

Gender Inequality in Guatemala: Why Girls Receive Less Education Than Boys

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Abstract

This article focuses on gender-based educational inequality in Guatemala, which despite some recent progress is still pervasive. Especially indigenous girls often receive little to no education. This article examines the evolution of gender-based educational inequality in terms of adult and youth literacy rates and primary, secondary and tertiary school enrollment. It then discusses ethical and political aspects of gender inequality in Guatemala, including how educational inequality is related to a societal dependency on girls and women for the collection of drinking water. The article concludes with some basic recommendations.

I. Introduction

Gender-based educational inequality is a worldwide epidemic. In the country of Guatemala, the problem of educational inequality based on gender remains prevalent today. The Global Education Fund (2018, p. 1) explains that “over half of the Guatemalan population is indigenous and less than 30 percent of poor, rural indigenous girls are enrolled in secondary school. Indigenous girls in Guatemala are among the country’s most disadvantaged group with limited schooling, early marriage, frequent childbearing, and chronic poverty.”¹

When girls are not given the chance to go to school, this leads them into making decisions that are not the best for themselves. They feel hopeless and think that the only way out of this feeling is to get married and have children instead of living life for themselves. However, an early marriage means not only that a Guatemalan girl is not completing her education, it also means that she is unqualified for a good job and thus remains dependent on her husband.

This article discusses the different aspects of why girls and women in Guatemala do not have adequate access to education. Following this introduction, the next section provides a brief review of the literature. Section III provides some socio-economic background for Guatemala, before Section IV provides a detailed analysis of the evolution of gender-based discrimination in

¹ The Global Education Fund is a civil society organization based in Boulder, Colorado, that is committed to helping children in poverty to receive a proper education. For further information, see: www.globaleducationfund.org/.

Guatemala's education system. Section V then reviews some ethical approaches to Guatemala's gender bias, and the last section provides some conclusions.

II. Literature Review

There are existing articles that show how women in Guatemala are mistreated in a variety of ways due to their gender. Additionally, many articles show how Guatemala's instability contributes to societal issues and gender discrimination. For example, economic instability in Guatemala gives women less of a chance to expand their role in society. Political instability makes it hard for women to have a political voice. All the different ways women are mistreated as well as Guatemala's larger societal problems add to why women receive less education than men.

- Vásquez (2011) focuses on the very little education indigenous Guatemalan women receive. According to Vásquez (2011, p. 110), indigenous women in Guatemala receive only 1.8 years of schooling on average. Vásquez explains that indigenous people's lack of education corresponds directly with how indigenous people make less money than non-indigenous people. Women face the worst when it comes to this, since around the world women make less money than men on average. The wage gap between indigenous people and non-indigenous people in Guatemala is already high, and if you are a female, the gap widens even further. Vásquez, includes a table that shows how indigenous people are given less of a chance to work in the formal public sector. He states (p. 118) that "the hourly wage is also higher in the public sector for all groups except indigenous females from minor groups."
- Menjívar (2008) discusses how women face violence in their everyday lives. The article explains that Guatemala is a country that has faced instability for years. Based on interviews with twenty-nine non-indigenous women in an Eastern Guatemalan town called San Alejo, it becomes apparent that women face great amounts of violence in their lives that significantly impair their ability to live productive lives. In one of her interviews, a 34-year-old woman explained that she never went to school as a child because she had to take care of her mother. The woman, named Hortencia, explained that her father was a drunkard and that she stayed home from school to protect her mother from his violent actions. While Hortencia said she was adamant about sending her five children to school in order to give them a better life than she had, other women in Guatemala have the potential to fall into the same patterns of being mistreated instead of receiving a proper education. Education can relieve girls and women of this vicious cycle.
- Ogrodnik and Borzutzky (2011) discuss women's lack of political power and their lack of access to proper schooling. They explain that Guatemalan women are also not active in the economy in their country, meaning that they have less opportunities to work than men. Ogrodnik and Borzutzky also describe how violence affects women's ability to progress in society. They note that crimes against women are on the rise, which points to the ineffective nature of existing polices. They emphasize the need to make a larger investment in antipoverty and other socioeconomic policies geared to increase women's economic self-sufficiency.
- Guinan (2015) documents in a CNN report how women in Guatemala's patriarchal society are trapped in a cycle of violence. The report details how prevailing culture of machismo and an institutionalized acceptance of brutality against women leads to high rates of

