

SCHOOL FEEDING WORKS

for

GIRLS' EDUCATION



World Food
Programme

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EDUCATION BREAKS THE POVERTY CYCLE	2
REALIZING EDUCATION FOR ALL	3
HUNGER AND EDUCATION	4
THE WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME'S ACTIONS	4
CASE STUDIES OF WFP TAKE-HOME RATION PROGRAMS	5
PAKISTAN	5
MOROCCO	6
NIGER	7
CAMEROON	8
LESSONS	9
CONCLUSION.....	10
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	11

EDUCATION BREAKS THE POVERTY CYCLE

Education is key to development and a powerful tool for lifting millions of the world's poor out of poverty.

As the educational level of a population increases, so do its chances of living a healthy, productive life. A survey of 106 developing countries showed strong, positive correlations between adult literacy rates and life expectancy (UNESCO, 1995) while, in Africa, an increase of one percentage point in the national literacy rate was associated with a two-year rise in life expectancy. (Lockheed and Verspoor, 1990)

Formal education acts as a powerful determinant of economic productivity, even when just a modest level of schooling is attained. Individuals who have completed primary school, for example, tend to have higher earnings and lower fertility, as well as a better health and nutrition status, than their less-schooled fellow citizens. They save more of their incomes, adopt new technologies more readily and participate more often in civic affairs. (Levinger, 1994)

The education of girls is of particular importance. We now know that girls' education is one of the wisest and most profitable investments a developing country can make. It is the key to empowerment and gives girls the knowledge and tools they need to improve their lives and that of their families and communities.

Studies show that illiterate girls marry as early as 11 years of age and have an average of six children each. In contrast, girls who go to school marry later, have greater spacing between births and have an average of 2.9 children. (King, 1994)

In a 2001 report, UNICEF reported that infants born to mothers with no formal education are twice as likely to die before their first birthday than are babies born to mothers with a post-primary school education. (UNICEF, 2001)

Another study found that a single year of a mother's education was associated with a nine-percent decrease in child mortality. Each added year of schooling for a mother results in a five to 10 percent decrease in mortality among her children. (King, 1994)

The benefits of education for girls extend beyond the girls themselves to their children and to future generations; educated mothers are better equipped to rear their children. A recent study by the International Food Policy Research Institute shows that between 1970 and 1995, 44 percent of the decrease in child malnutrition was attributable to improvements in female education. (IFPRI, 1998)

Educated mothers are also more likely to send their own daughters to school.

REALIZING EDUCATION FOR ALL

Education - especially education for girls – is key to meeting the basic needs of millions of people throughout the developing world.

Most national governments recognise the importance of education. Nonetheless, education for girls remains very much a goal rather than a reality. Of the approximately 130 million primary school age children not attending school, two out of three are girls. (UNICEF, 2000)

Girls are also the majority of the roughly 150 million children of primary school age who begin school but drop out before completing four years of education. This means that they have not acquired even basic literacy and numeracy skills. Of the 875 million illiterate adults in the world, two-thirds are women. (UNESCO, 2000)

South Asia remains the region with the largest educational gender gaps, although the situation there has improved over the last decade. However, in the least developed countries in general, the inequalities between boys' and girls' access to access to primary education have actually widened since world leaders met in Jomtien ten years ago. (UNESCO, 2000)

Why are girls not in school?

One reason, in some parts of the world, stems from tradition or culture. In cultures where men traditionally work in paid professional positions, school may be deemed “wasted” on girls because it is not perceived to lead to paid work. There may be concerns about girls walking a long way to school and/or being away from the protection of their homes and families. Likewise there may be concerns about the lack of sanitary facilities and privacy for girls in schools or about jeopardizing the girls' morality.

Another reason is poverty. In food insecure and impoverished populations, poverty often prevents children from attending school, even if it is provided “free,” without school fees. Not only are there often other costs associated with school (e.g., clothing, books), but there is also the loss of the child's labor.

Poverty strikes girls particularly hard, as their work is so valuable to the family's subsistence. Marginalized, food-insecure people typically spend 65-70 percent of their income on food. (World Bank, 1992) Poor, food-insecure families need the girls' labor and income. Girls contribute to the family by providing agricultural labor in the fields, selling goods in the marketplace, finding food and water, preparing and serving food, caring for other children, and/or by working as domestic laborers outside the family.

