

How Does Education Affect Poverty?

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Abstract

Education is widely recognised as one of the most effective instruments for reducing poverty and promoting sustainable development. This article examines the multifaceted relationship between education and poverty reduction, highlighting education's role as a catalyst for economic growth, social equity, improved health outcomes, and resilience to social and environmental risks. Drawing on evidence from international organisations and empirical studies, the paper demonstrates how access to quality education enhances human capital, increases income-earning potential, and contributes significantly to national economic growth. Beyond income effects, education is shown to reduce inequality, lower maternal and infant mortality rates, decrease childhood stunting, and mitigate vulnerability to HIV/AIDS, climate-related disasters, and domestic and community violence. Emphasis is placed on the transformative impact of female education, which yields intergenerational benefits for health, nutrition, and social stability. The article argues that education is not merely a social service but a fundamental development strategy and human rights that address both the causes and consequences of poverty. It concludes that sustained investment in inclusive, equitable, and quality education, especially for marginalised groups—is essential for breaking cycles of poverty and achieving long-term social and economic transformation.

Keywords: *Education and Poverty; Human Capital Development; Inequality Reduction; Economic Growth; Maternal and Child Health; Gender and Education; Sustainable Development*

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Background to the Study

Education is often referred to as the great equalizer: It can open the door to jobs, resources, and skills that help a person not only survive, but thrive. In fact, according to UNESCO, if all students in low-income countries had just basic reading skills (nothing else), an estimated 171 million people could escape extreme poverty. If all adults completed secondary education, we could cut the global poverty rate by more than half. At its core, a quality education supports a child's developing social, emotional, cognitive, and communication skills. Children who attend school also gain knowledge and skills, often at a higher level than those who aren't in the classroom. They can then use these skills to earn higher incomes and build successful lives.

1. Education is linked to economic growth

Education is the best way out of poverty in part because it is strongly linked to economic growth. A 2021 study co-published by Stanford University and Munich's Ludwig Maximilian University shows us that, between 1960 and 2000, 75% of the growth in gross domestic product around the world was linked to increased math and science skills.

"The relationship between ... the knowledge capital of a nation, and the long-run [economic] growth rate is extraordinarily strong," the study's authors conclude. This is just one of the most recent studies linking education and economic growth that have been published since 1990.

2. Universal education can fight inequality

A 2019 Oxfam report says it best: "Good-quality education can be liberating for individuals, and it can act as a leveler and equalizer within society." Poverty thrives in part on inequality. All types of systemic barriers (including physical ability, religion, race, and caste) serve as compound interest against a marginalization that already accrues most for those living in extreme poverty. Education is a basic human right for all, and — when tailored to the unique needs of marginalized communities — can be used as a lever against some of the systemic barriers that keep certain groups of people furthest behind.

3. Education is linked to lower maternal and infant mortality rates

A 2017 report shows that the country's maternal mortality rate had declined by more than 70% in the last 25 years, approximately the same amount of time that an amendment to compulsory schooling laws took place in 1993. Ensuring that girls had more education reduced the likelihood of maternal health complications, in some cases by as much as 29%.

4. Education also lowers stunting rates

Children also benefit from more educated mothers. Several reports have linked education to lowered stunting, one of the side effects of malnutrition. Preventing stunting in childhood can limit the risks of many developmental issues for children whose height — and potential — are cut short by not having enough nutrients in their first few years.

In Bangladesh, one study showed a 50.7% prevalence for stunting among families. However, greater maternal education rates led to a 4.6% decrease in the odds of stunting; greater

paternal education reduced those rates by 2.9%-5.4%. A similar study in Nairobi, Kenya confirmed this relationship: Children born to mothers with some secondary educations are 29% less likely to be stunted.

5. Education reduces vulnerability to HIV and AIDS...

In 2008, researchers from Harvard University, Imperial College London, and the World Bank wrote: "There is a growing body of evidence that keeping girls in school reduces their risk of contracting HIV. The relationship between educational attainment and HIV has changed over time, with educational attainment now more likely to be associated with a lower risk of HIV infection than earlier in the epidemic."

Since then, that correlation has only grown stronger. The right programs in schools not only reduce the likelihood of young people contracting HIV or AIDS, but also reduce the stigmas held against people living with HIV and AIDS.

6. ...and vulnerability to natural disasters and climate change

As the number of extreme weather events increases due to climate change, education plays a critical role in reducing vulnerability and risk to these events. A 2014 issue of the journal *Ecology and Society* states: "It is found that highly educated individuals are better aware of the earthquake risk ... and are more likely to undertake disaster preparedness.... High risk awareness associated with education thus could contribute to vulnerability reduction behaviors."

The authors of the article went on to add that educated people living through a natural disaster often have more of a financial safety net to offset losses, access to more sources of information to prepare for a disaster, and have a wider social network for mutual support.

7. Education reduces violence at home and in communities

The same World Bank and ICRW report that showed the connection between education and maternal health also reveals that each additional year of secondary education reduced the chances of child marriage — defined as being married before the age of 18. Because educated women tend to marry later and have fewer children later in life, they're also less likely to suffer gender-based violence, especially from their intimate partner.

Girls who receive a full education are also more likely to understand the harmful aspects of traditional practices like FGM, as well as their rights and how to stand up for them, at home and within their community.

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