

Editor's Note [Volume 26 No. 3 (2026)]

Advancing Women's Education as a Catalyst for Child Health and Nutrition in Africa

Across Africa, the well-being of children remains closely tied to the knowledge, agency, and empowerment of women. Among the many determinants of child health and nutrition, women's education stands out as one of the most powerful and cost-effective interventions. It is not merely a social good - it is a public health imperative. This has been known for a long time.

Educated women are better equipped to make informed decisions about infant and young child feeding, hygiene practices, healthcare utilization, and household nutrition. Evidence consistently shows that maternal education is strongly associated with reduced rates of child stunting, wasting, and mortality. Even a few years of formal schooling can significantly improve a mother's ability to understand nutrition information, interpret health guidance, and adopt optimal caregiving practices. Such women also appreciate how good young children look when they are healthy.

In many African contexts, limited access to education for girls continues to perpetuate cycles of poverty and malnutrition. Early marriage, gender inequality, and economic constraints often curtail educational opportunities, with long-term consequences for both women and their children. When girls leave school early, they are more likely to enter motherhood without the knowledge and resources necessary to support healthy child growth and development.

Education influences child nutrition through multiple pathways. First, it enhances women's literacy and cognitive skills, enabling them to access and apply health and nutrition information. Second, it increases women's autonomy and decision-making power within households, often leading to better allocation of resources toward food, healthcare, and sanitation. Third, it is associated with improved economic opportunities, thereby enhancing household food security and dietary diversity.

Importantly, women's education also shapes intergenerational outcomes. Educated mothers are more likely to prioritize schooling for their own children, particularly girls, thereby reinforcing a virtuous cycle of empowerment and improved health outcomes. This intergenerational effect is critical for achieving long-term, sustainable improvements in nutrition across populations.

However, education alone is not a panacea. Its impact is maximized when complemented by supportive systems, including accessible healthcare services, community-based nutrition programs, clean water and sanitation, and policies that promote gender equality. Nutrition education must also be context-specific, culturally sensitive, and integrated into broader development strategies.

For policymakers and development practitioners, the message is clear: investments in girls' and women's education yield substantial returns in child health and nutrition. Prioritizing universal access to quality education, delaying age at marriage, and supporting women's lifelong learning opportunities are essential strategies. In parallel, integrating nutrition and health education into school curricula can further amplify these benefits.

The urgency of addressing child malnutrition in Africa cannot be overstated. As the continent continues to face the dual burden of undernutrition and emerging diet-related non-communicable diseases, empowering women through education offers a pathway to resilience. It strengthens families, communities, and nations.

In conclusion, advancing women's education is not only a matter of equity - it is a cornerstone of public health and nutrition. To improve child survival, growth, and development, Africa must continue to invest in the education of its girls and women. The health of future generations depends on it. Healthy girls and women mean a prosperous nation, even in times of emergencies.

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