

But these findings should be read with caution for two reasons: One, the predicted probabilities of the effect of religion follows a non-linear pattern suggesting other influences may be mediating this association. Two, great gender disparities within Moslem countries and between Moslem and non-Moslem countries exist. The exploratory qualitative analysis also suggests that pregnancy-related dropouts may be less of a problem compared to gender discrimination in Moslem countries implying the need for different policy strategies to address the prevailing gender gaps in schooling.

These findings, combined with the complex connections between the different factors influencing gender inequality, justify further probing into the structure of gender inequality in schooling. The rationale is based on the fact that both the form and structure of this gender gap will largely dictate the effectiveness of policies designed to resolve existing gender inequality. The natural question to ask then is "Does Islam influence the structure of gender inequality? Providing an answer to such a question, however, goes beyond a quantitative analysis to approaches that can tease out the qualitative nuances inherent in the analysis of the connections between religion and gender inequality in education. This will be the objective of our qualitative analysis.

Introduction and research questions

Progress in achieving gender parity in schooling has occurred worldwide, but little empirical evidence exists on the role of religion on the educational records of countries. The paucity of empirically-tuned research that simultaneously assesses the multiple influences, including religion, on which participation in schooling hinges, is the motivational drive behind this research. This paper assumes the existence of both quantitative and qualitative differences in gender inequality among countries even though most research has focused on quantitative differences. Further, as Stromquist (1989) argues, such quantitative determinants of gender inequality including family, cultural, and school-related factors are usually, despite evidence to the contrary, treated as distinct and in a decontextualized manner in the literature.

Accordingly, the paper examines the effects of national religion (as measured by the percentage of Moslem population in a country) on both the size and the structure of the gender gap. Whereas a number of studies have examined these differences cross-sectionally, we use historical data from a variety of sources, including the World Bank, to document how the gender gaps found in developing countries have changed over time, in response to changes in the composition of national populations based on religion. More importantly, we examine the effects of national religion on the source of these gender inequalities, whether driven by "cultural," versus "economic," or "demographic factors. Important issues to tease out include determining at what typologies is religion most pronounced. In that endeavor, we rely on data from 36 countries in which recent Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) have collected substantial information on the reasons why females drop out of school.

This is an opportune time to focus on the linkages between schooling and religion given the ongoing educational transitions in developing countries and the recent concern over religious edicts on female education. The paper contributes to the debate on the gender gap in schooling in four important ways. First the comprehensive study of all countries enhances the predictability of the analysis. Second, the qualitative analysis adds depth and richness in efforts to provide efficient policies to address the prevailing educational gender gaps. Third, it moves the debate beyond modernization precepts that polarize the schooling experience into the fictitious duality of modern versus traditional, secular versus religious, or economic versus cultural into a continuum of schooling experience characterized by different typologies depending on the particular society's progress in education.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, it extends Eloundou-Enyegue and his colleagues research efforts on the qualitative determinants of gender inequality in

schooling by incorporating a religious twist in this complex nexus of education and gender inequality. From a policy standpoint, regardless of level of gender inequality, it is important to recognize that Moslem countries may not respond to the similar policy strategies designed for non-Moslem countries to address the prevailing gender gaps in education.

Context and significance

The call by the international community for all countries to strive toward universal access and completion of a good quality education at all levels have led to significant progress in enrolments but this generalization can be misleading due to tremendous regional and contextual variations. Intuitively, universal education appears to be a simple goal but the developing country experiences have proved it to be a daunting one. Despite national and international efforts and the resulting progress in enrolments, gender parity in access to schooling, achievement, and completion has remained an elusive goal. For instance, latest figures for net primary enrolment rates range from 82-99% for East Asia and the Pacific region (EAP); 81-100% for LAC; 60-100% for South Asia (SA); 53-100% for ECA; 31-99% for Middle East and North Africa (MENA); and 30-109% for sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (UNICEF 2005).

