

East Asia and Pacific United Nations Girls' Education Initiative

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In focus: Why Boys Do Poorly in School

Introduction to the EAP UNGEI study on why boys do poorly

By: Undarya Tumursukh and EAP UNGEI Secretariat

In the last decade, countries as diverse as Australia, America, the United Kingdom, Brazil, Mongolia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Lesotho, have raised concerns over the relative under-achievement of boys in education. These concerns have been fueled, among other things, by persistently higher drop-out rates among boys, especially at higher grades and in developing countries; higher percentage of boys with lower scores on national tests; and much higher percentage of boys among students receiving disciplinary measures. Educational disparities were found to be particularly pronounced at higher (secondary and tertiary) levels of education. A number of global reports have raised the issue of boys' education as well, particularly in connection to a higher demand on boy child labor in some of the developing countries.¹

Is it possible that we have spent so much of our energy focusing on girls at a disadvantage and have forgotten about the boys?

This so-called "reverse gender gap" has given rise to concerns about boys' education and men's development but very little research has been done in this area, hence effective, evidence-based policies are yet to be formulated. To build on the existing discourse however, the East Asia and Pacific Regional UNGEI commissioned a small study in four countries where this phenomenon is prevalent, namely - Malaysia, Mongolia, the Philippines and Thailand.



UNICEF/NYHQ2006-1869/Robert Few

Researchers in these four countries were asked to comb through existing literature and also, when available, collect additional first-hand data (by conducting focus groups and interviews with schools and community members) to determine the main reasons for this trend and recommendations for the way forward.

Education is a fundamental human right and the failure of the state to fulfill its obligation to ensure each child's and adult's right to quality education, especially quality, free basic education², risks exacerbating (gendered) socio-economic disparities, deepening the rural-urban development gap, and creating conditions for a wide range of human rights violations.

For these reasons, it is imperative to inquire into the gender dynamics existent in the education sector, better understand the interplay of structural, institutional, cultural and other factors that impact education of boys and girls, and explore avenues for promoting gender-equal quality education for all. Studying the causes for the under-performance of boys in education will contribute to building this essential knowledge.

Education is a fundamental human right...

Currently, three countries have submitted their initial reports in which some of the main findings are outlined here. The full report covering all countries will be released by EAP UNGEI by the end of the year.

References notes

- 1) See: UNICEF, Chapter 5. What About Boys?, The State of the World's Children (2004), 58-68; UNESCO, Reaching the Marginalized. EFA Global Monitoring Report 2010. Summary, 13; UNESCO, Education for All by 2015? Will We Make It? Global Monitoring Report 2008. Summary, 5.
- 2) Spelt out in a number of international human rights instruments including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, Convention on the Rights of the Child, and Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.

Malaysia

By: Norlia Goolamally (Open University) and Jamil Ahmad (National University of Malaysia)

In Malaysia, education is the responsibility of the federal government. Educational issues are managed by the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Ministry of Higher Education. While education in Malaysia is centralized, all states have their own education department to support the federal government in organizing, coordinating and facilitating educational matters.

The Malaysian education system provides access to 6 years of universal primary education to children between the ages of 6+ to 11+, from Year 1 to Year 6. Students are promoted to the next year regardless of their academic performance. At the end of Year 6, students are required to sit for the Primary School Assessment Test. The five subjects tested are Malay comprehension, written Malay, English, Science and Mathematics. National secondary schools in Malaysia use the Malay language as the medium of instruction.

After completing six years of primary education, students move to secondary school. Secondary education is from Form 1 to Form 5. At the end of Form 3, students sit the Lower Secondary Assessment, the PMR. Students are then channeled into the Science or Arts stream based on their results in this examination. In Form 5, their final year of secondary education, students sit for the Malaysian Certificate of Education examination.

The disparities

Three public examination results were analyzed to investigate the performance of boys and girls in four core subjects - Bahasa Malaysia (National Language), English, Mathematics and Science. Although students may take other subjects at the secondary school level, these four subjects have been maintained in the curriculum for purposes of continuity, sequence and integration between the primary to the secondary levels.



