It’s time for Africa to invest in education, not war

By Sibongile Ncube, Zimbabwe

The play of statistics to do with education can be quite illuminating, if slightly bemusing: primary school enrolment may have increased in sub-Saharan Africa by three percentage points since the beginning of the 1990s, but this still means that less than 60 percent of children are in school.

According to the United Nations Development Programme’s Human Development Report 2003, 115 million of the 680 million children of school going age in developing countries do not attend classes. Of that number, a good three-fifths are girls. Moreover, not all children who enrol complete their studies. Just over half of the children who start primary school finish it and in sub-Saharan Africa only one in three gets to do so.

What the statistics fail to bring out, however, is the power play that attends African governments’ decisions on where to put their money. Even though education is a basic human right, African governments continue to spend extensively on the military rather than on establishing the building blocks of a more meaningful future for children.

Economist Witness Chinyama argues that African governments must get their priorities right and put more resources in social services such as basic education, which is the engine of any country’s economic development. Yet they have traditionally allocated more resources to expenditure rather than investment in social services. “They should operationalise capital budgets and social ministries,” Chinyama says, “as these play a crucial role in developing the economy.”

Military spending in sub-Saharan Africa only one in three gets to do so.

Predictably, the majority of schools were unable to cope with the onslaught both in terms of facilities and teaching staff. There was no money to recruit new teachers and those already on the job were overwhelmed by the work load. Nevertheless, Kenya had taken a critical step in the direction of giving all children a chance to go to school.

Like many other developing nations, Kenya relies on international funders and donors to support its free primary education programme. There are different categories of international organisations that support the cause of free education. They include church related organisations, humanitarian organisations, bilateral donors and the Bretton Woods institutions.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child says all children have the right to an education and to develop their personality and talent to a full potential. Article 28 stipulates that governments, “shall ... make primary education compulsory and available to all”. One of the document’s main goals is to eliminate “ignorance and illiteracy throughout the world.”
Free education: who calls the shots?

From Page 1

But do the international bodies have their own agenda in supporting African countries to achieve free education? This question is hardly frivolous: when the Kenya government increased teachers’ salaries to head off a long-standing pay award dispute dating back to 1997, the local World Bank country director made his dissatisfaction known.

He argued that Kenya’s wage bill was too high and that 31 percent of its gross domestic product goes to salaries for public servants, including teachers.

He pointed to the fact that 28 percent of the GDP is spent on recurrent expenditure and compared this with Tanzania, which spends 4.1 percent of its GDP, Uganda with 5.7 percent and Zambia with 7.8 percent.

Free education is a component of recurrent expenditure, which is also used to service schools and roads.

What the World Bank was doing, in effect, was to question the government’s policies. As far as it was concerned, Kenya was simply not focusing on priority areas. The core focus should be on agriculture, it argues. What this means is that the bank wants to direct the policies of this country.

This is not unexpected: any kind of support comes with strings attached. For example, Japan recently granted Kenya US$1 billion for educational, food, health and water assistance. The grant is part of an economic package in support of the New Economic Plan for Africa’s Development (Nepad). But why should education be tied to Nepal? Is this not a way of some of these global institutions sneaking in their agenda?

If universal primary education is to be achieved by the year 2015, African governments will need genuine support. Africa needs to increase children’s access to education; increase basic/compulsory free education levels, improve the quality of the curriculum and focus teacher training around more effective methods of teaching. Adequate pay for teachers is central to all this.

“Africa needs to increase children’s access to education; increase basic/compulsory free education levels, improve the quality of the curriculum and focus teacher training around more effective methods of teaching. Adequate pay for teachers is central to all this”

African should invest in education, not war

During the Cold War, Africa was one of the most militarised zones in the world. At the beginning of the 1990s, a semblance of peace and stability returned to countries that began the process of opening up the political space to more players. But coups and conflicts in the mid-1990s have undermined the gains. A peculiar feature of militarisation in Africa is that the poorest countries — including Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Somalia — are spending the most on arms and the military.

With continued political instability in Rwanda, Burundi, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Algeria, Eritrea and the Democratic Republic of Congo, military spending is likely to continue its growth rather than decrease. This will clearly work against the drive to achieve education for all by 2015. The literacy rate in Sierra Leone stands at 36.3 percent, that of females accounts for 22.6 percent. Mozambique's literacy rate is 42.1 percent, well below the continental average of 58.5 percent. Zambia's is on the high side at 78.9 percent and Zimbabwe's is above 80 percent.