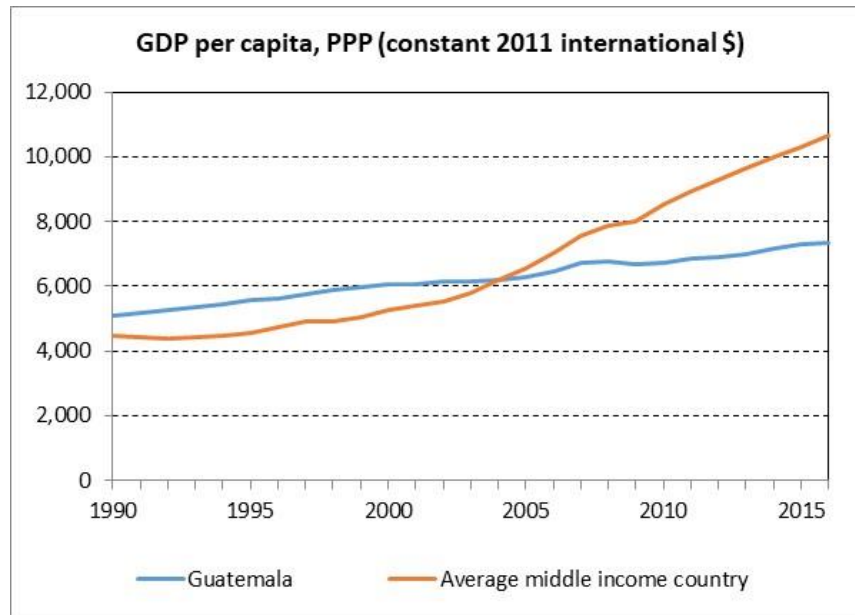
violence. According to rights groups that were consulted, machismo not only condones violence, it places the blame on the victim. Fortunately, Guinan finds signs that the culture of discrimination may be slowly changing.

III. Socio-Economic Background

Guatemala is a country that has gone through major changes since its declaration of independence from Spain in 1821. Initially, Guatemala was mostly under authoritarian rule. In 1954, a coup d'état carried out by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) deposed the democratically elected Guatemalan President Jacobo Árbenz. The coup ended the Guatemalan Revolution of 1944–1954 by installing the military dictatorship of Carlos Castillo Armas, which led to the Guatemalan Civil War until a peace accord between the guerrillas and the government ended it in 1996.²

Following the end of the civil war, the “government has attempted to revitalize the economy by fostering the diversification and expansion of nontraditional exports such as cut flowers and snow peas, and free trade zones and assembly plants have been established to encourage the expansion and decentralization of manufacturing.”³ However, as Figure 1 shows, Guatemala’s PPP-adjusted GDP per capita has grown at a fairly slow rate between 1990 and 2016. In 1990, Guatemala’s GDP per capita stood at \$5,101, while that of the average middle-income country (MIC) was \$4,466 (more than \$600 below that of Guatemala). However, in 2016, Guatemala’s GDP per capita had increased to only \$7,367, while that of the average MIC reached \$10,673, leaving Guatemala’s GDP per capita \$3,306 below that of the average MIC.

Figure 1: GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2011 international \$), 1990-2016



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2018).

