

The Lost Boys: A Research Proposal

THE BACKGROUND

Girls' education is the most important investment the developing world can make. This is a resounding theme for governments and organizations around the world that want to effect widespread change.

In whole, I agree with the perspective and the initiatives (such as Michele Obama's Let Girls Learn) that have risen from understanding the downstream benefits of educating young women. The benefits from an increase in education for girls have been shown to be significant. In Bjorn Lomborg's "Smartest Targets for the World," decreasing gender inequality showed a larger payoff per dollar spent relative to many other development solutions. Girls who are educated grow up making better decisions for themselves and their families. With increases in girls' education, mortality rates go down; subsequent generations are better educated; fertility rates decrease; and families make better economic decisions.

The media constantly reminds us of the number of uneducated girls in Sub-Saharan Africa, in particular. According to these reports, the disparity between girls and boys in school is damaging to the world economy and has broad and negative consequences on establishing equality for all people.

Based on the coverage, it would be easy to believe that it's universally true that girls across Africa – for reasons cultural or otherwise – aren't given the opportunity to go to school. However, is this horrible phenomenon true for *every* African country? For media consumers in the West, it's easy to forget that there are 54 different states in Africa. Is it really fair to generalize that *all* African women are uneducated and have limited access to school?

Perhaps there is another story to tell and other perspectives to consider. In late 2014, I was assigned by the Peace Corps to teach school deep in the mountains of Lesotho, a tiny country that is land-locked by South Africa. For the past two years, I have lived in the rural village of Malubalube in the Mokhotlong district. I came to the village to teach math, HIV/AIDS education, and women's empowerment at the secondary school.

Malubalube is a traditional village where there is no clinic, no doctor, and barely a road. There are still traditional healers and, according to my students, "witches." On my first day, based on how Sub-Saharan Africa has been portrayed in the media, I expected to see few, if any, girls in attendance. I was quickly surprised to find that 80 percent of the students were female - there were almost no boys! I thought this must be a fluke. Perhaps there were simply more girls than boys in Malubalube. I asked myself, "Is this year different? Maybe in my second year, I will see more boys. What does the aggregate country data show? Is this a country-wide phenomenon?"

I soon came to realize was that the stereotypical stories about African schools weren't true – at least not here. The story wasn't one of low girls' attendance at school. Instead, country-wide, it

was *boys* who were not attending school. I started asking questions and want to know why this was occurring and what Lesotho could do in order to better understand and potentially address this problem.

THE DATA

There is not a lot of data about education in Lesotho, but there was enough to prove the initial premise. Thanks to the *Education Statistics Bulletin of 2010* released by the Lesotho government, figures 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4 show a country-wide problem.

Figure 4.1 shows there are more girls in all Forms A through E (roughly equivalent to grades 8 through 12 in the United States). Figure 4.2 tells us that in the more rural districts (schools that are classified as “mountain” vs. “lowland”), the ratio gap between girls and boys school attendance widens. The highest ratio, in the mountain schools of Mokhotlong and Quthing, is more than 2 to 1. Figure 4.3 shows that over time, this phenomena has shown in every district. Finally, figure 4.4 shows that as more of the population attends school, the gap between girls and boys grows. If this data is valid, girls’ education is clearly growing at a much faster rate than boys’. All of this information points to a question which needs to be addressed.

THE HYPOTHESIS

Everyone assumes that girls’ education needs to be improved across all of Africa. That is a generalization that leads to policies for Africa, but not for individual countries. Lesotho should certainly do all it can to continue to educate its girls, but also be focused on learning why its *boys* are not attending school and determining what they can do about it. The problem could be due to economic, societal, cultural reasons, or, most likely, a combination of all of them.

My hypothesis is that boys in Lesotho – and their families - don’t see the economic benefit in schooling. Families have to pay huge fees for their child to attend secondary and high school and jobs available after high school are largely agricultural. This study would try to prove the hypothesis that perceptions of economic benefit are driving this behavior, what is driving those perceptions, and how long has this been occurring. Finally, this study would give specific policy recommendations for schools and communities in Lesotho to address the issue so there is not a generation - or more - of lost boys who aren't educated.

IMPORTANCE

The importance of this study is more than just finding out why boys are not going to secondary school in Lesotho, which is a tiny country relative to the aggregate population of Africa.

First, this is relevant because Sub-Saharan Africa is often generalized as one state, when in reality, it is a combination of 54 states with different types of government, laws, cultures, and most important, people. When we generalize about Africa, we are not benefiting from understanding the intricacies of single states and cultures. Discovering that girls are not being excluded from school everywhere in Africa is just one example of where broad-brush thinking

can lead us astray. In Lesotho, due to this generalization, it's possible to imagine aid and resources flooding into the country to address a problem (girls' attendance) that doesn't exist.

