



## **Girls' Enrollment in Secondary Schools in Eritrea: Status and Hindering Factors**

[Author: Dawit Teclmariam Bahta, College of Business and Economics, Halhale  
Email: [dawitt7@gmail.com](mailto:dawitt7@gmail.com) | P.O. Box. 11191, Asmara, Eritrea]

### **Abstract**

*Development of a society cannot take place without the productive participation of women and this can only happen when girls are adequately empowered with adequate education in Eritrea skills and knowledge through sound education. The main objective of this paper was to examine the status of girls' enrollment in secondary schools and to identify and analyze the hindering factors with reference to Eritrea. The data were collected from the statistics office of the Ministry of Education and were analyzed using quantitative approach. Policy documents from the Ministry of Education were examined in relation to the issues of gender disparity in secondary education in Eritrea. Further, data on school enrollment and hindering factors were also analyzed. The analysis revealed that the status of girls' enrollment is still low in secondary schools in Eritrea. Among the factors that contribute to gender disparity include lack of access to schools with a reasonable distance and socio-cultural beliefs and attitudes of the parents.*

**Key words:** *Girls' education, Girls' Enrollment in secondary schools, Gender disparity in education, Obstacles to girls' education*

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### **1. Introduction**

There has been a broad consensus that education is an important foundation on which the socio-economic and cultural development of a nation is based. Education is claimed to be a basic factor in promoting rationality of thought, improving social mobility, enhancing an individual's capacity and skill to respond to the demand of the changing world (Coombs, 1985). Hence to acquire these advantages, both genders must be educated equally. As the universal declaration of Human Rights of 1948 outlined, Education is a basic human right. Like all human rights, it is universal and inalienable to everyone regardless of gender, religion, ethnicity, economic status and other differences. Article 10 of the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) also states that, women should have equal access and continuing participation in all forms and levels of education. However women's education still lies far behind men's in most developing countries with far-reaching adverse consequences for both educational and national wellbeing. Current estimates place the number of out-of-school children around 93 million. The majority of these children are girls, and almost 80 per cent of them live in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (UNICEF, 2008).

Gender disparity has serious social, political and economic implications. Women are particularly disadvantaged and, as they account for half of the world's population, the consequences are grave both individually and cumulatively for nations (UN–OHRLLS, 2006). On the other hand, it is clear that raising the level of women's education contributes a positive outcome not only to women but also to their countries' development. Educated women are better equipped to enter the paid labor force which is critical to the survival of the many female headed house-holds in developing countries. Moreover, nations with higher levels of female school participation in the past, today show higher levels of economic productivity, lower fertility, lower infant and maternal mortality and longer life expectancy than countries that have not achieved as high participation levels for girls (Rosemary & Elizabeth, 1991).

One of the millennium development goals is to “Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015” (UN, 2000). However many countries in the world, including Eritrea have failed to achieve gender parity target for primary and secondary education. In the Sub-Saharan Africa, a number of countries including Eritrea report that, there is a significant gender disparity in education and this disparity grows wider in secondary and tertiary levels. Thus equal access for boys and girls to primary and secondary education remains a goal to be achieved for most developing regions.

The government of the state of Eritrea in the education policy pledged to implement the six “Education for all” objectives and the two relevant Millennium Development Goals to tackle the gender gap in education. However, despite Eritrea's policy on education which states the availability of basic education for all and the promotion of opportunity in terms of access, equity, relevance and continuity of education to all school-aged children, enrolment, retention, and completion of girls in education is lower than their male counterparts in all levels of education (MOE of Eritrea, 2013). Closing gender gap in enrollment in Eritrea is vital and should get considerable attention if a given target of enrolment is to be attained. Therefore, this paper intended to examine the status of girl's education in terms of their enrollment and to identify and analyze major factors that cause lower girls enrollment in secondary education. The study sought to address the following research questions: What is the status of girls' enrollment in secondary education in Eritrea? and What are the major factors that contribute to the lower enrolment of girls in education?

## **2. Methodology**

This paper used the 2012/2013 official ‘Basic Education Statistics’ and ‘Essential Education Indicators’ reports, which are issued every year by the Department of Research and Human Resource Development of the Ministry of education in Eritrea. The main purpose of the documents was to provide useful, relevant, reliable, and up to date information on education for various stakeholders within and outside the education sector. The 2012/13 reports are the 16<sup>th</sup> issues in the series, and contains compiled data of annual

school censuses carried out by the six administrative region's education offices through standard questionnaires.

The data used is annual academic data that run from the academic year 1993/94 to 2012/13 and consists of data on enrollment in secondary level segregated by gender as well as average distances between home and school in kilometers at region(zoba) level segregated by school level (elementary, middle and secondary). The data are quantitative and were analyzed by using descriptive method of analysis like proportions, ratios, averages as well as differences in a manner that relates female enrollment to other relevant variables, and with the underlying intention of identifying status of girl's enrolment in the secondary schools. Ratios, proportions are used to analyze the status of girl's enrolment and average is used to analyze access of schools with a reasonable distance.