Piling on the agony

Poverty has made a bad situation worse, especially when households reeling under its effects have to pay school fees.

In southern African countries, such as Zimbabwe, drought threatens to pile on the agony as most resources are channelled into importing food. Some countries are, however, cutting back on military budgets: South Africa has reduced its military budget by at least 51 percent since 1989. Mozambique has made efforts to halve its troops in keeping with the 1992 peace agreement that ended the conflict between the regime and the Frente Mozambican for the Liberation of the People (Frelimo) government and rebels of the National Resistance Movement.

According to Liberian Education Minister Evelyne Kandaka, the ongoing war has deprived the population of education. Only 35 percent of Liberians are literate. The effects of continued warfare will be felt long after the crisis is over for the simple reason that Liberians can only contribute to the growth and development of their nation if they are literate.

If governments channelled more resources to the education sector, the burden on parents would be greatly reduced. Yet cost sharing has become the by-word in many African countries.

Says Molly Khumalo, a Zimbabwean mother of four: “We want the best for our children. We want them to go to schools of our choice, we want them to have all the requirements. The effects of continued warfare will be felt long after the crisis is over for the simple reason that Liberians can only contribute to the growth and development of their nation if they are literate.

Although free education has led to increased enrolment in many African countries, it is not without its difficulties, however. Zimbabwe allocated $109 billion to the ministry of education last year and $76 billion to the defence ministry (fiscal rates). But there are those who argue that this is not good enough for the country to achieve its education goals. With the national budget already around the corner, many Zimbabweans are calling for an increase in allocations to social services.

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But reflects the views of AfricaWoman
All these children want is a decent education

By Sakina Zainul Datoo

Tanzania may have benefited from debt cancellation under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries programme, but the funds meant to go to the education sector have yet to reach the majority.

It is yet another complaint in a litany of woes facing education in this country. Though the universal primary education scheme assures every child of at least basic education, there are complaints that classes are too crowded for meaningful learning to take place. Quality education is now the domain of private schools, which charge fees that only a privileged few can afford.

But the harshest criticism is reserved for the cost-sharing scheme at the secondary school level. Pushed to the limits in the 1980s, the government introduced the scheme in which it shared the burden of education with parents. It was soon abandoned as impractical at the primary level but continues in secondary schools.

The result was that only about 13 per cent of children finishing primary school were able to proceed to the secondary level. Most parents are simply too poor to afford their part of the costs, including fees, books, uniform and the many other educational requirements that government schools do not provide.

Mariam Bilal, a standard seven pupil at the private Bilal Comprehensive School, says: “Cost sharing is not good enough. Most parents can’t cope with even that. The government itself does not appear able to do its part. I think non-governmental organisations and other institutions can fill the gaps.”

Her father, a small-time businessman, has already told her he is not sure he will be able to afford her secondary education. “Only education will change the future of Tanzanians, who are so poor,” says the girl who comes first in her class and dreams of becoming a doctor.

Parents must pay a minimum of $60 per year as public secondary school fees while uniform, books and other necessities can cost about $80 on the lower side. With most families here earning $1 per person per day, such costs are outright prohibitive. Most parents have more than one child, making secondary education a luxury in most families.

Hidaya Mohamed, who is in standard six, would like to go on to Benjamin Mkapa Secondary School, a government school she has heard praised a great deal. But there is no history of secondary education in her family. She has an older brother who does not go to school and a younger sister in a government primary school. Her mother, who is a single parent, earns a living selling maandazi (traditional buns).

“I don’t think I can go there,” says Mohamed. “My mother can’t pay her contribution. I don’t know who can help me… our government is good, but it is not for all. It helps only those who can be seen but not all of us.”

But Education Minister Joseph Mungai denies that students are unable to go to secondary school for lack of fees. “No child has ever been turned away from school because of inability to pay fees,” he told Afriquadian.

A survey at Bilal Comprehensive School in Temeke, Dar es Salaam, shows that most of the students finishing standard seven – which marks the end of primary education – get good grades. Many are able to secure places in government and private schools but cannot continue because they simply cannot afford the fees.

Says school administrator Sidikka Karim: “It is a sad reality. While in most places parents and teachers worry about their children’s performance in exams, the situation here is different. Passing is not the issue at all. It breaks our hearts when the children cannot go far because their parents are too poor to send them to secondary school.”

