

ISSUE FACT SHEET: CULTURAL INFLUENCES

DID YOU KNOW?

Worldwide, there are 33 million fewer girls in primary school than boys.

When families have to choose, they are more likely to send boys to school rather than girls.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. How do cultural beliefs influence and affect a girl's life?
2. How are educational opportunities for girls tied to these beliefs?
3. What can be done to help communities understand and accept social change?

DEFINITION

Culture is defined as the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions; the shared beliefs and values of a group of people.

OVERVIEW

The environment in which a girl grows up will influence every area of her life. Cultural beliefs surrounding the value and role of women, as well as the value placed on education, have a huge impact. Cultural influences shape our thoughts, beliefs, judgments, and tolerances. Behavior that is seen as intolerable in one community will seem perfectly normal in another. Challenging these deeply held cultural beliefs is often one of the biggest obstacles facing girls.

A community's expectations for girls revolve around its expectations for women. When it is assumed that a woman's role in society doesn't require an education, there seems to be little reason to educate her.

However, when a culture see women as individuals and contributing members to a community, investing in their education has value.

RELATED IMPACTS: POVERTY

Practices such as bonded labor are often deeply ingrained in cultures. Girls and their families who are willing to break cultural expectations often risk harsh judgment. Ending practices that perpetuate the cycle of poverty – lack of education, oppression, and violence – isn't easy and taking a pioneering stance can be difficult and isolating for families, especially in small villages. Beating the odds requires a family's support. Once communities begin to experience the benefits of an educated population – higher income, better business practices, and healthier children – the road becomes easier to travel. One group of girls can pave the way for the next, increasing education and reducing poverty.

RELATED IMPACTS: EDUCATION

Cultural beliefs about educated girls vary greatly around the world. In some communities it is common for girls to finish high school and attend college. In other communities schooling is severely limited and girls are discouraged, or banned, from attending. The reasons why girls are not in school vary. For some it is early or forced marriage, or the need to work or care for younger siblings or sick relatives; for some it is extreme poverty or concerns about safety. Cultures that place a high value on education, specifically the education of girls, tend to invest in education. However, when cultures value the education of boys only, or when they value women merely in their ability to serve men, education typically is not viewed as a valid investment overall. These cultures are less likely to build schools, hire and train teachers, or make the schools that do exist more easily accessible.

WHAT'S WORKING

So what can be done? How can we help send girls to school? How can we encourage fathers and sons to value their daughters and sisters? How can community leaders be convinced that educating girls will help build their community?

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) around the world are implementing programs to help girls. These programs not only address the welfare of the girls themselves and the challenges they face, but they also advocate for the benefits that educated girls provide to the larger community. Here are some examples of programs that are working:

- Specifically funding the education of girls. Making it possible for families to send both their boys and their girls to school.
- Educating community leaders on the benefits that educated girls bring to the community, such as better health and business practices.
- Providing better income opportunities for parents so they have enough resources to support their families.

RESOURCES

- Room to Read at www.roomtoread.org
- CARE at www.care.org
- Girl Up at www.girlup.org
- Plan at www.plan-international.org
- World Vision at www.worldvision.org
- See Additional Resources Guide for other resources, including relevant videos (found in the Resources section).