Secondary data are also used from other local studies and international organizations, like United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and World Bank. This paper made use of the corresponding data in addressing the issues that are raised.

### **3. Results**

#### **3.1 Status of Girls' Enrolment**

During the academic year 2012/2013, there were 100 secondary level schools in Eritrea (MOE of Eritrea, 2013b). Children with the age group of 15 - 17 can be enrolled in the Secondary School level which covers four years (9 - 12). In Eritrea there are two types of Secondary Schools. These include Science and Commerce schools. At the end of high school, students take the Eritrean School Leaving Certificate Examination (ESLCE) in order to join the college for higher learning. Teachers in the secondary level are qualified if they have a minimum of a Bachelor of Arts (BA) or Bachelor of Science (B.Sc.). Female enrollment is lower in secondary schools as compared to the elementary and middle school level.

In secondary education, the total number of enrolled students has increased from 32,756 in 1993 / 94 to 110,369 in the academic year 2012 / 2013. However, total increase in enrolment in secondary education did not bring equality in enrollment between male and female. The status of girl's enrolment is still lower than that of boys. In 2012 / 2013, to attain gender equality, female enrolment should increase by 14 percentage points. Besides in the academic year 2012 / 2013, the ratio of female to male enrolment was only 0.75.

In terms of administrative regions in Eritrea, in the academic year 2012 / 2013 , 42 % in Anseba region, 42 % in Southern (Dehub) region, 26 % in Southern Red Sea (Dehubawi Keyih Bahri) region, 33% in Gash Barka region, 49% in Central (Maekel) region and 28% in Northern Red Sea (Semienawi Keyih Bahri) region, girls were enrolled in secondary level education. The Central Administrative region has the highest share of girl's enrollment in secondary level which was 49%. In the contrary, the Southern Red

Sea region has the lowest share of female enrollment. The reason is inadequate number of secondary schools in this region. In the academic year 2012 / 2013 in the Southern Red Sea region, there were only 2 secondary schools giving service (MOE of Eritrea, 2013b). Table 1 provides a summary of enrolment in secondary level in Eritrea between 1993/94 and 2012/2013.

Table 1  
*Enrolment in secondary level between 1993 / 94 and 2012 / 2013*

Year	Enrolment in Secondary level						Gross Enrollment Ratio			
	Total	Male	Female	Female	M-F	F/M	T	M	F	F/M
1993 / 94	32,756	19,432	13,324	40.7	18.6	0.67	19.9	23.1	16.6	0.71
1994 / 95	36,728	22,097	14,631	39.8	20.4	0.66	21.7	25.5	17.7	0.69
1995 / 96	39,188	23,713	15,475	39.5	31.0	0.65	22.4	26.6	18.1	0.68
1996 / 97	40,594	24,262	16,332	40.2	19.6	0.67	22.6	26.4	18.6	0.70
1997 / 98	41,615	25,198	16,417	39.4	21.2	0.65	22.4	26.6	18.1	0.68
1998 / 99	47,533	29,777	17,756	37.3	25.4	0.59	24.9	30.5	19.0	0.62
1999 / 00	59,626	37,533	22,093	37.0	26.0	0.59	30.3	37.3	23.0	0.61
2000 / 01	63,951	40,355	23,596	36.9	26.2	0.58	31.5	38.9	23.8	0.61
2001 / 02	70,183	45,129	25,054	35.7	28.6	0.55	33.6	42.2	24.5	0.58
2002 / 03	72,818	46,633	26,185	36	28	0.56	33.8	42.4	24.9	0.58
2003 / 04	69,401	46,449	22,952	33.1	33.8	0.49	33.7	44.0	22.9	0.52
2004 / 05	76,051	50,010	26,041	34.2	31.6	0.52	35.9	46.0	25.3	0.55
2005 / 06	77,644	50,351	27,293	35.2	29.6	0.54	36.2	45.7	26.1	0.57
2006 / 07	75,800	45,471	30,329	40.9	19.1	0.66	33.0	38.7	27.0	0.69
2007 / 08	83,411	49,323	34,088	40.9	18.2	0.69	33.9	39.6	28.1	0.70
2008 / 09	89,761	53,997	35,764	39	22	0.66	34.4	41.3	27.6	0.66
2009 / 10	95,076	55,770	39,306	41	18	0.70	33.9	39.8	28.1	0.70
2010 / 11	99,993	57,309	42,684	42	16	0.74	34.5	39.5	29.5	0.74
2011 / 2012	95,152	54,936	40,216	42	16	0.73	31.7	36.3	27.0	0.74
2012 / 2013	110,369	62,881	47,488	43	14	0.75	34.1	37.9	30.0	0.79

Source: MOE of Eritrea, 2013a

The total gross enrollment ratio increased from 19.9 % in the academic year 1993 / 94 to 34.1 % in the academic year 2012 / 2013 as it is indicated in Table 1. Despite a total increase in gross enrollment ratio, to attain gender equality, female gross enrollment ratio should have increased by 7.9 percentage points in the academic year 2012 / 13. The gender parity index shows that in 2012 / 13 female GER for secondary level was only 0.79 of the male GER. This shows that the status of girl's enrolment in Secondary education is lower and gender disparity in favor of boys.