The future is very much on the minds of these children, who see education as the passport to a brighter future. “I want to study further so I can get a good job, but I don’t know if I can because I don’t have parents and I can’t keep on depending on my sister,” says 15-year-old Karwa Muharami. Her sister runs a small business and also supports a brother in standard four.

Hadija Amiri, 15, wants to be a nurse when she grows up – like the aunt who is now paying her fees – but is sceptical about the likelihood of getting government support for her secondary education. “To me, the government is doing nothing as lots of kids go without education,” she says.

Children in difficult circumstances depend on finding people with good hearts to sponsor their secondary education. Parents here spend sleepless nights worrying about the future of their children. For days on end, they search for people of goodwill who will spare some cash for their children’s fees. “It is not just about money,” says mother-of-three Twaiba Kassim. “It is also about policy. The government can do better.”

Having lost her husband to cancer two years ago and educated only up to standard seven, Kassim could only find a job as a househelp. She earns about $40 a month. “It’s a tough life, but I am sacrificing everything for my children’s education, so that they and their children can have better lives.”

Her oldest daughter has been lucky enough to find a sponsor willing to pay for a year at a private secondary school. Kassim herself pays minimal fees at a charitable private primary school for the other two. She is disillusioned with both cost sharing and government schools.

“Classes are crowded and the teachers can’t cope. Private schools are also better because they teach in English.” She is critical of a recent decision by Parliament to retain Kiswahili as the medium of instruction in government schools. “Those very MPs send their children to English schools. They are fooling us. You can’t go far without English. Even Mwalimu Nyerere himself had to know English to fight for our independence,” she adds.

In the cost-sharing scheme of things, the government is responsible for teachers’ salaries, the upkeep of schools and basic facilities. But most government schools do not have laboratories, libraries and books and parents are often asked to bear the extra costs of providing them. Consequently, most government schools are in pathetic condition – with no electricity. But Tanzania’s children are not overly worried about that. All they want is an education. “Cost sharing helps a little, but the government should do for secondary education what they have for primary – make it free and compulsory for every child to attend secondary school – since you need a minimum of form four education to become financially independent,” says Hood Salim. He is 15.

Minister Mungai has a different solution. He wants parents to build more day secondary schools so more children can further their education. It is a comment that annoys Margaret Chiwuya. Her mother is already stretched to capacity paying $400 per year for her primary education.
Focus on the Commonwealth Education Ministers’ Meeting: Edinburgh

Girls can’t afford to wait as ministers drag their feet

By Susan Naa Seygure, Ghana

There are no laws barring Ghanaian girls from enrolling in school and staying there. But there are many acts of commission and omission that keep them out of school. Some of these acts are criminal, but the culprits get away with it. Not a day passes without a story in the media of teachers defiling their pupils. Some fall pregnant and have to leave; others drop out because they cannot cope with the abuse.

A horrid situation is prevailing in modern Ghana, which boasts a fully-fledged ministry of basic, secondary and girl child education headed by a woman. There is no denying that the government has responded positively to the call to give women and girls equal opportunities in every aspect of life. But should this gender sensitive policy not have an impact on issues such as male teachers defiling their female charges?

The government should know that its gender sensitivity will not be judged by the number of institutions and projects oriented towards girls and women that have been started since it took office. The test is in how successful these initiatives have been in making a difference. There is a need to find a place for women. This should extend to an assessment of how many obvious practices and traditions that affect women that the government has managed to bring to an end.

Minister Christine Churcher says most of these discriminatory practices are deeply rooted in society. No amount of education can clear them if people are not ready to abandon them. Our society should also accept that it will remain backward until the gap between boys and girls in school is bridged.

In Ghana, the number of girls in primary school comprises 46 percent of the enrolment; this drops to 45 percent in junior secondary school and 42 percent in senior secondary.

Aba Mansah Forson, the director of the girls’ education unit of the ministry of education, youth and sports, says defilement of girls by their teachers happens more in rural areas than in towns. She reckons that rural girls are less assertive and confident than their urban counterparts. Forson encourages their children to “help” their teachers, male or female, leading to some teachers taking advantage of the situation to defile girls. Forson deflates to give statistics on the issue but is quick to add that whatever statistics are available do not reflect the true situation: not all the cases are reported to her unit.

