

directed to the full development of the human personality." The International Federation of University Women, which promotes women's education worldwide, was founded in the same year. It has consultative status with the United Nations and meets every four years. The international commitment to women's education was affirmed at the 1990 Education for All Conference in Thailand; at the 1998 UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education in Paris; at the 2000 World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, which launched the formal Education for All (EFA) Campaign; and at the 2002 United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI), in Paris. In response to the EFA campaign, which focuses on primary and secondary education, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are both targeting funding toward achieving the goal of gender equity in education worldwide by 2015. When the campaign turns its attention to higher education, women's colleges and universities, unnoticed in their current discussions, should emerge as of particular interest.

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Meanwhile, at just the right moment, women's colleges and universities around the world are themselves coming together to promote women's education as an international priority. The leaders of 29 women's colleges and universities from five continents met for the first time this past June, in western Massachusetts, USA, at the invitation of two of the leading American women's colleges, Mt. Holyoke and Smith. The gathering was titled, "Women's Education Worldwide 2004: The Unfinished Agenda." The discussions focused not on the merits of the single-sex method but on their shared commitment to preparing women leaders, both professionally and as agents of social change. The group is just in the early stages of forming—it may soon have a website and a listserv—and it hopes its membership will expand. (Contact: jlytle@mtholyoke.edu) They plan to meet again in two or three years. Indeed, the question of whether coeducational institutions committed to women's education might eventually participate seemed open for further discussion.

Women's education is one of the most powerful tools available for uplifting a nation. It is also a human right that too many women around the world have been denied. Perhaps the 21st century will be the Century for Women's Education Worldwide. It is a revolution longverdue. ■

The Challenge of Women's Higher Education in Asia

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The value of women's education has received global recognition over the past two decades. As early as the 1990 World Conference on Education for All, in Jomtien, Thailand, women's education was cited as a top priority for international development agencies. The "Beijing Platform for Action," the outcome document of the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, in Beijing, focused on 12 critical areas of concern. The education and training of women was one of these critical areas. Governments committed themselves to ensuring equal access to education; eradicating illiteracy among women; improving women's access to vocational training, science, and technology and continuing education; developing nondiscriminatory education and training; allocating sufficient resources for and monitoring the implementation of educational reform; and promoting lifelong training for girls and women.

The "Human Development Report," produced by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), utilizes the Human Development Index (HDI) to measure quality of life in a wide range of countries. Through the HDI, specifically through the Gender Differentiated HDI or GDI, which is a measure of gender inequality in the achievement of the basic components of HDI (longevity, knowledge, and income), the importance of gender equality in educational attainment is stressed. In 2000, the United Nations held a Millennium Summit at which world leaders from 189 countries committed themselves to achieve eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), with gender equality and women's empowerment as one goal. Goal 3 emphasizes, among other issues, the need to eliminate gender disparity at all levels of education.

A Focus on Higher Education

While the case for women's education has been eloquently made, there has been considerably more attention to literacy and basic education. The relevance of women's higher education is not revealed in the neglect it has received in most quarters of the international development community for years. The arguments for women's higher education center on human resource development, economic returns, and gender equality and women's empowerment. Women

graduates must be seen as part of the human resource base of a country. Discriminatory practices in access to education and career opportunities are not only unjust but are also a flagrant waste of valuable expertise. Higher education for women leads to substantial economic returns achieved by raising productivity and the income levels of families.

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While the benefits of educating women for the welfare of societies in general and their families in particular are well understood, education's role in reducing gender inequality and benefiting women themselves is less clearly established. It is often assumed that education enhances women's well-being, strengthens their voice in household decisions, improves their opportunities to participate in community affairs and the labor market, and gives them greater autonomy to determine the conditions of their lives. The empirical literature, however, reveals that education is a necessary but not sufficient investment for achieving gender equality and improving women's well-being. Often it is only secondary or higher education that leads to improved options, opportunities, and outcomes for women. It is also suggested that the enabling environment (i.e., a range of social and economic factors) needs to be favorable before female education, even higher education, makes a real difference in women's lives. Women's education is most beneficial to women themselves in settings that are less patriarchal, where they have access to services, where they have real options and opportunities, and where market and social conditions favor positive returns.

Inequality in Higher Education

Global trends reveal a growing representation of women in higher education in many regions—with the highest ratios in Europe, Latin America, and the Arab states and the lowest representations in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Despite improved ratios of access and participation over the past decades, there remains a definite pattern of gender tracking in most countries with women dominating certain courses or fields such as liberal arts, home economics, nursing, and teaching; while men dominate courses in law, agriculture, engineering, and natural sciences. Gender tracking, which channels women into careers that are basically extensions of their domestic responsibilities and allows men to acquire more marketable skills and enjoy greater earning power, only

exacerbates the problem of unequal opportunities for women.