Second, because the statistics are not in a database already, this study is relevant because it would involve field economics work, which is something that economists sometimes overlook.

The specifics of this study could show that in some countries where this is a phenomenon, the institutions for an increase in human capital are there (a good education system), but the opportunities in the job market are not. As a result, boys do not see the economic incentive to continue to attend school because their opportunity cost is too high if there is relatively little hope for a job after they finish school.

Over time, we could look at the effects of a country where a generation, or more, of boys and men are uneducated, and make policy recommendations to alleviate that problem.

WHAT DATA WILL BE USED?

1. Geographic Situation — Based on available Lesotho national statistics, it seems that the more rural the school is, the larger the gap between girls' and boys' school attendance. Although girls are attending schools more than boys everywhere in Lesotho, I want to find out the ratio of girls to boys at each school and connect this data with the distance away from the nearest urban town in each district of Lesotho. This data, which is likely available through the education office, should show exactly where the problem is occurring the most and whether or not there are any outliers (schools with more boys than girls).
2. Census Data — Lesotho is conducting its census in 2016. The census demographic data will help us further understand the problem, and potentially how long boys have been opting out of formal secondary education.
3. Test Scores — There are three national tests in Lesotho. One at the end of primary school, which is called the PSLE. Another is administered at the end of secondary school (Form C). The third is taken at the end of High School (Form E). I would use the data from the exams to determine how students are performing on a standardized level across districts, schools and communities and compare girls' scores to boys' scores.
4. Population Interviews — Qualitative data will be necessary to help identify the cultural, economic, or societal contributors to the problem. I would hire and train Basotho (locals) to conduct surveys and interviews. These surveys would ask basic demographic questions and specific education/job questions to determine how long the interviewees went to school, if they are working now, etc. These interviews could also help us understand the job market in Lesotho relative to the education data and whether males see the economic cost of attending secondary school too high.

TIMELINE

CHALLENGES

Because much of this proposed study would involve economic field work, it will be expensive to retrieve some of the information. Hired surveyors would have to be incentivized correctly so that they do their job and retrieve truthful information.

There is also the possibility of general cultural issues which could make this research difficult. Some questions that we might think would be easy to answer, are not in a different culture. For instance, “How old are you?” is a difficult question for many Basotho to answer. All questions would have to be tested to ensure that there are no translational or cultural issues. There also may be sensitivities about talking about “traditional” schools that boys sometimes attend in the mountains to learn local culture and “become men.”

It is also not clear when 2016 census data will be available. There also is a possibility that there will be no conclusions in the data, as it is not clear if job market data is good enough or available in a country where most of the people are subsistence farmers or in the informal job market.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Depending on the results of this study, there are potentially many more questions to ask and answer. If, for example, we saw a current relationship between school attendance and perceived lack of economic benefit, the next logical question would be to determine whether a long-term pattern of non-attendance actually helped *create* the void of economic benefit or if it poses a risk of creating a further void of economic benefit.

Understanding whether there are other developing countries where boys are not attending school in the same numbers as girls might also help provide clarity into the drivers of the trend.

Table 4.1 Enrolment in Registered Secondary Schools by Age, Form and Gender - 2010

Age	Form A		Form B		Form C		Form D		Form E		Total
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
below 12	34	102	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	136
12	416	881	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1297
13	1576	3522	325	723	0	0	0	0	0	0	6146
14	2929	4920	1157	2605	299	648	0	0	0	0	12558
15	3263	4674	2150	4086	1003	2224	296	586	0	0	18282
16	3049	3553	2740	4211	1647	2988	859	1675	248	479	21449
17	2294	2061	2693	3299	1820	2837	1442	2466	736	1255	20903
18	1436	1011	2172	2040	1746	2202	1656	2298	955	1484	17000
19	597	362	1191	970	1270	1294	1315	1736	943	1192	10870
20	283	127	687	459	873	718	1140	1047	816	864	7014
21	93	63	265	155	414	267	672	567	533	547	3576
22	47	21	116	91	231	122	407	304	302	311	1952
23	20	11	53	33	96	66	184	160	205	136	964
24	8	24	19	21	32	30	94	94	100	85	507
higher 24	8	26	13	48	20	43	90	184	70	151	653
Total	16053	21358	13581	16741	9451	13439	8155	11117	4908	6504	123307

Table 4.3 Enrolment in Registered Secondary Schools by District, Gender and Percentage Share per District, 2008-2010