HUNGER AND EDUCATION

When poor children do go to school, they often leave home on an empty stomach. Three hundred million of the world's children are chronically hungry: the approximately 170 million of these children who attend school must learn while fighting hunger.

In developing countries, providing school meals can play a critical role in ensuring that children learn once they are at school. Children in rural areas often walk long distances to school on empty stomachs. Many cannot afford to bring food from home to eat during the day. These children are easily distracted in the classroom and have problems staying alert and concentrating on the lessons. Teachers report that breakfast-deprived children fall asleep in class and are unable to benefit from the education provided. (UNESCO, 1994)

This syndrome, generally referred to as short-term hunger, has been shown to affect children's cognitive functions and, most likely, their learning achievements. (UNESCO, 1989) Several studies have demonstrated that the effects of short-term hunger are exacerbated in children who already have a history of undernutrition and face nutritional deficiencies (Levinger, 1994).

In addition, children whose cognitive development during the first years of their life has been impaired by malnutrition and who live on one meal per day are more affected by missing breakfast than are better-nourished children. (Pollitt, UNESCO 1990)

School feeding programs help get poor children into school, help them stay in school and help them learn while they are there. **This is particularly true when programmes are targeted at girls.**

THE WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME'S ACTIONS

WFP places special emphasis on meeting the needs of women and girls in all of its programs. Two of WFP's four 'commitments to women' made at the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women relate specifically to educating girls. Sixty percent of WFP's country program resources in countries with a significant gender gap are targeted to women and girls and 50 percent of all education resources are targeted to girls. (WFP, 1995)

Realising that traditional school feeding was often insufficient to reach these targets and to close the gender gaps in education, WFP developed an innovative way of using food aid to help educate girls. Basic food items, like a sack of rice or several liters of vegetable oil, are distributed to families in exchange for the schooling of their daughters. These "take-home rations" compensate parents for the loss of their daughters' labors and enable girls to attend school. WFP assistance directly tackles the critical issue of the opportunity costs that prevent girls from receiving an education.

Such programs are currently operational or under preparation in more than a dozen developing countries. Results thus far indicate a good chance that these girls will continue schooling through the primary level as long as the take-home rations are available.

CASE STUDIES OF WFP TAKE-HOME RATION PROGRAMS

PAKISTAN

[Primary Source: WFP/UNESCO, *End of Term Evaluation of the WFP Country Programme in Pakistan (1994-1998)*: Technical Report on Education Sector. Paris, 1999.]

WFP targets primary schools in rural areas of the two provinces where girls education is particularly underdeveloped, Balochistan and the North West Frontier Province (NWFP).

Economic factors are a key impediment to education, in addition to cultural traditions. The provinces also suffer from an insufficient number of schools and the poor quality of existing ones.

Low-income families in Pakistan are much less likely to educate their daughters than their sons since they rely heavily on girls' labor at home. In Balochistan's lowest income groups, for example, the ratio of enrolment is six boys for every girl. For the country as a whole, the ratio is 1.5 boys to 1 girl. In 1997, only 20 percent of primary school-age girls were enrolled in school in Balochistan, and 27 percent in NWFP.

WFP began to address the gender gap in these provinces in 1994 by distributing a 5-liter tin of vegetable oil per month to the family of each female student who attended school for a minimum of 20 days. Oil is a precious commodity for local families and an important part of the local diet. The WFP ration has a local value of about US\$ 5; the monthly income of most families participating in the project is approximately US\$ 30.

At assisted schools in NWFP between 1994 and 1998, the enrolment of girls increased by 247 percent. In Balochistan, the increase was 197 percent. Student attendance and dropout rates were also positively affected.

Interviews revealed that WFP assistance also helped change parental attitudes about female education. Only a few years earlier, there was hardly a girl in school in the same area. Progressively, it has become more acceptable for families to educate their daughters. This effect was most pronounced in some particularly remote and traditional districts. Even the most conservative families began sending their daughters to school as they realized the benefits of an education.

The take-home ration program has also had a noteworthy spin-off effect on women. In this society where women have traditionally been confined to their homes, mothers now occasionally visit the schools to explain their daughters' absence and collect rations on distribution days.