“Government has to do more to ensure girls go to school and get the protection they need to stay and complete their education”

The education sector has no specific policy guidelines on defilement despite the fact that this problem dates back to colonial times. Is it that the education gurus do not consider this a problem, therefore we should all shut up and expect it to go away on its own? There is some consolation from Forson, who says: “The act constitutes gross indiscretion and offenders face outright dismissal from the Ghana Education Service.”

Ebenzer Baabeng of Darkuman has learnt that lesson well. On April 24, 2002, he was jailed for seven years for defiling a 15-year-old girl. He further used the age-old trick of giving the unsuspecting girl a book to take to his room. He then followed her and attacked her. In another incident, school proprietor Kwaku Apanfo appeared in court on charges of defiling a five-year-old. His wife was pregnant at the time, almost full term, but was that any reason to assault a child?

The reports abound, but whether the education officials hand over the perpetrators to police for prosecution is another matter altogether. Dissimilar deviants is not good enough. What is required is a well-documented policy that sets out how such matters should be dealt with once and for all. The sooner, the better – for both girls and Ghana’s image.

Even though Unicef has a five-year programme aimed at strengthening the capacity of the government and civil society to ensure all children achieve the right to basic education, Ghana can hardly be said to have reciprocated. This is not good enough, she argues, since it is government officials who should all shut up and expect it to go away on its own.

According to Obeng-Ofori, non-governmental organisations are doing more in this area. This is not good enough, she argues, since it is government officials who should all shut up and expect it to go away on its own.

“公办 ministers drag their feet”

The time for rhetoric is up. Governments must demonstrate more commitment to girls’ education. International conferences, such as the Commonwealth Education Ministers’ meeting, are fine. But the resolutions they adopt are not sufficient to justify the huge amounts of money spent on them. If not, they will be reduced to yet more “talk shops.” Girls cannot afford to wait as their leaders drag their feet.
TANZANIA

Throwing girls out is not solution

By Jamilah Mwanjisi

Like any other 16-year-old, Alice Imani had big dreams. She wanted to be a doctor. She just loved the status and influence that doctors have in Africa. Status is something she can no longer hope for. She was expelled from school last year after committing the “sin” of falling pregnant and has become used to it and it still hurts.

“At what can I do with standard six education?” she asks rhetorically. “I will just have to accept this life; I hope I can get some skills so I can take care of my child and myself.”

The ministry of education and culture in this country has only one remedy for schoolgirls who get pregnant: throw them out. Last year, the regulations fun- damentally dragged into marriage here, and it is not a solution.

“I will never want to go there,” she says. “They took me to his home. Sessions that he liked me came by and read out to me, I was unprepared for what I was hearing at the meeting.”

Umati established centre in 1986 to give a second chance to girls who drop out of primary school. They are taught family planning meth- ods and life skills. Those who make for the years lost may move on to private secondary schools or join vocational training institutes. They cannot be accepted in government schools.

Most of the girls at the centre are poor and their parents cannot af- ford the fees for private schools. Fees in private schools range from $500 to $1,000 a year.

Falling pregnant in school has other consequences: unmarried mothers are a source of embar- rassment for their families. Some girls are thrown out of home and are rejected by society. They lose any prospects of getting married as they are considered immoral.

Marjorie Mbilinyi of Haki Elimu (Right to Education), a non-govern- mental organisation that advocates quality and equal education in Tan- zania, argues that expelling preg- nant girls from school runs counter to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which makes education a basic right. “The sad thing is that it’s not even a law, just a regulation,” says Mbilinyi. “There is no excuse to leave it there and deprive girls of their basic right.”

“Pregnancy means you had sex and you were, therefore, misbe- having. Some argue that once you get pregnant you are an adult and you don’t deserve to be in school.”

“Anyone can consider you a 13-year-old an adult? She is still a child and needs to be given a chance to grow up and learn from her mistakes.”

As a result, they rush through or skip the topics that they feel un- comfortable with.

“In collaboration with Temeko Municipal Council, Dar es Salaam, Umati has trained 35 teachers on sexuality education and how to talk about the subject to young people. The project has reached just one- third of the schools in the district. Civil society groups in Tanzania have long advocated the cancella- tion of the pregnancy regulation, but the ministry of education and culture remains unmoved. Last July, some members of parliament raised the question with the then minister Juma Kapuya, who said the ministry was waiting for a con- sensus from the people on the mat- ter. Some parents were against the idea of giving young mothers an- other chance to complete their ed- ucation, he said. Besides, he added, there were not many girls dropping out of school due to pregnancy.