District	2008				2009				2010			
	M	F	Total	% Share	M	F	Total	% Share	M	F	Total	% Share
Butha-Buthe	3676	4912	8588	8.3	3820	5220	9040	8.1	4170	5833	10003	8.1
Leribe	8841	12043	20884	20.2	9424	13237	22661	20.3	9824	13460	23284	18.9
Berea	5607	6658	12265	11.9	6282	7993	14275	12.8	7162	8800	15962	12.9
Maseru	11850	14774	26624	25.8	12801	16132	28933	26.0	14052	17802	31854	25.8
Mafeteng	4637	6122	10759	10.4	5397	7318	12715	11.4	5291	7006	12297	10.0
Mohale's Hoek	3083	4203	7286	7.1	2796	4094	6890	6.2	3535	4677	8212	6.7
Quthing	2549	3440	5989	5.8	2292	3056	5348	4.8	2961	4173	7134	5.8
Qacha's Nek	1279	2147	3426	3.3	1540	2373	3913	3.5	1791	2758	4549	3.7
Mokhotlong	1373	2614	3987	3.9	1112	2613	3725	3.3	1725	3491	5216	4.2
Thaba Tseka	1267	2242	3509	3.4	1416	2564	3980	3.6	1637	3159	4796	3.9
Total	44162	59155	103317	100.0	46880	64600	111480	100.0	52148	71159	123307	100.0

Table 4.4 Secondary School Enrolment Rates, Gender Parity Indices and Pupils/Teacher Ratios, 2001-2010

Year	Gross Enrolment Rates				Net Enrolment Rates				Pupils/Teacher Ratios
	Total	Males	Females	GPI	Total	Males	Females	GPI	
2001	32.2	27.9	36.6	1.3	21.3	16.4	26.3	1.6	23.7
2002	33.6	29.0	38.3	1.3	22.0	17.2	27.0	1.6	24.0
2003	34.5	30.1	39.1	1.3	22.8	17.9	27.9	1.6	23.9
2004	36.8	32.2	41.5	1.3	23.8	18.6	29.0	1.5	25.0
2005	39.1	34.2	44.0	1.3	25.4	19.8	31.2	1.6	26.6
2006	39.8	34.8	44.9	1.3	25.7	20.0	31.4	1.6	25.7
2007	41.4	35.5	47.3	1.3	27.0	20.8	33.4	1.6	24.4
2008	43.8	37.1	50.6	1.4	29.0	22.3	35.9	1.6	24.0
2009	47.7	39.7	55.8	1.4	31.5	23.8	39.4	1.7	23.5
2010	53.1	44.4	61.9	1.4	34.2	26.0	42.5	1.6	25.8

Table 4.5 Registered Secondary Schools Age Specific Net Enrolment Rates (NER) - 2010

Primary Enrolment				NER ₁			Primary age enrolment at (6 to 12)			Population			NER ₂		
Age	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
6	17316	16611	33927	66.8	65.2	66.0	17316	16611	33927	25936	25481	51417	66.8	65.2	66
7	19888	19686	39574	79.0	79.6	79.3	19888	19686	39574	25165	24725	49890	79	79.6	79.3
8	19574	19796	39370	80.5	82.8	81.6	19574	19796	39370	24315	23906	48221	80.5	82.8	81.6
9	19492	20109	39601	81.3	85.4	83.3	19492	20109	39601	23970	23555	47525	81.3	85.4	83.3
10	20898	21768	42666	88.1	93.3	90.7	20898	21768	42666	23715	23339	47054	88.1	93.3	90.7
11	19821	21236	41057	84.0	91.4	87.7	19855	21338	41193	23602	23234	46836	84.1	91.8	88
12	19346	20630	39976	82.2	89.0	85.6	19762	21511	41273	23544	23175	46719	83.9	92.8	88.3
Total	136335	139836	276171	80.1	83.5	81.8	136785	140819	277604	170247	167415	337662	80.3	84.1	82.2
Age	Secondary Enrolment			NER ₁			secondary age enrolment (13 to 17)			Population			NER ₂		
Age	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
13	1901	4245	6146	8.1	18.3	13.2	19464	21618	41082	23525	23144	46669	82.7	93.4	88
14	4385	8173	12558	18.9	36.1	27.4	19924	21451	41375	23163	22629	45792	86	94.8	90.4
15	6712	11570	18282	28.5	50.2	39.2	18245	20284	38529	23578	23033	46611	77.4	88.1	82.7
16	8543	12906	21449	36.3	56.0	46.1	16175	18271	34446	23507	23030	46537	68.8	79.3	74
17	8985	11918	20903	38.1	51.6	44.8	12907	14210	27117	23570	23097	46667	54.8	61.5	58.1
Total	30526	48812	79338	26.0	42.5	34.2	86715	95834	182549	117343	114933	232276	73.9	83.4	78.6
	-	-	-	-	-	-	223500	236653	460153	287590	282348	569938	77.7	83.8	80.7