The growing school age population in most developing countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, has meant that the progress already gained is being depleted. The UN Millennium 2005 report state that eight out of every ten children not enrolled live in SSA or SA with the situation more bleak in rural areas and in SSA. In much of SSA, more than 33% of children are not enrolled; in five countries in particular, the figure is over 50%.. SA is performing just slightly better than SSA with 20% of school age pupils out of school. But enrolment is only part of the story. The greater challenge is keeping those enrolled in school particularly in areas with high dropout and repetition rates. The primary school completion rates in SSA of just over 50%, between 60 and 75% in Southern Asia, Western Asia and Oceania speaks to this challenge. In contrast, greatest progress (of 90% completion rate) is seen in LAC and South-East Asia (UN 2005).

It is already 2005 and the target date for most urgent goal of all (i.e. attaining universal education at the primary and secondary levels) and the litmus test of the world's commitment to eradicate poverty. However, the signs are not very encouraging as many countries have fallen short. These mean figures for net female/male ratio at the primary level speak to this setback: 1.008 for LAC; 0.997 for ECA; 0.981 for EAP; 0.914 for MENA; and 0.896 for SSA. Although the ratios at the secondary level are comparable with those at the primary level, excepting Latin America where girls' enrolment in secondary school surpass that of boys, the numbers enrolled are far less, meaning a lot more of secondary school aged youth is not in school. Even less promising is the evidence for the tertiary level as gender disparities tend to increase at higher levels of education due to spill over effects. The implications of this missed opportunity are gross as progress toward the 2015 goals will not only falter but may not be sustainable (UN 2005). For instance, among 65 developing countries with relevant data, roughly half have achieved gender parity in primary schooling while the figures are only 20% and 8% in secondary and higher education respectively (UN 2005).

Even more pervasive and consistent worldwide is the evidence against poverty's role in schooling outcomes. UN (2005) argues that children from the poorest 20% of

household are three times less likely to be enrolled compared with those from the richest 20% of households. The SSAn education crisis is aggravated by the AIDS epidemic which is reaping the region of its gains in life expectancy and adult work force particularly teachers, who were in limited supply in the first instance. The reasons usually forwarded for the persistent gender inequity in schooling in developing countries include patriarchy and cultural norms and gender roles that circumscribe women as wives and mothers. Most school systems operate in ways that reinforce rather than question the bases for gender inequities both in the school and in the society at large. Thus the few women who succeed in participating at higher educational levels follow a limited number of study fields mostly designed for women thus perpetuating the problem (Assie-Lumumba 2000; Stromquist 1989).

Theoretical and empirical considerations on gender inequality in schooling

This paper is framed within two ongoing debates in the global development agenda, The first debate relates to resolving the persisting gender inequality in schooling as one of the most critical means to eliminating poverty while the second concerns the discourse on the role of religion in female education that have crystallized since the events of September

Female education and development

The global commitment to eliminate gender inequality in schooling and in society as a whole has been reaffirmed in several world conferences for more than two decades, but has garnered special impetus since the 1990s, with the most recent international endorsement occurring during the United Nations 2000 Millennium Summit. In this summit, the United Nations member states committed their governments to eliminate extreme poverty through eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). While achieving each goal is important to development, the two goals considered most critical for achieving the remaining goals pertain directly to gender equality in schooling: (1) achieve universal primary education and (2) promote gender equality and empower women by achieving gender parity in education at primary and secondary levels by 2005 and at all levels by 2015.

In spite of the global commitment to achieve gender equality, much remains to be achieved. Key obstacles are related to inattention to appropriate theoretical and political issues. As Bellamy (2003) writing in the UNICEF's State of the World's Children 2004 report assert, development policies and work have been both atheoretical and typified by a concern on economic growth rather than human wellbeing.

Economic theories on the determinants of the provision of schooling begin with a cost-benefit analysis, which posit the tendency for investments tend to rise with anticipated returns and vice versa. A gender dimension is visible in this calculus whereby women's benefit from schooling may be lower than men's due to intrinsic sex differences or discrimination against women. The anchoring of women's societal position to marriage and family and their almost unshared role in household tasks, mean they have shorter careers than men, which in turn motivate smaller investments in schooling, both quantitatively and qualitatively. These theoretical notions have also found support in scholarly work, which conclude that gender differences in education have persisted because of the lower returns to women's education relative to that of men in the labor market (King and Hill 1993; Schultz 1993; 1994).

