



SDG 4 mid-point challenge: Fixing the broken interlinkages between education and gender equality

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ABSTRACT

While the UN's SDG Summit 2023 marks the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda, many of the SDGs are moderately to severely off-track. In this commentary, we place emphasis on addressing hidden quality gaps that can help fix broken interlinkages, and in turn create positive correlations and harness untapped synergies, across goals. To illustrate broken interlinkages between SDGs 4 and 5, we focus on the puzzle of "education without employment" in South Asia. We argue that a hidden form of gender inequality in education quality – gender stereotypes in learning materials – potentially undermines interlinkages between SDG targets in the region, among other factors. If gender inequality in educational production is overlooked, a focus on enrolling more girls will not fix the broken links between SDGs 4 and 5. Addressing hidden gaps in public service quality should be a priority during the final half of the SDG campaign.

1. Introduction

It is widely accepted that the benefits of educating women include a range of social and economic outcomes, including better employment opportunities and higher wages (Hill and King, 1995). Globally, policymakers and international development agencies single out the provision of education as a key to empower women and boost their economic participation (UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2012). In particular, research on emerging economies has shown a robust link between rising education levels and increased labor market participation rates (Klasen et al., 2021).

Historically, a lack of gender equality in schools coexisted alongside low presence of women in the labor force in most developing countries. Over the course of the last half century, global consensus on the investment value of female education and employment, has produced much progress, particularly during the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) campaign.¹ In fact, since the close of the MDGs and now deep into the UN's latest agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it is clear that women worldwide are more educated than before. Globally gender gaps in educational attainment are also diminishing (Evans et al., 2020). Substantial progress was seen across much of Asia,

with South Asia making the largest gains. Yet this has not translated into higher economic status among women in many parts of developing Asia. In South Asia, for the past two decades, female employment participation has been low, leaving millions of women out of the region's economic successes (Najeeb et al., 2020). At the SDG mid-point, only 15.4 per cent of indicators devoted to gender progress are "on track" (United Nations, 2023a).

In a context of rapidly expanding female schooling and stagnant female employment, therefore, the objective of this commentary is to critically reflect on the challenge of broken interlinkages between SDG 4: Quality Education and SDG 5: Gender Equality & Women's Empowerment. While gender progress is undermined by multiple challenges, we focus on a relatively small piece of the overall puzzle. With the acknowledgement that true progress will require addressing long-term structural and cultural barriers, we advocate that we cannot neglect the lesser details that contribute to inequality. Specifically, this commentary examines an overlooked factor – gender inequality in education quality defined in terms of gender imbalance in textbook content. We argue that addressing this hidden form of gender inequality in the schooling process is an important reason for the broken interlinkages between SDGs 4 and 5.

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¹ Overall enrolment in primary education in low-income countries rose from 83% to 91% between 1990 and 2015. In Southern Asia, female-male primary school enrolment ratio increased from 74:100–104:100 during the same time (Galatsidas and Sheehy, 2015).

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In [Section 2](#) we explain the larger study context, briefly summarizing the key changes in education and gender equality related global goals and targets across MDGs and SDGs campaigns. Then we formally define the concept "hidden gender inequality in education quality." [Section 3](#) describes the so-called broken link between female education and gender equality in South Asia based on available secondary data. [Section 4](#) provides an in-depth account of this using peacetime Afghanistan as a case study where we summarize the evidence on gender bias in textbooks. [Section 5](#) concludes by highlighting the key policy message.

2. From MDGs 2 & 3 to SDGs 4 & 5: Conceptualizing hidden gender inequality in education quality

In the last decade, particularly since the inception of the SDGs, the term "quality education" has become more profound in discourse and practice. Moving from the MDGs to the SDGs, the global attention shifted from an emphasis on universal primary education to inclusive and equitable *quality* education for all. As global development agendas have unfolded, it has become clear that years of schooling are not an adequate measure of progress and instead, quality is what truly matters. The [UNICEF, 2019-2030 Education Strategy](#) stresses that "the association between education and economic growth is much more driven by learning outcomes than by access/enrolment" ([UNICEF, 2019](#)). In this context, [King and Winthrop \(2015\)](#) highlight specifically that high quality and gender-sensitive curricula and learning materials are key to progress, both of which received little attention in MDG targets.

