

Gender Parity in Education: Laptops Bridge the Gap

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Education for girls is severely unequal throughout the developing world, particularly so in the Middle East and Africa¹, serving as a key ingredient to regional instability. One Laptop per Child strives to right this imbalance through personalized and individual approaches to female education based on specific regional contexts.

One of the worst examples of inequality exists in Middle East where, for example, the Gender Parity Index in Afghanistan is 0.44, male enrollment in primary school education is more than twice than that of females. The XO provides an opportunity for community and group-based learning outside of the classroom in contexts where females are denied access to formal education. A group of young girls can come together and share their knowledge and experience, and build their skills through innovative technology, while girls isolated from their communities can maintain connectivity and access to a variety of social and academic networks globally.

Africa too has a severe imbalance in male to female education where access to education for females can also have severe implications for health. According to a recent World Bank report on female education in Africa, increased education for girls protects against HIV/AIDS infection, reduces women's fertility rates, lowers infant, child, and maternal mortality rates, and spreads overall health practices through women's roles in family structures. Giving each school-age girl a laptop would provide a unique opportunity to not only enhance education on health, but also provide access to the most recent and reliable texts, libraries and information whether from the Internet, shared locally or among the community's XO; one hundred girls can keep 10,000 books distributed among their laptops.

Countries with the lowest number of girls in education are at the bottom of the human development table (OECD). Inequality in education not only leads to severe inequalities in income distribution and female presence in the workforce, but also has drastic implications on overall economic development, furthering regional instability and insecurity. Gender inequality in education has a direct impact on economic growth by lowering the average of human capital; the differences in growth rates for developing regions can in some part be attributed to large gender gaps in education. The XO helps to provide important tools for critical thinking and skill building in the workforce: enhancing female literacy, familiarity with computers, and the ability to solve problems using information technology. The successes of other economic development organizations in the field have indicated that economic prosperity is even more achievable and tangible through channels that work directly to empower women.

Violent conflict in any of these regions often leads to a situation where girls can become more invisible and severely marginalized; the XO provides a channel to connect to formal and informal learning opportunities and maintain continuity in unstable environments.

Communities benefit from the elevated status of girls on a broad level, and families receive the additional value of the technology as well as new and improved learning opportunities for society as a whole. By focusing on female education at the earliest stage, ages 6-12, girls can be empowered before being made aware of the limitations imposed by their society, catalyzing their life-long growth and development, bridging the gender gap.

¹ Gender Achievements and Prospects in Education: The Gap Report UNICEF 2005.

² Education For All (EFA) Report The World Bank. March 2009.