### 3.2 Hindering Factors to Girls' Enrolment in Eritrea

In Eritrea, the distance between girls' homes and schools is long preventing girls' access to education. Many schools, particularly those in remote areas, are not only far from homes, but girls have to walk long distance through difficult terrain and unlit roads in order to attend school. Table 2 shows the average distance that Eritrean children travel to attend in elementary, middle and secondary schools national level.

Table 2  
*Average distances at national level*

Level of school	Average distance at national level in kilo meters
Elementary school	5.3
Middle school	21.76
Secondary school	63.53

Source: MOE of Eritrea, 2009

Early marriage is another major factor that leads to the abandonment of girls from formal education. The practice of marrying girls at a young age is most common in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, and Eritrea is not an exemption (UNICEF, 2001b). UNICEF recognized early marriage as a barrier to girls' primary school education in Chad, Eritrea, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Yemen. In Eritrea, the legal minimum age of marriage is 18. However, despite this legal minimum age of marriage, in many parts of Eritrea the average marriage age is 15 years (NUEW, 2004; Haile, 2005). Early marriage is basically practiced in the rural areas of Eritrea where more than 75 % of the people live in (Rena, 2009). Generally, early female marriage is encouraged by all ethnic groups in the country. In Eritrea it is believed that early marriage secure more children. On the other hand an unmarried female is considered as a burden and shame to the family and want her to get married early even before the age of 18 years.

Poverty is another factor that contributes to low enrolment of girls in secondary schools in Eritrea. According to Eritrea IPRSP, it was reported that in 2004, 66% of households were living below poverty line in the country (GOE, 2004). Majority of Eritrean households are poor and the size of their families is big with an average of 6 children in a family (EDHS, 2002). Although tuition is technically free in Eritrean education, there are several user fees and expenses that limit girl's education like registration fees, uniforms, purchasing exercise books and text books, house rents, transportation costs and food subsidies for children required to attend middle and secondary schools outside the community, as well as levies imposed by school managements. In Eritrea, the opportunity cost of sending a girl to school is higher than that of boys. Girls participate more in household activities, support their mothers in bringing water and wood and assist in looking after the children. According to a study by Smith (2001) in Eritrea six to seven hours a day are spent on daily housework by girls aged 10-15.

#### **4. Discussion**

Eritrea's education policy is based on the principle of universal primary education of up to eight years, as well as skilled manpower requirements of both the public and private sectors. It intends to promote equal opportunity in terms of access, equity, relevance and continuity of education to all school-aged children; encourage the provision of education by private sector; to provide continuing education through formal and non-formal channels to achieve a more literate and skilled population and to make serious efforts in

the sharing of the costs of education between government, communities and parents. Moreover the National education policy articulates the central value placed on gender equality in education. Specifically addressing gender disparity in education, the government's education policy states, the government shall work towards the elimination of gender disparity at all levels of the education system. It further commits the government to ensuring girls full and equal access to and achievement in basic and secondary education of good quality (NUEW, 2004). Despite this policy, the status of girl's enrolment in the Secondary education level is lower. There is a marked gender disparity where the enrollment for boys is 57 % and 43 % for girls.

Long distance from home to school combined with lack of transportation is a major cause of low girl's school enrollment in Eritrean education. Availability of schools within a reasonable distance from home is often a pre-condition for school participation particularly for girls. As Rihani (2007) in his study stated that, the distance between home and the secondary school becomes more of a problem for girls, especially in rural areas, where middle and upper secondary schools are more likely to be distant from small villages. Research in diverse countries such as Ghana, India, Malaysia, and the Philippines also indicates that distance matters especially for girl's school enrollment and attendance.

The average distance for elementary, middle and secondary school levels is long contributing to the low status of girls enrolment. Average distance differs from one area to another, both at local and national level. For instance, at a national level, on average students are required to travel 5.3 km at elementary school level, 21.76 km at middle school level and 63.53 km at secondary school level. This shows that schools are not near to students' home or village and the average distance increases with an increase in the level of schools. The reason for this is due to inadequate supply of schools, particularly middle and secondary schools in remote areas.

