

Study: Policy language regarding girls education often limiting, not empowering

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Education for girls in developing countries has received more attention in recent years. A new study found that the very policy documents advocating the need for equal access to education limit the scope of the initiatives by over-simplifying issues and by referring to education in a way that belies the complexity of gender roles and culture.

"We found that while many international development organizations have touted the importance of girls' education over the past decade, the language used in the policy documents often limited the discourse of what real changes would need to be made to address gender inequalities hindering girls from accessing education," said Lisa Hoffman, assistant professor in the School of Education at Indiana University Southeast.

She co-authored the study, "Girls' Education: The Power of Policy Discourse," with lead author Karen Monkman, associate professor in the College of Education at DePaul University.

For the study, presented on April 16 at the American Educational Research Association's annual meeting in Vancouver, the researchers analyzed 300 policy documents from 14 agencies from 1995 to 2008. The study focused on the "public face" of the policies -- how organizations such as the United Nations Girls' [Education](#) Initiative, nonprofit organizations, USAID and the World Bank talk about their work -- not on implementation documents or evaluation reports.

The documents often left little room for argument about the need for

parity and its role in local and national development efforts. The researchers say the lack of conflicting issues prevents readers from understanding the struggles agencies face with the range of contradictory issues involving such things as gender, development agendas and family economics.

"There is often no explanation as to relationship, cause-effect, rationale or theory of action relating to many of the arguments for educating girls or the relationship of barriers and strategies," the researchers wrote of their findings. "Arguments that increasing the numbers of girls in schools and reaching parity will serve to eradicate poverty, generate peace and democracy, stimulate development and improve public health, for example, are not explained. They are stated as assertions that cannot be questioned, interrogated, challenged or critiqued."

Hoffman said the paper exemplifies how "the language we use can both enable and constrain how we approach complex problems."

Provided by Indiana University

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