MOROCCO

[Primary Source: UNESCO/WFP, Case Study Mission Report: WFP Project Morocco 2288.04: *Promotion of Girls' Education in Rural Areas*. Paris, 2000.]

The educational system in Morocco historically has been strongly biased in favor of males and urban areas. In 1998–99, only 52 percent of school-age girls in rural areas attended primary school, compared to 72 percent of boys. In urban areas 81 percent of girls and 87 percent of boys attended. Four out of 10 rural girls drop out of school before reaching grade five, whereas practically all urban boys and girls finish five years of elementary schooling.

The reasons for the low educational participation of rural girls and women were identified in a 1994 survey conducted by the Ministry of Education: Schools were often seen as being too far from students' homes to walk safely back and forth. Many schools lacked potable water and/or separate latrines for boys and girls.

Strong sociocultural traditions against girls' education were also identified. Educating a girl was reported by many as reducing her chances of finding a husband and as a lost investment for her family. Older girls, in particular, were reportedly withdrawn from schools to marry or because their proximity to boys and male teachers was not tolerated by parents.

The most important factors identified by the survey, however, were the direct and indirect costs of a girl's education. It was found that rural girls--particularly those in the primary school age group--play an important role in helping their mothers with domestic chores, farm work and childcare. Many girls are sent to cities to perform domestic work and thus contribute to the family income.

WFP has assisted education in Morocco since the early 1970s through a school-feeding program. It was clear, however, that feeding children in schools was not sufficient to address these issues and close the significant gender gap in rural education. WFP thus implemented a take-home ration program and targeted rural primary schools with the lowest number of female students.

Girls who attend school regularly receive a ration of 100 kilograms of wheat and 10 liters of vegetable oil per year, distributed in two installments. This is equivalent to approximately one or two monthly incomes of a typical beneficiary family, or between 1.5 and four monthly salaries of a girl working as a domestic helper in a Moroccan city.

In a two-year period, the program has had highly favorable results. Female entries in the first grade doubled in assisted schools. In one province covered by the project, girls now comprise 43 percent of total primary enrolment, whereas in the early 1990s girls made up 10 percent of the entire school population.

A review of the program concluded that the importance of WFP assistance for girls' education goes beyond pure economics. It also fosters a moral and social recognition by parents, particularly in fathers, of the importance of sending their daughters to school. The review team was told by a Moroccan woman, "Before, it was shameful for a girl to go to school. Now, we are used to it. The take-home rations helped us take the first step."

NIGER

[Primary Source: UNESCO/WFP, Rapport De Consultation: Project PAM/Niger 2445.01: *Assistance Alimentaire aux Ecoles en Milieu Nomade et Transhumant*. Niamey, June, 1998.]

Niger is one of the five countries in the world where children have the lowest chances of receiving an education. In 1998, only 27 percent of primary school-age children attended school. Women and girls are the most affected by the general educational crisis. Female literacy is less than 10 percent. In the 1998-99 school year, only 30 percent of 7-year-old girls managed to start their primary education. Rural girls are the hardest hit, with only 15 percent attending primary school in 1998.

As in many other countries, women carry most of the agricultural and household burdens. Girls must help their mothers with daily chores in the fields and at home. Many girls also have to work to supplement the family budget. As a result, families simply cannot afford to let their daughters go to school.

Socio-cultural traditions present another obstacle to girls' education. In fact, a large part of the population still perceives "modern" schools and schooling as a foreign element with little practical value. In the case of girls, schooling is seen not only as alienating them from their traditional culture, but even worse, affecting their behavior in ways which are incompatible with religious and family values. If a girl attends school, she is thought to be beyond her mother's control and exposed to multiple risks to her safety and moral behavior.

The WFP take-home ration program for girls developed out of an existing school-feeding program in Niger and became operational in early 1997. The reasons were similar to those observed in Morocco, namely a recognition that school feeding helped both boy and girl students but did little to overcome the inequalities between the two groups. A special effort was needed to increase female enrolment and maintain attendance throughout the primary education cycle.

The program also addressed the needs of families with several school-age children. Families receive 150 kg of cereals a year for one or two girls and 300 kg of cereals a year for three or more girls. The ration is distributed during the agricultural lean season when household food stocks are particularly low and food aid is most needed to tide families over until the following harvest.