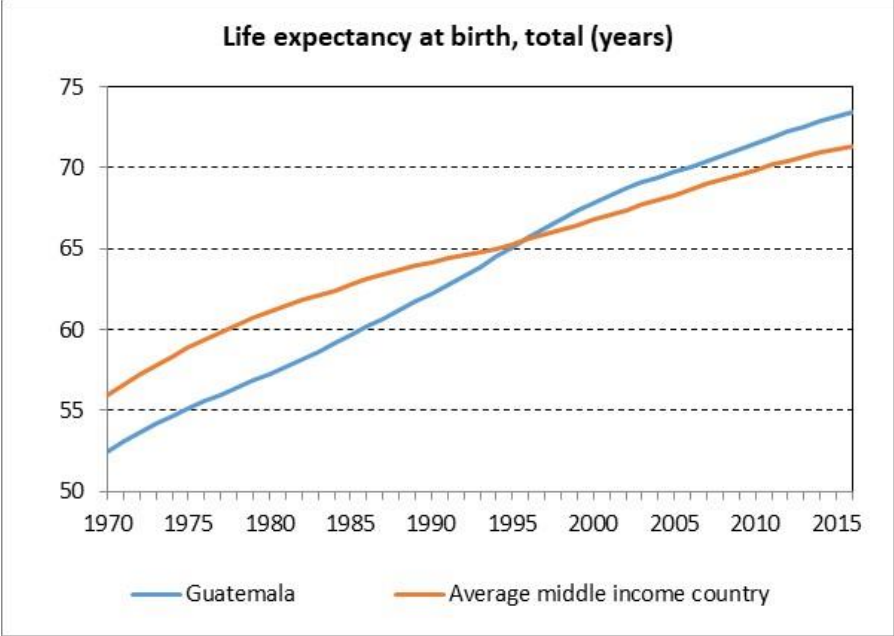
² Summarized based on information provided by Anderson et al. (2018) and Wikipedia.

³ Anderson et al. (2018), p. 2.

Furthermore, Menjívar (2008, p. 115) pointed out that “Guatemala has consistently ranked among the most unequal, even by Latin American standards.” Hence, the current average income per capita of \$7,367 per year, which is the same as a daily average income per capita of \$20.18, is highly distorted by the rich. Indeed, based on the World Bank’s (2018) latest poverty incidence data of 2014, 50.1 percent the population live below \$5.50 a day, 25.3 percent live below \$3.20 a day, and 9.5 percent still live in extreme poverty (i.e., below \$1.90 a day).

On the positive side, as Figure 2 shows, life expectancy in Guatemala has increased steadily over the last five decades, and more so than in the average MIC. In 1970, average life expectancy was 52.5 years in Guatemala and 56.0 years for the average MIC. However, Guatemala caught up with the average MIC in 1995, and in 2016, Guatemala’s average life expectancy (73.4 years) exceeded that of the average MIC (71.3 years) by 2.1 years.

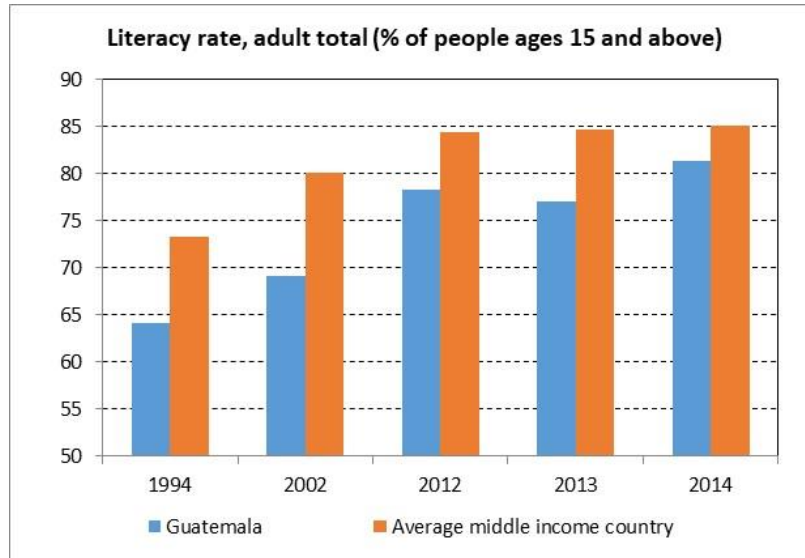
Figure 2: Life Expectancy at Birth (in years), 1970-2016



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2018).