ZAMBIA

Coming to the rescue of abducted girls

By Pamela Chama

CHARITY Moyo drags her feet as she makes her way to the head- master’s office at Nhuchu Basic School in the heart of Chongwe dis- trict, east of Lusaka. The 16-year- old pupil is seven months pregnant. She tells her story, staring at her hands: “I was taking a walk by the river after leaving school when a man who had told me on two occa- sions that he liked me came by and grabbed me with the help of anoth- er man. He took me to his home. I was shocked by what happened next. I was unprepared for what I underwent. If that is what marriage is about, I never want to go there.

All I wanted was to return home and go back to school.”

Abduction of girls is common in this community and when she did not return home, her father imme- diately set in motion efforts to find the person responsible and report- ed the matter to the local office of the Programme for the Advancement of Girl Child Education (Page). He knew the importance of educating girls, having attended a talk arranged by the organisation. “At that meeting, we were told that a girl who has been forced into marriage could be rescued and al- lowed to continue with her school- ing, regardless of her condition,” says Elliot Moyo. “I was deter- mined to see my daughter comple- te school.”

A week after Charity’s abduc- tion, Page Coordinator Miriam Nyirongo completed the arrange- ments and got the 14-year-old out of the man’s home. She had already conceived, but that was not a prob- lem because the government had introduced an inclusion policy seeking to guarantee all children an education.

“Page promotes the education of girls regardless of their circum- stances, and that is what I am doing here in Chongwe,” says Nyirongo. She has her work cut out for her. Girls as young as 12 have been lit- erally dragged into marriage here, bringing to an abrupt end their ed- ucation. Page operates in 53 basic schools and four high schools.

“We have brought back 77 girls who were taken away from school this year for various reasons, in- cluding early marriage, sexual abuse and defilement,” says Dis- trict Education Board Secretary Edson Simwanza.

Because communities are in- volved in Page, parents have taken to coming into the local offices of- fering to withdraw their children from early marriages. Some simply want more information on how the programme can help advance the interests of girls.

Simwanza proudly says: “We rescued a girl of 13 a few days before her forced marriage. She had been in boarding school for three days now. Neither her parents nor the supposed husband know where she is and we are paying for every- thing!”

Chongwe is one of 72 districts running the Page campaign. The programme aims to reduce absen- teeism by doing follow-ups in the homes of children who stop coming to school. According to government data, pupils in rural areas are more likely to miss school than those in urban centres – at 40 to 80 percent.

Education Minister Andrew Mu- lenga says: “In the past, girls were thrown out of school upon getting pregnant because they were as- sumed to have graduated into the club of mothers, which was intel- lectual wastage.”

It is not always a bed of roses though, says Nyirongo: “I lost a case in one of the remotest areas where a girl aged less than 12 was being married off. The place was too far for me to reach with my mo- tor bike. Sometimes, parents are difficult and argue that the child is not mine. I tell them that though they brought the child into the world, she now belongs to the na- tion.”
Free education comes at a high price

By Kwamboka Oyaro

THREE pairs of hands fight for space on a small table ordinarily meant for two pupils. On the narrow passages between the rows of desks, more small hands scribble on books placed on the children’s laps. This standard one classroom is filled with enthusiastic faces – so many, in fact, that there is standing room only for the teacher.

This is St Joseph’s Primary School, Nyamira, about 350 kilometres west of Nairobi. Many of the children here are barefoot, others are not in the blue and white uniform. For most, it is their first time in a classroom – thanks to the free primary education introduced early this year. Even the tattered exercise books and the fact that they have to share text books will not dampen the spirits of the children in this room.

It is hope that defies reality: with the enrolment in primary schools shooting to 7.5 million from last year’s 2.5 million, teachers can hardly cope with the numbers. The strain on teachers has greatly compromised the standards of education. After freezing the employment of teachers since 1998, the ministry of education has advertised jobs – but they are in essence only for the replacement of those who have retired, quit or died.

