

Inexcusable Absence: Why 60 million girls still aren't in school and what to do about it[†]

Maureen Lewis and Marlaine Lockheed*

Remarkable increases in primary schooling over the past decade have brought gender equity to the education systems of many poor countries. But as CGD non-resident fellow Maureen Lewis and visiting fellow Marlaine Lockheed show in their new book, *Inexcusable Absence*, nearly three-quarters of the 60 million girls still not in school belong to ethnic, religious, linguistic, racial or other minorities. In this CGD Brief, they present the key findings from their research and suggest practical policy solutions to achieve universal primary education for girls and boys.

Why are 60 million girls still out of school?

The images of girls returning to school in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban drew attention to the lack of educational opportunities for girls all too common in many developing countries. Girls' education is indisputably crucial to development, and the development community has worked hard to get more of them into school. The result: since 1960, there have been remarkable increases in primary school enrollment rates for both boys and girls in developing countries. In most countries, girls' participation has converged with that of boys, bringing gender equity to the educational systems of many poor countries (Figure 1). But the international community has largely overlooked a key issue: that out of the remaining 60 million girls ages 6-11 still not in school, 70 percent belong to socially excluded groups (Table 1).

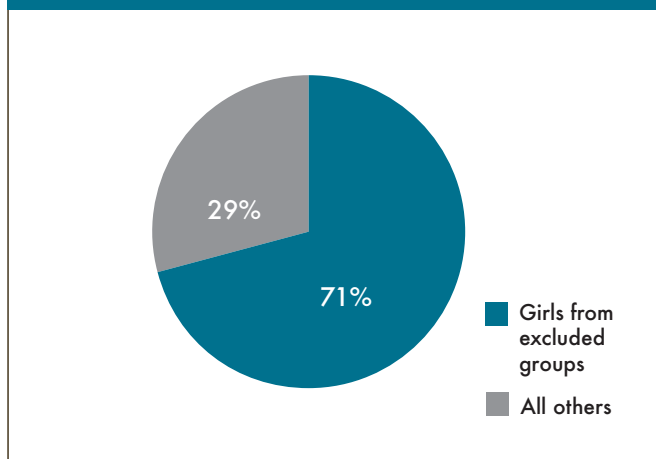
Social exclusion sidelines certain population groups, preventing them from receiving the social rights and protections meant to be extended to all citizens. Discrimination by the majority population towards ethnic minorities, isolated clans, and groups where other than the majority language predominates effectively excludes them from mainstream activities such as education and employment. Socially excluded groups are also less likely to send their daughters to school, and more likely to allow them to drop out early, as compared to sons.

Countries with a diverse mix of ethnicities and languages are particularly at risk for excluding these doubly disadvantaged girls from school. On average, countries with a broader cultural and linguistic mix tend to have more difficulty reaching universal education, and in bringing girls into school. Within countries, girls from excluded groups complete fewer years of schooling and are less likely to complete primary school or attend secondary school.

[†] This Brief is based on CGD's latest book *Inexcusable Absence: Why 60 million girls still aren't in school and what to do about it* by Maureen Lewis and Marlaine Lockheed, Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2006; and, *Exclusion, Gender and Schooling: Case Studies from the Developing World* by Maureen Lewis and Marlaine Lockheed, eds, Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, forthcoming 2007. The leadership and support of CGD Board members Belinda Stronach and Board Chair Edward W. Scott, Jr., is gratefully acknowledged, along with financial support for this work from the Flora and William Hewlett Foundation, the Nike Foundation, the Jacob and Hilda Blaustein Foundation, and other sponsors, as well as the core support that Ed Scott provides for the Center's work.

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Figure 1. Girls not in school



But getting these girls into school is a realistic goal that yields high returns. Once in school, girls from excluded groups often perform as well or even better than boys at the primary level. Results from a handful of country studies are encouraging with respect to girls' achievement:

- In Peru, the fifth grade reading and mathematics scores of rural Quechua girls were no different from those of rural Quechua boys.
- In Ecuador, indigenous girls scored higher than indigenous boys on fifth grade mathematics tests.