MDG 2, the goal devoted to education during the Millennium campaign, had a single focus on access, relying on only one target: "To ensure that children universally – including both boys and girls – will be able to complete a full course of primary education by 2015".² Equally, MDG 3: Gender Equality was measured by the single target of achieving gender parity in education (i.e. "Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015"), though also included a reference to women's employment within the MDGs' indicator framework. Regardless, female schooling remained the key for interlinkages between MDGs 2 and 3.

Our choice of the term "hidden inequality" is motivated by the fact that none of the SDG 4 indicators explicitly recognize "gender inequality in educational production", let alone recognize it as a critical means. Targets associated with the fourth Sustainable Development Goal are somewhat vague to guide policy and practice when it comes to gender equality in education. For instance, while SDG Target 4.5 promises to 'eliminate gender disparities in education' and SDG 5 commits to achieving 'gender equality and empower all women and girls', these aspirational targets towards equality, equity, and inclusion do not convey the array of challenges, particularly those most invisible.

Equally, gender inclusion is critical for achieving SDG 4 both as means and ends ([UNESCO, 2020](#)). Academic discourse has long brought attention to this issue. [Giroux and Penna \(1979\)](#) laid a foundation for more critical gender discourse when they identified the issue of the "hidden curriculum," referring to how ideas are subtly communicated from schools into societies in the maintenance of often inequitable status quos. The examination of how gender norms are implicitly conveyed in educational processes then gained increasing attention among scholars since the turn of the millennium ([Mirza, 2004](#); [Tietz, 2007](#); [Blumberg, 2007](#); [Vu and Pham, 2022](#)).

Yet, in SDG 4 targets, reference to gender disparities in skills and opportunities in the context of "effective learning outcomes" has no explicit focus on gender mainstreamed learning materials. Target 4.7

² UN General Assembly, United Nations Millennium Declaration, Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly, 18 September 2000, A/RES/55/2, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3b00f4ea3.html> [accessed 15 January 2024]

lumps gender inequality together with numerous other transformative themes and advocates: "By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development".³ Similarly convoluted language is noticeable in indicator 4.7.1 ("Extent to which (i) global citizenship education and (ii) education for sustainable development, including gender equality and human rights, are mainstreamed at all levels in (a) national education policies; (b) curricula; (c) teacher education and (d) student assessment").

The consequence is that major policy reports on gender or education continue to overlook this institutional dimension of gender inequality, particularly as it manifests in learning material. A case in point is the recent UNDP publication entitled "Breaking down gender biases: Shifting social norms towards gender equality" ([UNDP, 2023](#)). The publication rightly worries about persistence of gendered social norms and how that is often embedded in institutional arrangements. It also acknowledges that "tackling prejudices and encouraging positive gender norms can be an important part of education curricula and social behaviour in schools" ([UNDP, 2023](#), p.17). Yet UNDP's "Gender Social Norms Index" (GSNI) capturing people's beliefs on gender equality in capabilities and rights, leaves out extensive gender bias in textbooks in countries with traditional gender norms as a key institutional input as well as outcome. This is despite the report's claim that by focusing on survey data on beliefs, biases and prejudices, GSNI "provides an in-depth account of the root causes of gender inequality that hinder progress for women and girls" ([UNDP, 2023](#), p.5).⁴

3. The broken link between female education and gender equality in South Asian labor markets

During the MDGs campaign, substantial progress was made towards female schooling across much of Asia, with South Asia making the largest gains. Countries in South Asia narrowed the Gender Parity Index (GPI)⁵ from 0.77 in 1991–1.03 by 2013, resulting in higher enrollment rates for girls than boys in primary education ([Asian Development Bank, 2015](#)). In some regions of the world, women have even more education than men.⁶ Despite such large gains for girls relative to boys in education, substantial gender gaps in employment remain, which hints at the broken link between SDG 4 and 5.

In 2021, just 25% of working age women were in the labor force in South Asia, which is nearly half the average across emerging markets and developing economies (EMDEs) ([Raiser, 2023](#)). Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, female labor force participation rate declined from 25.54% to 25.16% between 2015 and 2019 in South Asia ([Mukhopadhyay, 2023](#)) and from 27.9% to 24.1% between 2001 and 2021 ([ILO, 2023a](#)).