While Guatemala currently has a higher life expectancy than the average MIC, its adult literacy rate has always been below that of the average MIC, despite that the gap has narrowed in relative terms. As shown in Figure 3, in 1994 (which is the first year such data is available for Guatemala), Guatemala’s adult literacy rate was 64.2 percent, compared to 73.4 percent in the average MIC, which is a gap of 9.2 percentage points. In 2014, the adult literacy rate was 81.3 percent in Guatemala and 85.1 percent in the average MIC. Hence, while Guatemala has reduced the gap, Guatemala’s adult literacy rate is still 3.8 percentage points below that of the average MIC. It is also noteworthy that Guatemala’s adult literacy rate decreased from 78.3 percent in 2012 to 77.0 percent in 2013, though it increased again from 2013 to 2014, the last year such data is available.

Figure 3: Total Adult Literacy (in percent); all available years

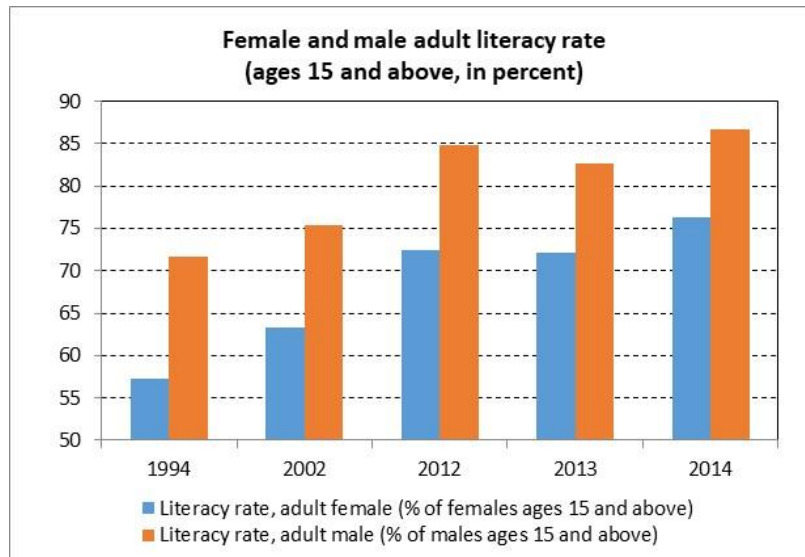


Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2018).

IV. Evolution of Gender Inequality in the Education Sector

While Figure 3 has shown that the people of Guatemala are less literate than the average person of MICs, Figure 4 shows that female adult literacy rates are considerably below those of males in Guatemala. Even though the gender gap has decreased over time, females had a slightly more than 10 percentage points lower adult literacy than males in 2014. Male adult literacy stood at 86.8 percent in 2014, while that of females was only 76.3 percent.

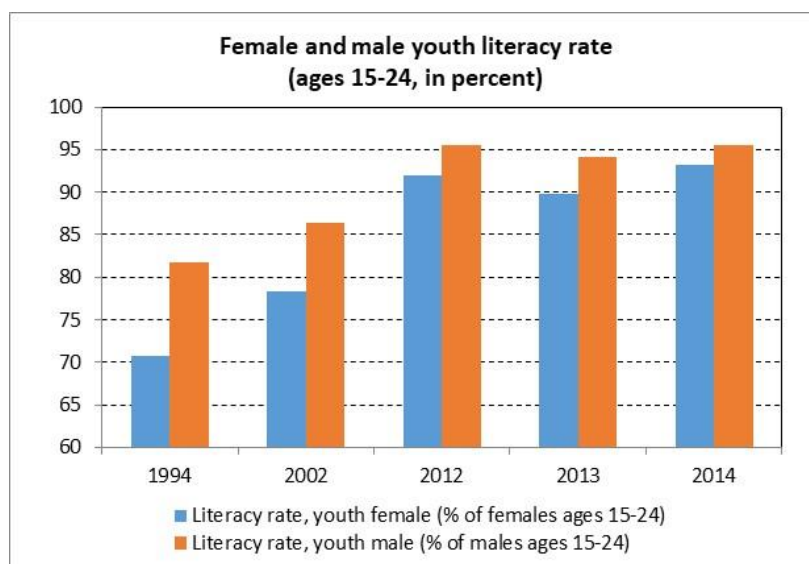
Figure 4: Female and Male Adult Literacy (in percent)