More broadly, countries whose students do well on international tests of reading, mathematics or science have annual economic growth rates one full percentage point higher than those of countries with lower performing students. However, when girls encounter constraints in their access to learning—when they are kept home from school and thus receive fewer hours of instruction or when their teachers discriminate against them—their performance can lag.

Success is possible, but more of the same is not enough

Getting and keeping socially excluded girls into school is not simple. It requires new strategies and reaching them can be costly. Cultural variations, linguistic differences, and the special needs of girls drive up costs, because they require new methods tailored to each group. Investment on two fronts—improving the *supply* of school opportunities and boosting the *demand* for education—is essential for enrolling and retaining excluded children in general, and girls in particular.

Improving and Diversifying the Supply of Education

- *Altering education policies and addressing discrimination.* Policies that appear fair on the surface may be subtly biased against girls from excluded groups. Policies regarding the language of school instruction or

Examples of Exclusion

- In Laos, Lao-Tai girls living in urban communities complete eight years of school, whereas Hill Tribe girls living in rural communities complete fewer than two years of school.
- In Guatemala, 62 percent of Spanish-speaking girls but only 26 percent of indigenous, non-Spanish-speaking girls complete primary school.
- In India, 26 percent of girls age 7-14 attend school, but 37 percent of girls of the same age group belonging to the lowest castes or tribes do not attend school.
- In the Slovak Republic, 54 percent of Slovak girls but only 9 percent of Roma girls attend secondary school.

coeducation may have greater effects on girls than on boys (girls from excluded groups are less exposed to the majority language than boys; the requirement for single-sex schools limits girls' opportunities in some countries).

- *Expanding schooling options.* Parents concerned with the physical safety of their daughters may be more likely to send them to community schools and non-formal alternative schools. Radio, television and computers can also expand opportunities for girls, particularly for girls who are secluded at home after primary school.
- *Improving the quality and accessibility of schools and classrooms.* School quality matters more for excluded girls than for boys and children from mainstream families. Poor quality schools can include schools with leaking roofs, shattered walls and poor sanitary facilities, as well as those whose teachers are absent and where textbooks and teaching materials never arrive. In Laos and Egypt, girls were less likely to enroll in and more likely to drop out from poor quality schools, compared with boys. Bilingual education programs that introduce reading, writing and thinking skills in the child's mother tongue, encourage girls' school enrollment and retention.

Creating Incentives for Households to Send Girls to School

- *Conditional cash transfers (CCT)* extend resources to households to defray some of the costs of sending their children to school, tying social assistance payments to desirable behaviors. Although challenging to administer in many settings, CCTs offer incentives for families to send children to school. Programs in Bangladesh, Ecuador and Mexico, among others, have been successful, although their specific impact on excluded groups is not entirely clear.
- *Scholarships and stipends* also offset the cost of schooling. Secondary school scholarship programs offer girls financing and encouragement to stay in school. They compensate families for the direct and indirect costs of

Table 1. Primary School-Age Girls from Excluded Groups Currently Out of School (in millions)

REGION	GIRLS OUT OF SCHOOL	GIRLS OUT OF SCHOOL FROM EXCLUDED GROUPS	PERCENT OF GIRLS OUT OF SCHOOL FROM EXCLUDED GROUPS	EXCLUDED GROUPS
Sub-Saharan Africa	23.8	17.9	75%	Populations other than the dominant tribe
South Asia	23.6	15.8	67%	India SC/ST; Pakistan rural tribes; Nepal lower castes; Afghanistan rural
Middle East & North Africa	5	1.7	33%	Berbers, rural populations
Latin America & Caribbean	1.5	1.5	99%	Indigenous and Afro-Latino populations
East Asia & Pacific	4.9	4.4	90%	Hill tribes; Muslim minorities; other ethnic minorities
Eastern Europe and Central Asia/CIS	1.6	1.4	90%	Roma; Turkey rural
Total	60.4	42.6	71%	

Source: Estimates based on UIS 2006; India Census 2001; Pakistan HH Survey; Vietnam LSMS; Ringold, Orenstein and Wilkens 2003; Winkler and Cueto 2004

education and have been highly effective in several countries, notably Bangladesh, where scholarships increased girls' enrollment to twice that of the national average. Stipend programs compensate parents for the cost of schooling—things like uniforms, books, materials and transportation. In Kenya, the learning achievement of girls rose among those receiving stipends.