Patriarchal and social customs such as early marriage and childbirth are pervasive and limit women's economic participation ([Scott et al., 2021](#)). At the same time, improvements in marriage norms alone have not been enough. In India, this pattern is most notable with female labor force participation declining from 30% in 2000–23% by 2022 despite a

³ For the full list of indicators, see: https://tcg.uis.unesco.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2020/09/SDG4_indicator_list.pdf

⁴ See https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-06/gsni202302pdf_0.pdf

⁵ A GPI of less than 1 suggests girls are more disadvantaged than boys in schooling opportunities and a GPI of greater than 1 suggests the other way around.

⁶ In Southern Asia, female-male primary school enrolment ratio increased from 74:100–104:100 during the same time ([Galatsidas and Sheehy, 2015](#)).

significant reduction in early marriage. In Pakistan, the rate has stagnated since 2015 and stood at 25% in 2022. Agriculture still remains the main source of jobs for women in these countries.

One country that deviates from the regional trend in terms of women's economic empowerment is Bangladesh, where privately-owned readymade garments factories have created more formal jobs for women than neighboring India, while also driving GDP growth (Evans, 2022). Female labor force participation stood at 38% in 2022. However, gender inequality in terms of the prevalence of the practice of early marriage is still one of the highest in the world and gender attitudes are mostly traditional (Amin et al., 2017).

In addition to the within country variation, South Asia still lags behind other regions, the Middle East and North Africa aside, in gender outcomes and in attitudes towards gender equality. In this context, major policy documents for countries in the region still emphasize the need for sustained investment in female schooling. In fact, in Afghanistan, where economic opportunities for women are very limited, a recent ILO report insists that providing equal access for all young women and men to quality education and training remains a key challenge and priority for the future of Afghanistan (ILO, 2023b). However, another policy report for the region places emphasis on interventions and measures that tackle all gender-norms related barriers to women's participation. According to (World bank, 2022), "Social norms and personal beliefs are important determinants of gender outcomes, such as female labor force participation, even after controlling for the level of economic development" (p. XVII).

In this context, the right quality of female education can play a transformative role by shifting norms and beliefs through schooling. Yet recent research on textbooks highlights hidden biases in South Asian education systems (e.g. see Islam and Asadullah, 2018). We elaborate on this challenge in the next section.

4. Hidden gender inequality in education quality in South Asia

The low economic status of women in general, and the reduced labor market presence of women in particular, despite schooling progress across much of South Asia, elicits a critical question: *why are gains in education not equaling gains in employment for women?* Several threads of commentary exist on this topic but there is a fundamental and yet long overlooked policy challenge: schooling girls in a universally substandard quality education system.

An interesting country case study is Afghanistan where girls' school enrollment increased rapidly during the past two decades (Asadullah et al., 2019). Female labor force participation also saw an increase during 1990–2020 (Amber and Chichaibelu, 2023). However, since the takeover of the Taliban administration in 2021, the total population of employed people is around half a million fewer than before. According to the ILO, total female employment fell by an estimated 25 percent in the fourth quarter of 2022 compared to the second quarter of 2021 (ECW, 2022). Current gendered patterns in socioeconomic indicators have coincided with new restrictions on women's formal employment, freedom of movement, and clothing (UN Women, 2021). Since the Taliban takeover, the regime has systematically removed women from the public space, curbed their political participation, and sharply reduced the number of female media workers (RSF, 2021).

Although the recent transition to an authoritarian regime has provoked rapid declines in progress for women, Afghanistan has historically remained far behind other nations in the region. The World Economic Forum (2021) ranked Afghanistan at the bottom in the years both prior and following the government transition. Most importantly the focus on Taliban related disruptions has overlooked two key deficits in the country's education strategy.

First, efforts to educate girls by building public schools during the latest Taliban-free regime has been undermined by a relatively flat learning profile. School quality was so low that schooling did not significantly boost female literacy (Asadullah et al., 2019). Second,

reform efforts during the peacetime era (i.e. 2002–2020) entirely overlooked hidden inequality in education quality. An analysis of peacetime English and Pashto language textbooks at both primary and secondary levels reveals numerous instances where lessons discourage women from pursuing outside roles, even predating the Taliban regime (Islam and Asadullah, 2024). The study also observes a high presence of gender stereotypes in professional roles and activities across textbook subjects and grades. A similar study of higher secondary school learning materials found that textbooks reinforce traditional gender roles, with low female visibility in social roles (Orfan 2023). Sarvarzade and Wotipka (2017) evaluated textbooks from three different political regimes between 1980 and 2010 in Afghanistan. In post-Taliban textbooks, female characters become more visible but mostly in roles complementary to men. The dominant female profession outside the home was teaching.