National primary and secondary school data from 2005-2007 were carefully analyzed and revealed that girls performed better in all four subject areas when compared to boys. At the primary school level, the overall performance of girls was between 75.9 – 95.6 per cent whereas the overall performance of boys was between 60.8 – 89.8 per cent. Girls were stronger in both Math and Science compared to their male counterparts. At the lower secondary school level, it was evident that girls' overall performance was also better than boys. Lower Secondary School Examination results indicate girls performing between 78.9 – 96.5 per cent whereas boys performed between 63.2 – 89.6 per cent.

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After five years of secondary education, students take the Malaysian Certificate of Education examination. They sit for different subjects according to the science, arts or technical streams. All four subjects are comparable for all students except for those in the science stream. The science stream students sit for pure science subjects, i.e. Biology, Physics and Chemistry, instead of the general science subject which is offered to the non-science stream students. For this final examination at the secondary school level, girls continued to show better academic achievement when compared to boys. The overall performance of girls was again, higher than boys for the three years in all four subject areas.

Why is this happening?

A focus group interview was conducted with eleven experts/participants³ to gather their insights as to the main reasons for the poor performance of boys. These results were then developed into survey items for a questionnaire and administered to 275 randomly-selected undergraduate students in two universities in Kuala Lumpur⁴. This full exercise gave a better understanding of the perceptions on reasons why boys performed poorer than girls.

The questionnaire was formulated around four main constructs: learning styles, society and culture, school environment, and development of boys and girls. The responses revealed that the general perception for the underperformance of boys was caused by the fact that boys learn differently than girls and would prefer more hands-on activities. In terms of development, respondents felt that girls tend to mature earlier than boys and are more ambitious. Furthermore, parents trust boys' capacity to secure a job without having a high level of education; whereas a girl would need more education to increase her chances of getting a job. When it comes to the school environment, the majority of teachers are female and they are seen to favour girls over boys. There are few male teachers in schools to act as a role model for boys.

The general perception for the underperformance of boys was caused by the fact that boys learn differently than girls

These findings may not be all encompassing and cannot be generalized to represent the perception of the entire country; however it does give a glimpse into the areas that need to be addressed. Primarily, this includes the way in which boys and girls are perceived differently and thus treated and given different opportunities. The school and home environments, where boys and girls can be treated differently based on their sex, also have a profound effect on a child's development and his/her performance in the education system and beyond.

This imbalance between the performance of boys and girls should be studied further to identify the problems that caused this to happen in Malaysia when in reality the MoE is working very hard to provide quality education for all, making it accessible to children even in the interiors of the country. Looking ahead - a comprehensive study should be conducted on a larger scale throughout the country to include a wider sample comprising different groups of people related to education. Different approaches in the data collection procedures are highly recommended as well.

Reference notes

3) The participants were two teachers each from the primary and secondary school, a primary school head teacher and a secondary school principal, two university lecturers, an MOE officer, two university students and two parents.

4) Respondents consisted of 75 students were from the Faculty of Business and Administration, 90 from Faculty of Science and Technology and 100 from the Faculty of Education. 163 respondents were female, 112 were male.

Mongolia

By: Undarya Tumursukh (National Network of Mongolian Women's NGOs) and Enkhjargal Davaasuren (National Center Against Violence)

Given its political past, the education system in Mongolia has undergone a great deal of change with its history of socialist authoritarianism and still weakly developed democratic institutions and culture. Faced with wide-spread poverty and deepening inequality, it has been a formidable challenge to develop quality schools. The researchers of this study sought to understand the issue of boys' educational performance in the historical context of a country that established an extensive formal education system as a mechanism for producing socialist subjects steeped in the communist ideology and later went through a painful and fundamental shift to democracy and market economy.

By the 1970s, an extensive, well institutionalized, highly centralized public education system was set up, emulating the Soviet system of education, and in effect replacing traditional (mostly religious) and non-formal education. An extensive childcare/preschool education system covered nurseries (for children 0-2 years of age) and kindergartens (3-7 years), which were free but not mandatory. The general education schools consisted of 10 grades (age group 8-18), the first 8 grades (1-3 primary and 4-8 middle grades) constituting mandatory incomplete secondary education. To proceed to grade 9, students had to have sufficiently high scores on their educational achievement as schools admitted only approximately 70 per cent of the students to upper secondary level⁵. Receiving a secondary education certificate was a prerequisite for college admission. Therefore, students with lower scores on their educational achievement⁶ were advised to proceed to vocational training institutions upon completion of grade 8. Thus, upper secondary education (grades 9-10) was free but not compulsory (and selective).