This argument (see King and Hill 1993) leans heavily to parents as key decision-makers in the schooling of their sons versus daughters as they weigh the benefits that will accrue in terms of labor market gains and marital outcomes (Eloundou-Enyegue and Calves 2006) and old age security to name a few. Thus failure to enroll daughters as opposed to sons is viewed as an "efficient" rather than "discriminatory" decision (GOOD). Discrimination can also stem from difficult economic conditions. In this case, families wish to educate their daughters but when constrained by resources, they view investments in sons as a better strategic choice (Eloundou-Enyegue and Stokes 2004).

However, evidence that weakens this argument is emerging pointing to a complex interplay of economics and other domains in the calculation regarding the schooling of children in the developing world. Such evidence is linked more to intra-household resource allocations more than a purely economic rationale. These models emphasize the effect of diverse choices of different family members on educational outcomes (see Eloundou-Enyegue and Calves forthcoming).

Female education and religion

The second debate evolves around long standing debate on female education and religion, re-energized by events of September 11 2001. Evidence of U.S. interest in this discourse is seen in the reopening schools to girls in Afghanistan and a detailed study by the USAID in Muslim countries in 2003 with the aim of "tackling challenges in the Muslim world." On the other hand, the stalled progress in progress toward achieving the MDGs has been blamed on the overly emphasized fight against terrorism by the US government, which has diverted both attention and resources away from efforts towards the attainment of these goals (UN 2005).

A contrasting argument to the economic perspective on the gender gap discourse draws from the role of cultural forces religion in shaping the schooling experiences of children. Among these cultural determinants and of relevance to this paper is the role of religion in gender equality in schooling. A thin literature alludes to a greater weight of religion over economic considerations. Unfortunately, much of the discourse evolves around conceptual contrasts including religious/secular, traditional/modern, public/private in characterizing education in predominantly Muslim countries that are inadequate in illuminating the dynamics involved in the study of education in Muslim societies.

A recent case in time is a study by Daun (2000). In his assessment of progress in primary schooling in SSA, Daun makes a blunt and emphatic remark that both the expansion and the decline in education is a function of both economic and religious factors with the latter's effect sometimes superseding that of the former. Contrasting the performance of countries with Christian majority with countries with Moslem majority, Daun concludes that the largest variations in female schooling among countries are due to religion with Moslem countries registering significantly lower female enrolment rates compared to Christian countries. Although, he recognizes the potential of interactions between economic development and religion, he never pursued it to further refine the interpretation of his findings. Further, despite its important contribution to knowledge regarding the evolution of schooling in SSA; the paper assumes a dichotomy between the economic versus the cultural factors governing schooling in SSA. Such a dichotomy runs the risk of losing valuable information on the dynamic nature under which pupils receive

schooling in the region. Further, the reliance on descriptive analysis leaves Daun's strong claims and conclusions semi-substantiated.

A more informative and overarching analysis is provided by the effect of poverty and culture on gender inequalities in primary schooling. The authors successfully elaborated on the nuanced and complex dynamism inherent in the provision of schooling in different contexts by connecting poverty, culture, gender, and schooling in a model that aids in teasing out these relationships over time. Their findings also point to the dominant role of in producing gender inequalities in schooling outcomes, in both qualitative and quantitative terms. Nonetheless, and despite the wide-ranging contributions of the paper, the analysis is descriptive. Thus, although the literature on the determinants of schooling is vast, much of it is descriptive and limited in their ability to explain the relative role of the various influences at any one point in time.