The take-home rations program has been successful in Niger. One survey showed that girls' enrolment increased by 75 percent after the distributions started.

CAMEROON

[Primary Source: Draft Report of the Mid-Term Evaluation of Cameroon Project No. 4387.01: *School Feeding in Adamaoua, North, Extreme North and Eastern Provinces*. WFP, Rome, 2001.]

WFP has provided assistance to Cameroon's education sector since 1992. The school-feeding program was specifically designed for the four provinces with enrolment rates below the national average: Eastern, Adamaoua, North and Extreme North. The school-feeding program in Cameroon is designed to improve student access and retention in primary schools and increase students' ability to acquire knowledge by improving their nutrition.

In May 2001, WFP completed the mid-term evaluation of the program. The total number of students in attendance at the beneficiary schools soared dramatically, with rates generally higher than 95 percent for girls as well as boys. The number of students in the North increased by 84 percent and in the Extreme North there was a 219 percent increase between the 1997-1998 and the 2000-2001 academic years.

The increase in the percentage of girls enrolled was even more impressive. In the Extreme North, girls' enrollment jumped 313 percent and in the North, it rose by 85 percent.

In addition, scholastic success rates constantly increase in WFP assisted schools. Trimester examination results indicate a 14 percent increase between 1997-1998 and 2000-2001 in the Extreme North.

LESSONS

Take-home rations work for girls' education. Wherever such programs have been introduced, the enrolment of girls increased by at least 50 percent.

Take-home rations and in-school feeding work best for the poorest, most food-insecure households. Food is a prime concern for these families and it benefits all family members, whereas the same is not necessarily true with other forms of support.

Where there is very little tradition for sending girls to school, the first step is often the most difficult. Strong motivation is needed to overcome these obstacles. Food aid can provide this motivation.

Take-home rations can promote the education of girls even if the rations are not completely equivalent to the value of a girl's labor at home or the income a girl might earn working away from home.

Preliminary information indicates that school feeding and/or take-home rations keep a larger number of girls in school once they have enrolled. (WFP, 2000)

Take-home rations elevate the girl's status within her family since her school attendance yields a direct, tangible and important benefit.

Program results in Pakistan, Morocco, Niger and Cameroon show that while food is the initial motivation for sending girls to school, parents of participating girls develop an interest in the education of their daughters. This change in parental attitudes is an important factor enhancing the commitment to education beyond the duration of food assistance.

These changes can be enhanced when take-home ration programs are accompanied by activities to create awareness and increase the interest and participation of parents in the education process.

If support can be provided for a minimum period of time, the benefits of such programs for individual girls who attend school because of food aid are real and sustainable. Take-home rations provided for at least a full primary education cycle enable a substantial group of girls to acquire basic knowledge and skills and thus have more impact.

These programs have low average running costs. Among the school feeding programs in the emergency operations, protracted relief and recovery operations and development projects supported by WFP in 2000, the lowest cost per beneficiary per day was 5 cents US and the average cost was 19 cents US (WFP, 2000). These costs are all-inclusive, ranging from the values of all food commodities provided by WFP, costs of transportation and monitoring to internationally and locally-recruited personnel.

CONCLUSION

Innovative approaches such as take-home rations and school feeding can provide solutions for those seeking avenues to reduce poverty and hunger and meet global commitments for women and education for all.

School feeding is a very effective way of using food aid for education. Since 1963, WFP has provided nutritious meals to schoolchildren in poor countries around the world. It uses food as a direct input to attract children to school in food-insecure areas, where enrolment ratios are lowest.

WFP experience shows that school feeding works: When food is available at school, enrolment and attendance rates increase significantly, and dropout rates decrease. Providing breakfast and/or lunch to children at school can also help reduce hunger and improve learning. When children no longer have to worry about food, they can concentrate on their studies and gain skills to overcome poverty. Children are more likely to stay in school longer if they have enough food to learn and thrive.

As for educating girls, food-insecure parents are more likely to send their daughters to school knowing they will receive at least one solid meal during the day without cutting into the family budget.

When take-home rations are provided in addition to in-school feeding, poor families have an incentive to send their daughters to school and to maintain their school attendance.

The WFP experience is dramatically clear: school feeding and take-home rations work for girls' education.

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