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2018).

The picture looks slightly better when comparing youth unemployment, which is shown in Figure 5. Not only is youth literacy much higher than adult literacy, the gender gap is also smaller in absolute and relative terms. Female youth literacy rates have increased from 70.7 percent in 1994 to 93.3 percent in 2014; while male youth literacy rates have increased from 81.7 percent to 95.5 percent during the same period. Hence, the gender gap in youth literacy has decreased from 11.0 percentage points in 1994 to 2.2 percentage points in 2014.

Figure 5: Youth Literacy (in percent)

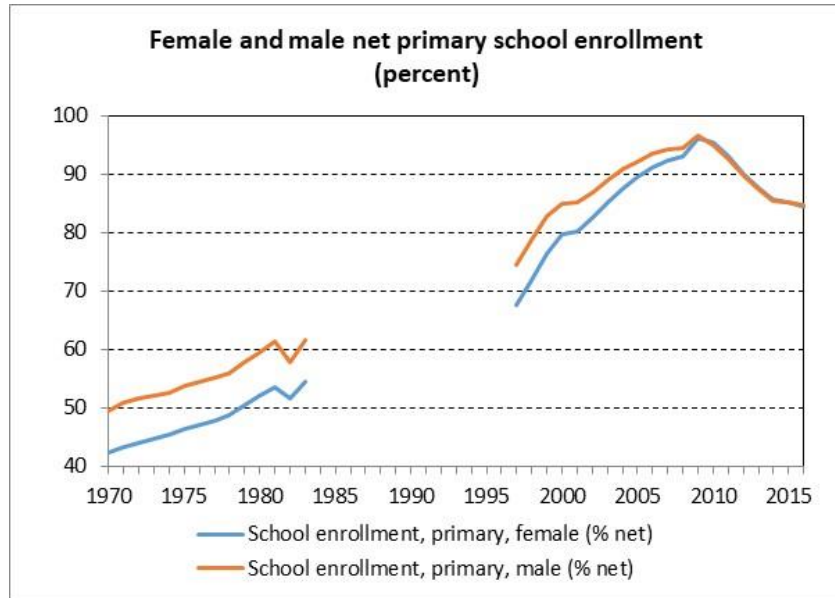


Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2018).

The reason for this relatively sharp decrease in the gender gap of youth literacy can be contributed to the elimination of the gender gap in net primary school enrollment. As shown in Figure 6, in 1970, net primary school enrollment was only 42.2 percent for girls while it was 49.5 percent for boys. It then increased relatively sharply during the late 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium, with net primary school enrollment increasing from 67.4 percent in 1997 to 96.0 percent in 2009 for girls, and from 74.5 percent to 96.5 percent during the same period for boys. Though net primary school enrollment has decreased since its all-time high of 2009, the gender gap has been eliminated since 2010. As of 2016, Guatemala's net primary school enrollment stood at 84.6 percent, for both, boys and girls.