If effective learning is to take place, the teacher-pupil ratio should be one to 30 at the most. But the learning mindset in Kenya now means that some teachers have to handle up to 70 pupils. Says Isabel Ogeto: “Teaching has never been so tiring. I stand here in front of the class, looking at tens of pairs of hopeful eyes. Although they are in standard one, they are at different levels of understanding. Some do not know how to hold a pencil, yet I can’t help them.”

Before free primary education, it was easier to cater for the needs of pupils with special needs. There was private tuition after school for those lagging behind. Parents conditioned to believe that education was the passport to a bright future dug deeper into their wallets – even when their children could actually pass exams under their own steam.

Tuition is now illegal in public schools. Slow learners must struggle to catch up with their classmates and many teachers complain of fatigue. Like other workers, teachers thrive on feedback, preferably evidence that the children are grasping the concepts they are being taught. They are motivated by adequate pay. But the classroom boom has not translated into better pay for the teachers, who went on strike in 1997 to demand the implementation of a salary award that gave them a rise of 200 to 400 per cent. The new government has come to an agreement with the Kenya National Union of Teachers which spreads the award over a decade. It is small consolation for teachers bombarded with arduous demands for quality education.

Indeed, teachers in a school in Nyamira have devised a way to avoid the stress of teaching classes filled to the brim. They hire untrained teachers and quacks to stand in for them as they spend time on farming or managing their businesses. Others simply do not turn up or make alternative arrangements.

Some teachers say forgoing ahead without assessing their pupils defeats the purpose of education and that it is impossible to mark 60 to 70 exercise books three or four times a day. Head teachers have had their own battles with ministry headquarters over extra levies. The government has banned such levies, but they have a habit of reappearing.

The euphoria holds for now, but it is only a case of the government putting a band-aid on. The government has promised more in vocational training than secondary education. One of the Commonwealth education values is developing life skills.

New purpose

The Ugandan government ought to focus on training teachers for vocational studies. This will give new purpose to primary education.

The fourteenth conference of Commonwealth education ministers in Canada in 2000 emphasised the need for reorienting education along the following lines: education should produce thinkers rather than mere implementers and should deal with all levels and different approaches.

The ministers also stressed the need to intensify efforts to promote gender equality in access to education. If this is to be achieved in Uganda, the focus should be on solving education’s worst enemy – poverty. This can only be achieved by concentrating efforts in primary education towards life skills and vocations. Education is a means to an end, not an end in itself, and should be geared towards addressing people’s basic needs.

Only recently, President Yoweri Museveni warned schools against charging compulsory lunch fees as this would discourage poor parents from sending children to school.

He said: “Children should not be sent away because they do not have today’s lunch. They should be left to continue with their education because education will give them lunch forever.”

That, of course, does not solve the problem. What it does is leave school authorities between a rock and a hard place: they have a choice between having hungry pupils trying to pay attention and having no pupils at all.

FOCUS ON THE COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION MINISTERS’ MEETING – EDINBURGH

Point of View

Education: A means to an end

By Margaret Nankumba, Uganda

The good news is that over 7.5 million Ugandan children are in primary school today, thanks to government’s commitment towards primary education. The bad news is that the dropout rate is so high that alarmed educationists are searching for a way out to find out precisely what is driving the children out of school.

According to ministry of education records, only 33 percent of the 2.1 million pupils who enrolled in primary one in 1997 reached primary six in 2002. Only 22 percent made it to primary seven this year.

They start dropping out as early as primary two. Of the two million or so who enrolled in 1998, 947,257 did not return the following year; a good number dropped out just before their primary leaving examinations.

With these levels of wastage, it would be wiser for the government to invest more in vocational training than secondary education. One of the Commonwealth education values is developing life skills.

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Given half a chance, girls will conquer science

By Rebecca Kuwai

SOPHIA Awortwi, Ghana’s director of science, technology and mathematics education, says: “Judging by the number of girls receiving prizes in science subjects, I can say that not only are more girls studying science but they are also excelling in it.”

The girls have the Science, Technology and Mathematics Education (STME) clinic to thank for their success. Started in 1987, STME came out of a regional workshop organised by the Commonwealth Secretariat in Accra. It had the theme “Gender stereotyping in science, technology and mathematics education”.

For the first 10 years, the clinic brought together up to 200 girls for a two-week period during the long vacation. Here they met female role models and specialists in scientific disciplines; they also had lessons in science, maths and technology – the idea being to demystify science and mathematics and expose the girls to career opportunities in those areas.