The climate on Asian campuses has not reached desirable levels of gender fairness. Bias is revealed not only in inequality of access and gender tracking but also in curriculum, instructional materials, language, policies, programs, and projects. Women and gender programs and projects do not yet have widespread support, and mainstreaming gender into the curriculum is even farther off. Men outnumber women in the top-level posts of colleges and universities.

Women's Colleges and Universities

In many countries in Asia, the enrollment of women in higher education is extremely low. Women's colleges and universities play a particular role in these societies, where conservative families prefer to send their daughters to all-women institutions. But aside from allowing more women access to higher education, women's colleges and universities in Asia (as well as elsewhere) are in a unique position to educate women for leadership. All-women institutions are good training grounds because in these settings women can more freely develop their leadership in a context that is relatively unencumbered by the cultural stereotypes and social pressures of a male-dominated society. Women's colleges and universities provide women with successful role models and mentors as the proportion of female faculty and administrators are greater. Women's colleges and universities provide the affirming and liberating atmosphere at a critical period in their lives to develop their confidence, self-esteem, and talents.

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Gender-fair Education

The main challenge to women's higher education, whether in the context of all-women or coeducational institutions, is to provide gender-fair education to students. Gender-fair education does not mean merely equal access to education for women and men, but more important, the equality of women and men in the very substance of education. Gender-fair education involves an aggressive move away from emphasis on separate and complementary spheres for men and women and on stereotyped careers to expanded options and outcomes. The attainment of equality, rights, and empowerment should not be accidental or simply an offshoot of a good education but rather

an explicit, overarching goal. The challenge of gender-fair education is not simply to provide women students with the best education possible but to create an enabling environment in society.

Some major instruments of gender-fair education are affirmative action and quota systems, aggressive recruitment of female faculty and administrators, reform programs to remove bias from curricula and teaching materials, gender-sensitivity training for teachers and counselors, a review of policies and procedures for possible gender bias, and active recruitment of women into nontraditional fields of study. Also important are the identification and projection of role models among faculty, administrators, and alumnae; systematic inclusion of women among speakers and resource persons for campus events such as graduation; setting up of policies and mechanisms to handle sexual harassment cases; support services to alleviate the double burden of women on campus and to make campuses more family-friendly workplaces.

Women and gender studies programs and centers are important institutional mechanisms for gender-fair education. In addition to offering courses, these programs and centers do research, design and conduct training programs, and publish books and monographs. There should be efforts to link up with women's nongovernmental organizations and activists for women's empowerment. These partnerships are not only valuable models of cooperation and synergy but they also lead to high impact advocacy and action aimed at the larger sociocultural and political environment.

The challenge of gender-fair women's higher education should be the transformation of women's lives as well as the transformation of society itself. ■

Women's Colleges and Universities in International Perspective

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Women's colleges and universities play an important role in the higher education of women in many countries worldwide. Approximately 1,200 of these institutions can at present be found in Asian countries (e.g., Korea, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India);

in Middle Eastern countries (e.g., the United Arab Emirates and Iran); in Western countries (e.g., the United States, Canada, and England); and in the African country of Sudan. In each of these countries, the history and purposes of women's colleges are broad and varied, dependent upon local and national contexts. This article provides a brief background of women's colleges and universities in an international perspective and highlights some of the findings from a recent research initiative on this topic undertaken at the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College.

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Evolution of Women's Colleges and Universities

Some of the earliest women's colleges date back to the early and mid-1800s, while the most recent ones have been founded in the past two years. Across cultures, the earliest women's colleges typically offered "female-appropriate" academic subjects such as teacher training, literature, and music. The schooling these early students received had as much to do with preparing them for their futures as wives and mothers as it did with academic development. Internationally, as more women began to work in the public sphere and take on roles outside of the home, women's colleges expanded and diversified their curricula and programs to meet these new demands. Long-established women's colleges now offer a much wider and deeper range of courses and activities than they did in the past.

The number of women's colleges and universities has declined in many Western countries (e.g., the United States, England, and Canada) over the past three decades as coeducational institutions have become the norm. Countries in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East have simultaneously been taking steps to establish women's postsecondary institutions, in response to increasing demands for women's higher education. For example, recently efforts have been made to establish new women's colleges in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bahrain, Kenya, and Zimbabwe. The missions of these institutions are dedicated to educating women in various fields including technology, medicine, and business, underscoring the contemporary promise of these singular institutions in the provision of tertiary education to women.