



Support Girls' Literacy

This is the first in an occasional series about surprising dimensions of environmental problems.

Today's thesis is that promoting educational equality in developing countries would be a good thing for the environment. In other words, environmentalists should favor directing more educational funds to girls rather than following the norm in many countries, which is to spend those funds on boys. Here's why:

First, increasing female literacy is one of the best ways of restraining population growth. As Jeffrey Sachs says in his book *Common Wealth*, a "girl's education has time and again been shown to be one of the decisive entry points into the demographic transition. Girl's education has multiple effects, all leading in the same direction: lower fertility." (p. 187) The most direct effect is that girls who stay in school longer marry and have children later. (Look [here](#) for further discussion).

Second, high population growth translates into higher societal consumption and hence higher carbon emissions (and more climate change). See, e.g., [this report](#) from the Wilson Center. It is for this reason that some environmental organizations are beginning to advocate making family planning more accessible throughout the developing world. ([here](#))

Ergo, giving girls their share of educational funds in developing countries is a key strategy in the campaign against climate change.

What this argument shows is that, from an environmentalist perspective, it's important that whatever funds a country spends on education go equally to boys and girls. Other forms of equality for women probably also decrease fertility. Of course, equality is a good thing in an of itself, but the point is that it's also a good thing for environmental reasons.

And the deeper point is that human societies and the physical environment are tightly coupled in ways that aren't always obvious. Protecting the environment also requires that we think about what kinds of societies we want to live in.