



BY WILLIAM F. FELICE  
*Guest Columnist*

## If we don't educate girls, the globe is losing half its brain power

It is not idealistic dreaming to believe that every girl and boy in our world can receive quality education.



Malala Yousafzai greets Hillary Clinton at the Clinton Global Initiative on Sept. 20 in New York. (AP Photo/Julia Nihinson) [ JULIA NIKHINSON | AP ]

To coincide with the September opening of the United Nations General Assembly, the U.N. organized a global summit on “Transforming Education” attended by more than 100 countries. The importance of girls’ education was a consistent theme at the conference. One of the summit’s opening speakers, 2014 Nobel Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai, had previously presented a petition to the U.N. with

more than 3 million signatures demanding free compulsory education for every child. Malala's activism and the U.N. Education Summit challenge global leaders to prioritize programs that enhance female education and literacy.

At the beginning of the 21st century, in all developing countries, there were 80 percent more illiterate women than illiterate men. In some communities, more than half the female population aged fifteen and over could neither read nor write. While in the years since, progress has been achieved to raise girls' enrollment in schools, in 2019 an estimated 131 million girls worldwide still remained out of school and confront many cultural and economic barriers to education.

U.N. and World Bank studies confirm that women deprived of education face serious obstacles to raising healthy and productive children. Women's education improves child survival. A 2014 58-country analysis concluded: "If all women in these countries completed secondary education, the under-5 mortality rate would fall by 49% — an annual savings of 3 million lives." In the U.S., a mother's education is associated with better child cognitive development.

In addition, uneducated women tend to have more children than they wish. Better educated women are able to use contraception more effectively and communicate better with their spouse about the desired family size. For example, a 2018 World Bank study analyzes the additional benefits of females continuing their education into secondary school. For 15 developing countries, it estimates that for each additional year of secondary education, the "risk" of a female bearing a child before the age of 18 falls by 5.8 percent.

Women's education is linked to women's health. Education makes it possible and easier for women to obtain medical care, comply with instructions, and follow up with health care providers. An analysis of 108 countries estimated that "if all women completed primary education, maternal mortality would fall ... by 66%. This would save the lives of 189,000 women every year." In contrast, a low education level makes it more difficult for women to obtain health care information, prevent illness and care for the sick.

Cross-country analysis by the World Bank indicates that countries that invest in girls' education have higher rates of economic growth. The results have been remarkable across all geographical regions and levels of economic development.

In a widely reported encounter, Bill Gates made this exact point while speaking to a sex-segregated audience in Saudi Arabia. A partition separated a large group of men on the left and a smaller group of women on the right. In the Q&A section a questioner asked Gates his opinion on whether Saudi Arabia could become a top 10 country in technology. Gates replied, "Well if you're not fully utilizing half the

talent in the country, you're not going to get too close to the top 10." The smaller group of women burst forth in riotous cheering, while the men meekly responded.

Progress toward achieving the U.N. goal of ensuring "inclusive and equitable quality education" for all by 2030 has been severely disrupted by COVID-19. The U.N. estimates that two-thirds of low and lower-middle class countries have reduced funding for education since the onset of the pandemic. In addition, foreign aid to education has flattened. It is thus imperative that now, more than ever, exceptional measures are taken to get students back into the classroom and on-track to achieving a quality education.

It is not idealistic dreaming to believe that every girl and boy in our world can receive quality education. Numerous education programs have had remarkable success. For example, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) has brought together developed countries and international organizations to raise funds to strengthen education systems in developing countries. GPE programs prioritize keeping girls in school and puts "gender equity at the heart of national education systems." The results from these programs have been impressive. Between 2002 and 2016, the GPE reports that forty-one million additional girls were enrolled in school across partner countries.

In accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, Malala said: "This award is not just for me. It is for those forgotten children who want education. It is for those frightened children who want peace. It is for those voiceless children who want change." The global community of nations must collectively embrace Malala's message and implement the workable education programs that can bring hope to these millions of forgotten children.



**William F. Felice is professor emeritus of political science at Eckerd College. He is the author of six books on human rights and international relations. He can be reached via his website at [williamfelice.com](http://williamfelice.com).**