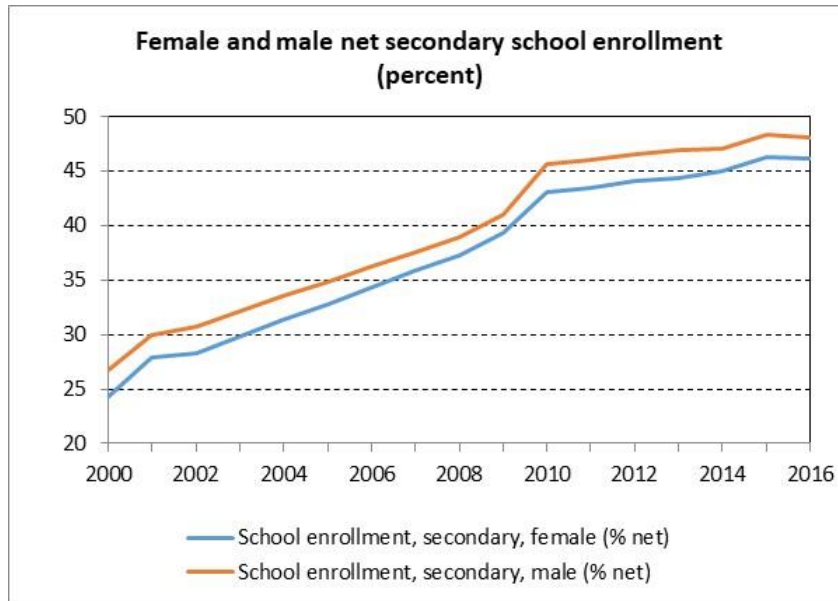
Despite the elimination of the gender gap in primary education since 2010, Figure 7 shows that there is a relative consistent gender gap of about 2 percentage points in net primary school enrollment. In 2000, net secondary school enrollment was 24.3 percent for females and 26.7 percent for males, which implies a gender gap of 2.4 percentage points. Sixteen years later, net secondary school enrollment reached 46.1 percent for females and 48.0 percent for males, hence still having a gender gap of 1.9 percentage points, compared to 2.4 percentage points in 2000. The gender gap actually increased slightly to 2.6 percentage points in 2010 and 2011, before declining gradually to 1.9 percentage points in 2016.

Figure 6: Female and Male Net Primary School Enrollment (in percent)



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2018).

Figure 7: Female and Male Net Secondary School Enrollment (in percent)

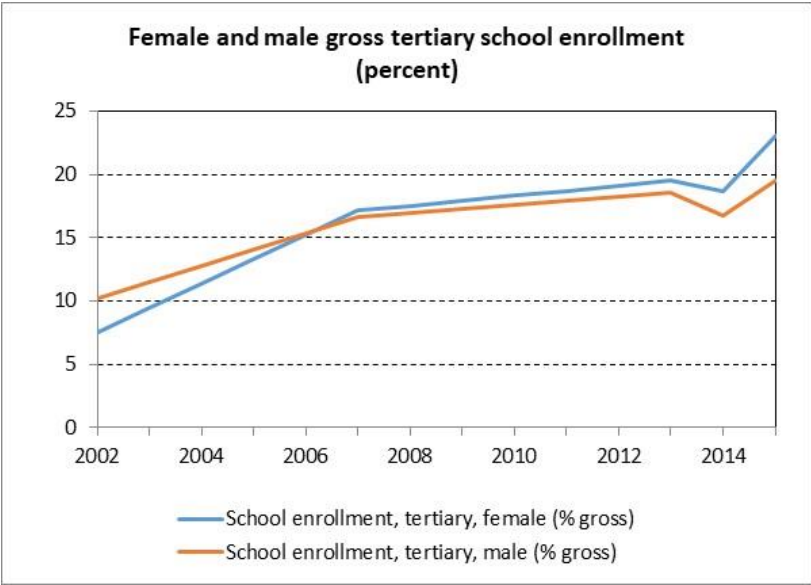


Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2018).

