

After 40 years, the world's women are far more educated

A new study shows that women have doubled their years in the classroom, to an average of 7.1 the world over. That has profound economic and societal benefits, and has contributed to a big drop in child mortality.

By the Monitor's Editorial Board

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Over the past 40 years, women around the world have moved ahead in formal education, doubling their average number of years in the classroom.

That's a profound development, with positive effects in personal and public well-being.

The education progress is reported in an unusually large-scale study of 175 countries that looked at the connection between women's schooling and reduced child mortality.

The new study, by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington, found that between 1970 and 2009, mortality of children under age 5 fell by half, to 7.8 million deaths per year.

Half of the drop is because women of a reproductive age are better educated. That helps mothers make better choices about personal hygiene, nutrition, and parenting. The study appears in the Sept. 18 issue of *The Lancet*.

What the research shows about education itself is also encouraging. Both women and men are getting more schooling. Four decades ago, women had an average 3.5 years in school. Now they have 7.1 years (men have 8.3 years) – a sign that it's time to concentrate on secondary schooling.

Every region of the world has shown improvement, especially in the developing world. Some countries in the Middle East have made more recent progress. In Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates, women have gained an average of three years in the classroom since 1990.

The world has made a concerted effort to get this far. Nonprofit foundations, the women's movement, governments, United Nations goals on education, democratization, increased prosperity through trade, computer technology – all of these have pushed the education trend line up, especially for women.

By last year, women had greater levels of education than men in 87 countries, including Qatar, Malaysia, and the Philippines. For the first time, more women than men in the United States are receiving doctoral degrees, according to a separate report. But in 40 countries, the gender education gap is larger than in 1970, including in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Women with more schooling become better earners, lifting economies. "Gender inequality hurts economic growth," reports Goldman Sachs. For countries that resist equal rights for women, the economic promise of more earning power can help break down cultural disapproval of women's gains.

The world needs to continue these upward trends in education. But it's more than years of schooling that count. What is taught, how it's taught, and how learning is measured are also important. That's not just a debate for the US, but for the world.

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