In almost all regions of Eritrea, in order to attend middle and secondary education, a girl must travel a long distance, or either, leave home to live in a rented house or with relatives outside the family village. However this is hard for girls who are generally not allowed to travel long distance or rent house in the urban area to continue their education for safety reasons. Therefore from the above facts, we can conclude that, distance is major barrier to girl's education in Eritrea.

Early marriage is another reason for the low status of girl's enrollment in Secondary education particularly in rural areas of Eritrea where majority of the population live. Hyde (1993) in his study of barriers to Women's Education in Developing Countries indicated marriage is an important reason for girl's poor entry to secondary or higher institutions or leave before completing the cycle. Also Review of studies in developing countries showed that in countries where girls are married at early age school enrollment of females was lower (Bowman & Anderson, 1982). In Eritrea, despite the legal minimum age of marriage which is 18, families prepare girls for marriage before the age of 18; at a time when they should be at school. This practice is common because, many

parents do not associate their daughters' schooling with social and economic success. A large number of parents in the society believe that women's natural duty is to get married and give birth. Parents see education as either irrelevant or as a barrier to achieving the goals and aspirations that they have for their daughters. An earlier study by Kane (2007) showed that, parents want their daughters to marry at 15 to 18 years of age. Eritrean society is a patriarchal society where the man decides everything and women listen to or accept orders from males. As a result, girls do not have a chance to express their preferences between education and marriage. The decision to stay at school or to get married is on the hands of the parents. This leads to girls' drop out of the school, often without life skills and negotiating power. Also husbands target the younger girls for marriage and they do not even choose the older well educated girls because in the community, there is a belief that, it is difficult to control an educated girl. Those girls, who marry young, inevitably have children early, and have many children, because their knowledge of contraception is poor and their power to negotiate its usage is weak. This makes it very difficult to go to school even after marriage.

The importance of female role models is widely accepted as means of promoting greater gender equality. Yet the number of women teachers remains extremely low in many countries (UNESCO, 2003). International research demonstrates that recruiting more female teachers usually works for increasing girl's school enrolment (World Bank, 2001). In Eritrea, the percentage of female teachers is 18% of the teaching force at the Secondary School levels and is skewed in favor of urban and semi urban centers. The presence of female teachers, apart from providing positive role models to young girls, often reduces parents' concerns about their daughter's morality and security. However, the inadequate supply of female teachers, particularly in the rural areas visibly deprives girls the much aspired role model in the regions.

Another significant constraint affecting the status of girls' enrollment in Secondary education in Eritrea is household poverty. The lower the income of the families, the lower will be the probability of sending their children to school. Majority of the Eritrean households are poor with big family size, averagely 6 children in a family. Due to the household poverty, many parents cannot afford to pay the school registration fees, uniforms, purchasing exercise books and text books, house rents, transportation costs and food subsidies for children required to attend middle and secondary schools outside the community, as well as levies imposed by school managements. This finding is consistent with Teshome (2002) who in his study found direct schooling costs are the major reason why parents offer not to educate girls. The opportunity costs of girls' schooling are associated with resources/services lost due to sending the child to school. Child labour is indispensable to the survival of many rural households in Sub-Sahara Africa including Eritrea, agricultural work, domestic work (cooking, collecting fuel, and fetching water) marketing as well as child care services are required from children, with girls demanded more than boys.

## 5. Conclusions and Policy Implications

Based on the findings, this paper concludes the following:

- a) Despite the Government of the State of Eritrea pledge to the six “Education for All” objectives and the relevant target three of the Millennium Development Goals, the status of girl’s enrolment is still lower in Eritrea at all levels of education, particularly in the secondary level, where the ratio of female to male enrollment is still low.
- b) While there are myriad underlying issues hindering girls’ enrollment in education, the key ones include long distance from home to school, the tradition of early marriage in which the average marriage age is 15, lack of female role model teachers particularly in rural areas where female teachers are very few and poverty levels

This paper provides the following policy implications to tackle the problem of low girl’s enrolment in education in Eritrea.

- a) Reducing the long distance to schools, by building schools at a reasonable distance, upgrading and expanding the existing boarding schools as well as establishment of new boarding schools in areas where girl’s enrollment is very low due to long distance, reducing or subsidizing house rent and food supply costs for female students.
- b) Conducting campaigns through religious leaders, community elders and local administrators to improve cultural and social traditions that affect girls’ education and enforcement of the legal minimum age of marriage to be 18,
- c) Recruitment of female teachers, in addition to serving as a role model, enhance community value of education and build parental confidence in sending their girl’s to school, by providing incentives like free boarding, transportation allowance. This can attract more female teachers in rural areas.
- d) Reducing or subsidizing school related direct costs such as registration fees, book purchasing, school supplies that prohibit poor parents from sending their children to school.

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