Finally, looking at female and male gross tertiary school enrollments, Figure 8 shows that the initial gender gap was eliminated between 2006 and 2007, with female gross tertiary school enrollment slightly exceeding that of males ever since, reaching a negative gender gap of 3.5 percentage points in 2015 (the last year such data is available). The explanation for the higher female tertiary school enrollment is mostly due to the continued discrimination against women in

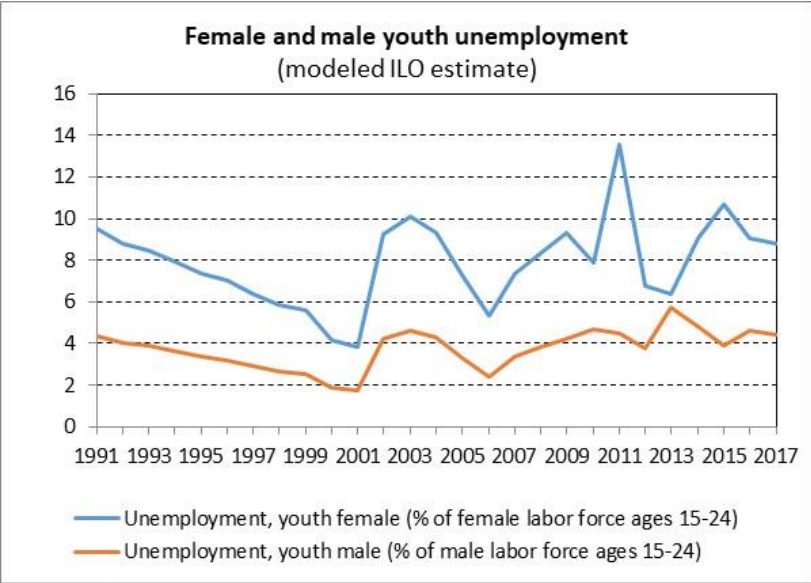
the workplace, especially young women. As Figure 9 shows, female youth unemployment has been and remains about twice that of male youth unemployment. Based on ILO modeling, male youth unemployment was 4.4 percent in 2017, while it was 8.8 percent for females, exactly twice that of males. Hence, it is not surprising that without getting a job, young females, especially from the wealthier families, decide to enroll in tertiary education instead of being unemployed.

Figure 8: Female and Male Gross Tertiary School Enrollment (in percent)



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2018).

Figure 9: Female and Male Youth Unemployment (in percent)



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2018).

V. Ethical and Political Aspects

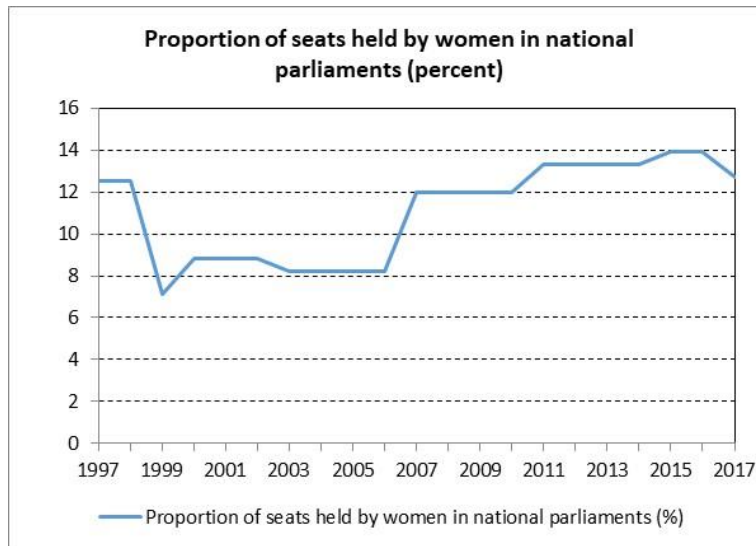
Among the various approaches of ethical reasoning, the educational gender gap can be examined via three approaches: the fairness or justice approach, the rights approach, and the common goods approach.⁴ This section also reviews power issues between genders and outlines political explanations for Guatemala’s gender bias. Finally, it illustrates these power issues by linking the gender bias in education to the lack of access to safe water.

According to the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics (2009, p. 2), the fairness or justice approach implies “that ethical actions treat all human beings equally – or if unequally, then fairly based on some standard that is defensible.” Given that there is no defensible standard to provide less education to girls than to boys, Guatemala’s gender bias is unethical.