The programme spread to the regional level after 1997 and also included junior secondary schools. It has since been introduced at the district level. As at 2002, more than 6,000 girls had benefited from the scheme. With such results, the effort was worth it.

When the programme started, girls represented only 11 percent of students taking science at the GCE level. Five years later, the number had risen to 24 percent. Says Awortwi: “It only happened when girls took science in higher learning institutions. In junior secondary schools, the number continues to rise.”

They are performing as well as some boys. In a number of cases, some girls in senior secondary school perform better than boys. Catherine Dagrist, a pupil at the University of Cape Coast who won a prize, said she was not into competition but her studies in mathematics and physics had improved under the scheme.

Girls in co-educational institutions suffer significantly more: They must contend with lecherous teachers and adventurous boys who want to experiment and satisfy their sexual curiosity. Like the boys, the girls are often ignorant about what is happening to their bodies. Girls in mixed schools have a hard time of it. Sometimes their clothing is removed as a stunt.

Indeed, many of the girls in the Fawe study described their first experience of menstruation as “shameful, terrifying or stressful. In Ghana, menstruation is not a threat to men. The shame is in the girls’ experience.”

The demonising of menstruation is perpetuated by some religious sects, which consider a woman in her menses as not clean enough to receive communion. In fact, they may not even be allowed into church. The cycle is completed by traditionalists who might not even allow a woman to cook for her husband while she is on her periods.

That girls should continue to be stigmatised and discriminated against simply because their bodies are responding to the natural order of things is unacceptable in the 21st Century. Forget the notion that girls in primary school are too young to know about menstruation. It is the duty of district assemblies, the Ghana Education Service and other stakeholders to provide facilities such as toilets, water and sanitary towels to make schools girl-friendly, argues Adow.

Menstruation is a natural part of every woman’s adult life and it need not be turned into a crisis or something to be ashamed of. African governments did, after all, commit themselves to the 2000 World Education Forum Declaration in Dakar that set new goals to ensure education for all.

They appended their signatures to the Declaration, in which they agreed to:

• Expand and improve comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged.
• Ensure that by 2015, all children – particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities – have access to and can complete quality primary education that is free and compulsory.
• Improve adult literacy rates by 50 percent by the year 2015, especially for women, and ensure that all adults have equitable access to basic and continuing education.

• Eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 and gender inequalities in all aspects of education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring that girls will have full and equal access to and achievement of basic education on terms of equal quality.

Toilets, water and a girl-friendly environment in schools are surely not too much to ask when the pay off is a better-adjusted society. And so we ask the Honourable Ministers in Edinburgh to put the education of girls on top of their agenda. And let’s not forget menstruation. It is nothing to be embarrassed about. The shame is in letting it ruin the lives of millions of schoolgirls in Africa.

Tell our daughters about sex and periods

By Charity Binka

GROWING up and facing the challenges of adolescence is a subject that is unlikely to feature on the agenda at the Commonwealth Education Ministers’ meeting in Edinburgh.

Yet natural developments such as puberty and the onset of menstruation are still compromising the level of girls’ education in many parts of Africa. Consider these findings from a 2000 study conducted by the Forum for African Women Educationalists in the Eastern, Volta, Brong Ahafo and Northern regions of Ghana: Even though adolescent pregnancy is a major factor in school drop out, not much has been done to counsel girls on the process of sexual maturation and menstruation. Some girls are thrown into shock the first time they menstruate. Some fall pregnant and do not even know it.

A total of 1,544 teenaged girls in junior and secondary schools were interviewed for the “Exploratory research on sexual maturation and menstrual hygiene practices among adolescent school girls in Ghana”.

Not surprisingly, the wastage of girls in the school system due to pregnancy is high. About 28 percent of girls getting pregnant were aged 15 and below; some fell pregnant at nine – truly a case of children having children.

Girls in co-educational institutions suffer significantly more: They must contend with lecherous teachers and adventurous boys who want to experiment and satisfy their sexual curiosity. Like the boys, the girls are often ignorant about what is happening to their bodies. Girls in mixed schools have a hard time of it. Sometimes their clothing is removed as a stunt.

Indeed, many of the girls in the Fawe study described their first experience of menstruation as “shameful, terrifying or stressful. In Ghana, menstruation is not a threat to men. The shame is in the girls’ experience.”