Accordingly, and with the aim of enhancing our understanding of the dynamics between the determinants of gender equity in Muslim societies, this paper raises several salient questions. First, is girls' schooling really lower in Moslem countries, net of economic development/urbanization? Second, how does Islam interact with development? Third, are there within country or group differences and regional variations? And fourth, is gender parity in education synonymous with gender equity in society? What are the internal dynamics such as gender differentials in economic and social payoffs for education? Knowing such information has important implications for parity because low gender parity in schooling can prevail even if parents may want to educate their daughters in situations where gender discrimination in employment type and earnings exists. To answer the questions raised in the paper our first objective is to examine quantitatively through multivariate logistic regression analysis the make up of gender inequality at all schooling levels based on the dominant religious makeup of different countries as described in detail below.

Data sources

The school enrollment and school dropout data come from the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) (DHS 2005). Information on each country's school progression rate and school system structure in terms of school entry age and the duration of primary school and secondary school is derived from the UN database (UN 2005). The World Fact book and Adherents.com provide the statistics on religion.

Quantitative analysis: Measures and analytical strategy

The quantitative analysis employs multivariate analysis to assess the net effect of religion on the prevailing gender gaps in developing countries. The outcome for this analysis is the gender gap in secondary schooling (i.e. secondary school completion), estimated for 38 countries for which Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) data on pupil school enrolment and school dropout reasons are available. The estimation procedure follows that developed and outlined by Eloundou-Enyegue (2004). The first step involves the estimation of grade- and reason-specific probabilities of school dropout for boys and girls. This is done by combining information on dropout reasons from the DHS and the UN information on school structure. Next, we constructed schooling life tables using these probabilities for each country. The table contains separate school survivorship curves for boys and girls, which are then used to calculate a third curve, girls'

survivorship ratio relative to boys. This last curve varies as pupils progress through school. The value of this survivorship ratio at the end of secondary depicts the final gender gap in schooling.

In the preliminary analysis we estimated the association between religion and the size of the gender gap at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. The outcomes measures for the first two levels are net enrolment measures while for the tertiary level only gross enrolment measures are available and we had no option but to use these. The main independent variable in both the quantitative and qualitative analyses is the percentage of Moslem in the population. Several potentially intervening forces (net total enrolment rate, average adult literacy rate, GNP, female participation in ministerial positions, and urbanization are controlled for. The last two covariates proved to be non-significant in the preliminary regression and may therefore be removed from the models. The school enrolment data come from several sources. Enrolment data is from the UNESCO database (the data on religion from the World Fact Book and from Adherents.com web site and the statistics on the control variables are obtained from the World Bank database.

Qualitative analysis

Conceptual framework

In contrast to the dearth of rigorous studies on religion and gender gap alluded to earlier, empirical evidence on the qualitative nature and determinants of the gender gap in schooling has emerged in the recent demographic literature with Eloundou-Enyegue as one of the few leading scholars in this direction (Eloundou-Enyegue 2004; Eloundou-Enyegue and Holtz 2004; Eloundou-Enyegue and Stokes 2004; Eloundou-Enyegue et al. forthcoming). Together the papers present a novel conceptual and analytical tool for explaining the various qualitative sources and magnitudes of gender inequality in schooling in a historical perspective. Accordingly, they provide a springboard for this research. The paragraphs that follow outline the main concepts of these works.

First, Eloundou-Enyegue (2004) develops the use of the life table in analyzing the effect of pregnancy-related dropouts on gender inequality in education. Assuming a dynamic schooling-history perspective, which implies that the gender gap develops only gradually, Eloundou-Enyegue decomposed the gender gap into its "causes" and "timing." Causes are differentiated into pregnancy-related (sex-specific) and non-pregnancy-related (non sex-specific) while the timing for dropouts are grouped into primary and secondary levels. Together these categories represent four possible sources of gender inequality: "primary school discrimination (Gp0);" "secondary school discrimination (Gs0);" "primary school pregnancy (Gp1);" and "secondary school pregnancy (Gs1)."

The first component, "primary school–pregnancy," according to the author, should be minimal in situations where girls complete this level before puberty; the second component, "primary school–other causes," symbolizes progress toward universal schooling or gender parity at the primary level. The third component, "secondary school–pregnancy," reflects the substantive importance of pregnancy-related while the fourth component, "secondary school–other causes," is indicative of greater risks of dropouts from secondary school due to non-pregnancy reasons arising more from discrimination that socio-economic reasons.