The gender bias is also unethical based on the rights approach as Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 states that everyone has the right to education. Article 26 also states that education “shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.”

It is true that when people are educated, they are able to live in a more harmonious world. They are able to better address concerns they or their community faces. They have a better understanding of political affairs, and they are also able to be better members of the global society. When women are given a proper education, they are also able to progress further economically. Educating women benefits the whole society. Looking at the gender bias from this perspective, it is also unethical under the so-called common good approach of ethical decision making.

Figure 10: Female and Male Youth Unemployment (in percent)



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2018).

⁴ This article follows the description of these approaches as defined in the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics (2009) at Santa Clara University.

Due to Guatemala's political instability, it is hard for both men and women to have a voice in politics. However, it is even harder for women to have a political voice. Ogrodnik and Borzutzky (2011) talk about political challenges women face. They explain (p. 58) that "women with the ability to read and write obtained the right to vote in 1945. This right was expanded to all women in 1966." Yet, not many women are elected into public office. As Figure 10 shows, despite that women constitute now about half of the voters, the proportion of seats held by women in Guatemala's national parliament varied during the last 20 years between a low of 7.1 percent in 1999 and a high of 13.9 percent in 2015 and 2016. Ogrodnik and Borzutzky (2011, p. 58) also emphasize that women's under-representation is also a reality in high-level appointed positions. For example, there is only one woman in the ten-member Constitutional Court.

When women are underrepresented in politics, this reinforces economic gender inequality. For example, in 2006, women represented only 38.3 percent of the economically active population in Guatemala.⁵ This shows that most women in Guatemala are not given the opportunity to make a living, since they make up less than two-fifths of the economically active population. When women are not in positions of power to make choices for women as a group, this causes women to remain inferior to men in all aspects of their lives.

Another major reason for why gender-based educational inequality exists is a lack of access to clean water. In many developing countries, women and girls are the ones who are forced to make the long journey from their villages to the nearest water source, which is often many miles away. Because of this, women and young girls spend their day doing these types of household chores instead of going to school. Based on the survey undertaken by Hajny (2015), this also applies to women and girls in Guatemala.⁶ This division of labor in terms of fetching water is not only ethically unjustified but it reinforces the ethically unacceptable gender gap in education.

VI. Conclusion

Overall, gender disparities within Guatemala's education still exist today and are long overdue to be fixed. Fixing the extreme gender inequalities in the Guatemalan educational system needs to start with empowering women. Without a voice, young women are unable to advocate for themselves. Once given this voice, women will be able to prove that they are capable of receiving an education and using it for the greater good of the world. Giving women a voice also allows them to run for more positions of power within the government. Right now, there are not enough women in the government to influence policy decisions. Once more women are involved, more decisions that help women will be made.

Additionally, water needs to be made more easily accessible to all. Right now, water collection depends largely on women, which causes them to be unable to unlock their full potential. Water collection is a chore that has been given to women, but if the whole community is able to be involved in water collection, this will allow women to have more time to go to school. Women are caught in a cycle of being made responsible for water collection, which then keeps them out of school.

⁵ Ogrodnik and Borzutzky (2011), p. 58.

⁶ Hajny (2015) shares the results of a case study he conducted in San Lucas Toliman, Solola, Guatemala. Out of the 160 families living in the area, Hajny surveyed 40 of these families about their attitudes towards paying for more advanced, community-based management water systems, coming to the conclusion that women and children in Guatemala currently play a large role in the collection of water.

Finally, though not addressed in this article, “parents and girls need to know that there are options in addition to or outside of marriage and motherhood.”⁷ Many young Guatemalan girls get trapped in the idea of having to get married at an early age in order to live a fulfilling life, but this is not true. By encouraging young girls and their parents that young girls can grow up and live independently, many gender-based issues could be resolved.

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⁷ Nierenberg (2002) p. 38.