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Trade increases female education levels [1]

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As you all well know we tend to like trade around here. For it was indeed Adam Smith who pointed out that it was the division and specialisation of labour followed by the resultant trade in production that made everyone richer. That said trade is currently leading to the greatest reduction in poverty in the history of our species is also true as globalisation roars on.

However, an intriguing little piece of research shows that trade also increases female education [3].

> The intensification of international exchange throughout Europe came with a progress of mercantile science and practices, which forced merchants to acquire considerable skills in arithmetic, bookkeeping, reading, and writing. In merchant communities women played a special role, since they were often in charge of business operations, especially during their men?s year-lasting travels: therefore, women needed to be literate. Accordingly they received more (and better) education, both formally and informally, as documented by a vast historical literature on abacus schools open to girls and on female epistolary writing. The fact that commerce, contrary to other occupations, did not require physical strength reinforced this pattern.

What the authors are doing is tracking how Italian areas which were plugged into the trading routes and system in medieval times had, and continued to have, greater education rates (and for longer) than those which were not. The effects lasted centuries too.

What interests me here though is not quite just being able to say that trade leads to the desirable outcome of greater female education. There's a rather deeper point. It's a standard mantra of development economics these days that female education is one of the vital things that leads to development. Certainly, those places which educate more girls (and have a smaller gender gap in education) do perform better on all of the usual measures of human advancement. But the thing is I'm not quite sure that this mantra is correct. I think it might be putting the cart before the horse.

I don't doubt that greater female education can lead to greater growth mind. I'm just positing that it's the growth that leads to the greater female education. For two reasons.

1) The aim of this life is to have grandchildren. That's true whether you think biblically or in a Darwinian manner. When there are very high child mortality rates then many children are required to ensure grandchildren. Thus in a poor society much of a woman's life will be spent in pregnancy and child rearing.

2) A poor society is, almost by definition, one that works on human muscle power. It is inevitable that men in general have more of this than women.

If we put the two together we can see (OK, posit) that a richer society will have lower child mortality and also will be less reliant upon human muscle. Thus the incentive to educate girls will rise. They will not need to be wombs on legs in order to ensure grandchildren and also the value of their (educated or not) labour will rise relative to that of men as other forms of energy enter the society.

This is nothing at all to do with whether we *should* have gender equality in anything at all. Of course we should, 'uman beans are 'uman beans and we've all the same rights. Rather, this is about how to trigger this desirable outcome. And I have a very strong suspicion indeed that the greater education and rights of women come as a result of the beginnings of economic growth, not produce it. Yes, I'm sure there's a feedback going on as well. But the logical policy outcome of this would be that we concentrate less on "gender issues" in development and more on development itself as the gender stuff will largely solve itself given the incentives that development produces. Women's labour becomes more valuable as development proceeds leading to greater education of that potentially more valuable labour.

Hurrah and trebles all round of course. But get the development going first.

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