In a second paper, Eloundou-Enyegue and Stokes (2004) further refine the education gender inequality relationship by proposing a contextual hypothesis for the analysis of teen fertility and gender inequality in schooling. Recognizing the crucial role of national or regional differences in both the etiology of school dropout and the normative life course of teens, the authors posit "that the gender-equity impact of teen fertility will be greatest within countries at intermediate stages of any one of four aspects of socioeconomic development." The first aspect, demographic in nature, relates to the extent to which childbearing during teen years evolves from being normative to being uncommon and selective with the negative impact of teen pregnancies on schooling greatest in demographically-intermediate countries.

The second aspect, the authors continue, concerns the stage in the educational transition whereby school participation at higher levels also translates into greater odds of pregnancy and dropout. The third aspect is cultural and describes the stage where education becomes normative, restricting any residual gender gap mainly to sex-specific causes. The situation where cultural discrimination against girls has waned leaves economic considerations in favor of boys as the driving force in gender inequality in low resource settings. The authors conclude by stating that regardless of the aspect in question, the negative association between teen fertility and schooling should exert its main toll during the intermediate stages of development.

Lastly, the paper by Eloundou-Enyegue and Holtz (2004) explains the variations in the main determinants of gender inequality at the global level. Eloundou-Enyegue and Holtz propose a typology of four gender-equity regimes to explain the global variations in the main causes of gender inequality in schooling. These four typologies, conditional on the type (i.e. the sources of gender discrimination) and the timing of discrimination against girls include "cultural," "economic," "demographic," and "egalitarian" regimes. According to the authors, the cultural regime represents the situation where discrimination is early, extensive, and governed by normative beliefs inhibitive toward girls' schooling.

Under the economic regime, girls are selectively eliminated from schooling in favor of boys based mainly on economic reasons. Discrimination at this level is therefore modtly confined to higher educational levels where the economics of schooling become more pronounced compared to the previous level. The demographic regime depicts the stage where purposive parental discrimination is minimal such that girls lag behind boys in schooling primarily due to teen pregnancies. Finally, the egalitarian denotes the phase in which gender inequality has been eliminated at all schooling levels.

Measures

Our second outcome, estimated in the qualitative analysis, is the structure of the gender inequality in education as proposed by Eloundou-Enyegue and Holtz (2004), which depending on the source outlined above, is categorized into (1) "cultural," (2) "economic," and (3) "demographic. To locate a country under this typology, the authors employ a life table technique, as described under the quantitative analysis, to establish the grade-specific (i.e. timing) and cause-specific odds (sources) of school dropout.

Where data is unavailable for a country, going by the authors, the UNESCO figures on gender parity in enrolments at the primary and tertiary levels are used to determine a country's regime. A female-to-male primary enrollment ratio is low (i.e.

below 0.75), the regime is described as cultural while an egalitarian regime applies if the female-to-male is 1.0 and above. By default, countries outside these two extremes are either economic or demographic, determined through a predictive equation. This equaution estimates the likelihood that a country fits a demographic regime based on a its rate of teen-age pregnancy and female-to-male literacy ratio within the adult population. The final predictive model is shown below:

$$Z = -69.32 + (1.662*P) – (0.011*P2) + (0.35*L) –(0.0028*L2)$$

where Z is a logit value for the probability of fitting a demographic regime; P is the percentage of teenage girls reaching age 20 without getting pregnant; and L the female-to-male literacy ratio in the adult population. If the predicted probability is more than 0.50, the country is said to fit a demographic regime otherwise the country falls under an economic regime.

Analytical strategy

We estimate the effect of religion on the three measures of the structure of gender inequality employing a multi-level fixed effects model and a discrete multinomial regression approach. This methodological approach allows us to address estimation biases that may arise from the cluster nature of the data and the consequential non-independence and non-randomness of the outcomes as well as any potential interdependence among the explanatory variable and unobserved community factors. Further, inclusion of interaction terms between the independent and control variables is enhanced by the use of a discrete model.

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