- *School feeding programs* show an association with higher enrollment and attendance. In Kenya meals raised attendance in program schools 30 percent relative to schools without a free lunch; test scores were also higher.

For developing country governments and their donor partners to build on the progress already made, and tackle the current challenges of reaching out-of-school girls, strategies to make education more responsive to the needs of marginalized populations must be developed and carefully tested. Along the way, sufficient resources should be devoted to tracking progress in excluded groups because if we don't count those who have been uncounted, we will never know. Along these lines, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics should report school participation and achievement data disaggregated by gender *and* by ethnic/linguistic group, to make it possible to identify the role of social exclusion. Disaggregating enrollment by gender—reporting separately on the school enrollment and achievement of girls and boys—was essential in monitoring progress towards gender equity. Having data on social exclusion would help in designing programs to meet the needs of the vast majority of the 60 million girls who are still not in school.

Success Stories: Including Excluded Girls

Over the past decade, these programs have helped close the education gap between boys and girls.

- In Chile, ten years of programs providing additional support to improve the quality of the lowest-performing schools significantly reduced the gaps in learning achievement between indigenous and non-indigenous students, including girls.
- In Brazil, Turkey, Bolivia and India, preschool programs that involved both mothers and children from excluded groups have been effective in reducing children's subsequent primary school dropout rate and in boosting their achievement.
- In India, community schools that used paraprofessional teachers, allowed the community to select and supervise teachers and hired part-time workers to escort girls from excluded groups to school, had higher enrollment, attendance and test scores compared with students in public schools.
- In New Zealand, Maori students' achievement increased following the introduction of bilingual programs.
- In Brazil, India and Spain, in-school and after-school programs have bolstered the performance of disadvantaged students helping to keep children of excluded groups in school, and compensating for the absence of educational reinforcement at home.

Girls' Education in U.S. Legislation

Last year the House and the Senate both introduced versions of the “Education for All Act of 2006”¹ to achieve the Millennium Development Goal of universal basic education in all developing countries as an objective of United States foreign assistance policy.² The bill recognizes education—and girls’ education specifically—as a critical strategy for eliminating terrorism, increasing educational and economic opportunities and reducing poverty throughout the world.

The “Education for All Act of 2006” was not passed, but a new version of the bill will likely be reintroduced in the 110th Congress. *Inexcusable Absence’s* findings that nearly three-quarters of the girls still not in school are from marginalized and excluded groups will be important for shaping the efforts of policymakers and implementers as they strive to achieve universal education.

Endnotes

- 1 S.3909 was introduced by Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-NY) and the companion legislation, H.R.6152 was introduced by Representatives Nita M. Lowey (D-NY), Earl Pomeroy (D-ND), Rahm Emanuel (D-IL), and Diane Watson (D-CA).
- 2 Senators Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-NY) and Chuck Hagel (R-NE) offered further bipartisan perspectives on why the United States must make good on promises to give education and development a higher place in its foreign policy priorities at a CGD event called “Missing the Mark: Girls’ Education and the Way Forward” (<http://www.cgdev.org/content/calendar/detail/3039/>).

Further Reading

- Birdsall, Nancy and Ruth Levine. *On the Road to Universal Primary Education*. CGD Brief. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2005.
- Birdsall, Nancy, Amina Ibrahim and Ruth Levine. *Toward universal primary education: investments, incentives, and institutions*. UN Millennium Project, Task Force on Education and Gender Equality. London: Earthscan, 2005.
- Lewis, Maureen and Marlaine Lockheed. *Inexcusable Absence: Why 60 million girls still aren’t in school and what to do about it*. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2006.
- Filmer, Dean, Amer Hasan and Lant Pritchett. *A Millennium Learning Goal: Measuring Real Progress in Education*. CGD Working Paper 97. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2006.
- Also see the International Center for Research on Women at www.icrw.org.



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March 2007