The widespread gender bias in textbooks is somewhat surprising for Afghanistan where in the 1980 s, women enjoyed better life opportunities. By 1992, women accounted for 50 percent students at Kabul university, 50 percent of civilian government employees and 40 percent of doctors (Nawid 2007). Strong participation of women was recorded in what has become men-only fields such as law and engineering. Women comprised 70 percent of teachers, 40 percent doctors an equal number of students in the universities (Sokhanwar et al., 2018). Also, 43 percent of employees at the ministry of education in 1980 s were women (Baiza, 2013).

In general, compared to their East Asian counterparts, South Asian textbooks exhibit significantly greater bias towards females (Islam and Asadullah, 2018). Within the region, with an exception to Bangladesh, girls and women are poorly represented both in text as well as pictures. In Pakistan, one study covering 194 textbooks from four provinces found an overall female share of 20.4% in characters (Mirza, 2004). More recent studies confirm female stereotypes in Pakistani textbooks (Ali and Hussain, 2019). Based on a comparative study of four countries, Islam and Asadullah (2018) also show that Pakistani secondary school textbooks are of lowest quality when assessed in terms of gender bias. For instance, the share of female characters in Pakistani textbooks in social and professional roles is 16% and 19% respectively. Similarly, no female characters were found in 78 pictures related to outdoor activities. In textbooks for Punjab province, female presence in social roles was as low as 7.6%. For India, evidence compiled over the last two decades reveals female presence ranging between 7% (Sumalatha and Ramakrishnaiah, 2004) to 30% (Kosir and Lakshminarayanan, 2023). A recent global review of non-pictorial content of textbooks from 7 South Asian and 27 other countries confirm the systematic nature of the challenge (Crawford, Saintis-Miller and Todd, 2024). The study finds that, even after adjusting for grade and subject, all the 7 South Asian countries rank in the bottom 10 in terms of female share in gendered words. Most importantly, of the total 34 study countries, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sri Lanka have the lowest representation of women and girls.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Following the UN's Millennium Development Goals campaign, women worldwide are more educated than ever before. In this commentary, we have argued that the current focus on boosting female enrollment in school alone will not pay dividends for gender equality including women's employment. Indeed, overall progress towards women's economic participation during the first half of SDGs campaign has been slow and even regressed in some parts of South Asia (World bank, 2022). Furthermore, the phenomenon of education without employment hints at broken interlinkages among key global development goals and addressing this must be a priority during the second half of the SDG campaign.

Gender parity in education in South Asia has not resulted in advancing economic participation for all women. The lesson from the region, particularly the experience of peacetime Afghanistan, is that

simply getting girls in school will not be sufficient for achieving gender equality and/or increasing women's participation in the economy unless women, among other opportunities, have access to high quality learning materials, in particular, gender empowering textbooks. According to Stromquist (as cited in Blumberg, 2007), "Despite the weak attention to gender equity in schooling, [promoting gender equality in the textbook and throughout the education system] may represent the strongest source of counter messages to traditional norms learned in the family, community, and national media" (p. 35).

Yet, UNESCO notes that tackling biases in textbooks has seen mixed progress (UNESCO, 2022).

Given the interlinkages between SDGs 4 and 5, global institutions, governments, and education advocates have started to recognize the quality shortfall in learning materials with regards to the gendered content of textbooks (UNESCO, 2020).

At the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, it is imperative that we identify and leverage synergies across goals. In this context, we have emphasized addressing hidden quality gaps that may contribute to broken interlinkages. Despite growing academic evidence, the issue of gender bias in textbooks continues to remain largely neglected in national education policies. Improved integration of policy and scholarly discourse may effectively address the ongoing problem of broken interlinkages within the global development agenda. Particularly since the UN Secretary General's SDG progress report finds that many of the SDGs are moderately to severely off-track, it is essential to establish actions that create a positive correlation and harness untapped synergies across goals (United Nations, 2023b). In resource constrained environments, this is especially useful as the right investments in one goal, may produce gains in others. Such positive externalities can help to expedite progress to achieve the full range of the SDGs within the 2030 timeline.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Asadullah M Niaz: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Webb Amber:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Islam Kazi Md Mukitul:** Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis.

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