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Gender, education and access to labour markets

Expert paper prepared by:

Dorrit Posel and Daniela Casale*
University of KwaZulu-Natal
South Africa

There have been very large gains in school enrolments in developing countries over the past two decades. There is still considerable regional variation, both in enrolment and in the quality of schooling, but overall, education gaps between developing and developed countries have clearly narrowed.

With the increase in education in developing countries, the gender gap in schooling has also been significantly reduced; and in some countries, including in Latin America and East Asia, a small female advantage in enrolment has emerged. Studies also find that once enrolled, girls typically progress through school as fast as boys. However, gender gaps in enrolment remain in poorer households, in rural areas and at higher levels of education. These gaps persist partly because girls and young women are disproportionately affected by demographic events (particularly teenage pregnancy and early marriage). In resource-constrained households, parents may also invest more in the education of boys than girls. More recent research further highlights how girls’ responsibility for domestic work and household labour affects the nature of their access to education.

In comparison to progress in education, progress in the labour market appears to have been slower. In all regions of the world – both developed and developing – a larger percentage of men than women participate in the labour market. However, the gender gap in labour force participation is greater in developing regions, and the gap exists even in regions where there is a

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female advantage in education. In most developing regions, women are not only less likely to participate in the labour market, but further, among those participating, they are less likely than men to find employment. Moreover, among those who find employment, women are more likely than men to be in vulnerable employment (own-account work or family labour).

Education has been important in improving labour market outcomes for women in developing regions, and gender gaps mostly decrease at higher levels of schooling. However, education has not been sufficient to overcome other constraints on both the supply-side and the demand-side of the labour market.

In developed countries, women's labour force participation typically increases with schooling. In developing countries, the relationship between education and labour force participation appears more often to be U-shaped: participation rates are relatively high among women with no education who are forced to accept low-paid work; they fall or stabilise among women with some education; before rising again among women with post-secondary schooling (as the opportunity costs of not working increase). Even where a similar relationship is observed for men, participation rates are lower among women than among men at each level of education.

Gender gaps in labour force participation are explained in part by traditionally defined gender roles, sustained by cultural norms, and by the nature of job growth. The significance of the demand-side of the labour market is particularly important when we consider the school-to-work transitions of the youth (15 to 24). Young women and men have entered the labour market when the creation of (formal) jobs has been limited. Consequently, despite being more educated than any previous generation, unemployment rates are far higher among the youth than the non-youth, and they are higher still among young women.

Among the employed, the relationship between education and earnings is positive for both men and women. However, gender gaps in earnings persist, even in countries where women are as (or more) educated than men, and where the returns to education are larger among women than among men (i.e. where the difference in earnings between the more and the less educated is greater for women than for men). These earnings disparities highlight gender differences in labour market opportunities and the types of job to which women and men typically gain access.

A review of the literature suggests therefore that the benefits of increased education have been mediated in the labour market by a number of constraints, including entrenched cultural norms about the appropriate roles of men and women, the continued sex-typing of occupations, and a lack of employment growth particularly in "good jobs" in developing countries. The persistence of gender gaps in labour force participation and earnings highlights the importance of policies which seek to reduce gender-stereotyping in education, in both subject choice and training; the provision of measures which make it easier for women to combine domestic work (including childcare) and employment; and policies which stimulate labour demand particularly for youth employment.