The demonising of menstruation is perpetuated by some religious sects, which consider a woman in her menses as not clean enough to receive communion. In fact, they may not even be allowed into church. The cycle is completed by traditionalists who might not even allow a woman to cook for her husband while she is on her periods.

That girls should continue to be stigmatised and discriminated against simply because their bodies are responding to the natural order of things is unacceptable in the 21st Century. Forget the notion that girls in primary school are too young to know about menstruation. It is the duty of district assemblies, the Ghana Education Service and other stakeholders to provide facilities such as toilets, water and sanitary towels to make schools girl-friendly, argues Adow.

Menstruation is a natural part of every woman’s adult life and it need not be turned into a crisis or something to be ashamed of. African governments did, after all, commit themselves to the 2000 World Education Forum Declaration in Dakar that set new goals to ensure education for all.

They appended their signatures to the Declaration, in which they agreed to:

• Expand and improve comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged.
• Ensure that by 2015, all children – particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities – have access to and can complete quality primary education that is free and compulsory.
• Improve adult literacy rates by 50 percent by the year 2015, especially for women, and ensure that all adults have equitable access to basic and continuing education.

• Eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 and gender inequalities in all aspects of education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring that girls will have full and equal access to and achievement of basic education on terms of equal quality.

Toilets, water and a girl-friendly environment in schools are surely not too much to ask when the pay off is a better-adjusted society. And so we ask the Honourable Ministers in Edinburgh to put the education of girls on top of their agenda. And let’s not forget menstruation. It is nothing to be embarrassed about. The shame is in letting it ruin the lives of millions of schoolgirls in Africa.
Grooming tomorrow's leaders

By Yetunde Oladeinde

FOCUS ON THE COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION MINISTERS' MEETING – EDINBURGH

October 2003

NIGERIA

The children are grown; time to go back to class

By Ruth Butaumocho

ZIMBABWE

Not keen to educate their daugh-
ters in the early days, considering
it a waste of money since they
would be getting married anyway.
The Zimbabwe Open University,
launched in 1989, offers women a
chance to educate the girls in high
education and get themselves qualifications
that can work to their advantage. The
university aims at providing "af-
fordable, accessible, flexible, high
quality and relevant education" in
the southern Africa region.

Instead of rigid academic require-
ments, the university asks for a
minimum of five Ordinary Level
passes and professional experi-
ence. Post learning, be it a formal
course or other form of education,
is taken into account. What this
has meant is that women who set-
too for teaching diploma after failing
to qualify for university can now
enrol for a degree course in
the same discipline.

The university has remained
ture to its vision: it is now the
largest learning institution in Zim-
abwe. Of the 13,856 students who
registered last year, 9,087 were
women. The percentage of women
enrolled at the university has risen
steadily over the years – living testi-
mony of the fact that women are
eager to put behind them years of
neglect since their family commit-
ments were difficult to combine
with full time study.

Says Mutsh Buvaka, in her final
year of media studies: "The cour-
ses are tailored to accommodate the
demands of our hectic lives. I am
able to do my assignments at home,
attend to my children and go for
lectures during the weekend."

Chigot says the flexibility of tu-
torials enabled her spend quality
time with her children and
grandchildren and left her ample
time to do her assignments. She
was, in fact, inspired by the fact
that one of her sons was a lecturer
at the university.

The road to university has been
long and hard, though. Women
were particularly sidelined in edu-
cation during the colonial era and
it has taken strength, perseverance
determination to face up to the
challenge of higher education. "I am
a retired nurse and teacher but
never felt the need to stay rooted
in that degree – to get a degree. "I
am overwhelmed," she told Africa-
woman. "But I'm glad I made it."

Chigot had a lot of difficulty en-
rolling as her mother passed away
but eventually found a place at the
Zimbabwe Open University, a dis-
tance learning institution that glad-
ly accepted her for the three-year
course. She was the oldest student
at the university.

Distance learning has thrown a
life-line to hundreds of Zimbabwean
women whose education was inter-
rupted for social and economic rea-
sons. Inadequate qualifications,
lack of fees and early marriage have
conspired to lock women out of
higher education. They have had
to use secondary school grades or
be content with certificates and
diplomas – meaning their profes-
sional progress was just as stunted
as their qualifications.

It is no coincidence that women
have had the short end of the stick
in education; many parents were
not keen to educate their daugh-
ters in the early days, considering
it a waste of money since they
would be getting married anyway.
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