The socialist state paid significant attention to achieving gender equality in education and employment. There was rapid progress in women's and girls' education throughout the socialist period. By 1980, Mongolia had

essentially achieved gender equality in education and women's literacy reached 90.2 per cent (96.5 per cent for men). By 1985, women had overtaken men in higher education, constituting 63.1 per cent of the 24,600 students⁷.

The disparities

During the transition period, there was a major blow to the educational system, with disproportionately harmful effects on boys' education as well as rural and peri-urban education. Families were left to fend for themselves with little to no government support, especially in rural areas, in the context of a sharp decline in state budget and services, downsizing and/or shutting down of state-run enterprises, structural adjustment programs, privatization of livestock, dissolution of socialist collectives, and active promotion of household production by the government. Many families opted for livestock herding and other forms of labor-intensive household production for survival, which in many cases led to reliance on child labor, especially of boys⁸.

Because of a confluence of structural, institutional and cultural factors, the transition period brought about a sharp increase in the school drop-out rate with a disproportionately negative effect on boys. According to the 1997 Human Development Report, between 1989 and 1996 there was a total of 166,000 school drop-outs. 70 per cent of them were reported to be boys⁹.



The increasing stratification of the society due to the capitalist economy was also manifested through inequality in education: the primary and secondary school enrollment rate for children of the poorest 20 per cent was 25 per cent lower than that for children of the wealthiest 20 per cent in the mid-1990s¹⁰. Further, school enrollment dropped most in rural areas, especially for children of herder families with many young children¹¹. Enrollment of boys in preschool education has also been consistently lower (e.g., by 7 per cent in 1995-1998)¹² than for girls, again especially in rural areas.

Why is this happening?

Due to resource constraints, researchers of the Mongolian study did not conduct further first-hand data collection; however they found causes of this phenomenon explained through existing data. What was found pointed to deep-seated problems in the Mongolian society in relation to the development of boys and men.

One unique feature of the Mongolian culture is the strong emphasis many parents put on the education of their daughters. This is based on the assumption that boys are strong and can take care of themselves with or without education while a girl's future needs to be secured by a (higher education) diploma so that she can provide for herself and her children in case of an unfortunate marriage¹³. Hence, in the face of financial and labor shortages and immediate survival needs, many families opted for withdrawing their children, especially boys, from schools¹⁴. This is an unusual result for a patriarchal culture, which more often neglect the education of girls due to, for example, a belief that girls will be married off and therefore not require as much education.

[boys] are more likely to be more severely punished...increasing the likelihood that boys leave school early

Education services in Mongolia do not respond well to practical and strategic needs of students, their families and the market, reducing the value of education and leading to assumptions that formal education is not directly correlated with economic success. This is reinforced for those boys, often from poor families, who are mainly exposed to adult males engaged in manual labor. Boys are disadvantaged by a combination of a hierarchical and authoritarian institutional culture, a predominantly female teaching corps, gender-insensitive policies and regulations, and teaching methods that emphasize obedience, tidiness, ability to concentrate and memorize (skills which girls are more likely to develop at home through domestic chores, games or caring).

Furthermore, boys are more used to greater personal freedom, and possibly higher status in the family. They respond more rebelliously to authoritarian methods at school, are less afraid than girls to disobey (and are, in fact, encouraged by peers and society on the whole to stand up to authority), are more likely to be more

severely punished. In the absence of appropriate mechanisms and teacher capacity to respond to such situations, this leads to a vicious circle, increasing the likelihood that boys leave school early.

A 2009 study found that boys and older children were more likely to be discriminated against than girls and younger children¹⁵. Boys were more likely to experience physical violence at the hands of peers and teachers. Monetary extortion by peers was also reported.

Similar to the case of Malaysia, Mongolian boys often grow up without positive male role models. They are exposed to negative influences, such as violence, sexism and materialism, from male role models, popular culture and their peers. This socialization of boys into dominant stereotyped masculinity leads to increased need for cash as boys grow older, leading some to skip classes or quit school entirely for short-term monetary gains, and rebel against authority figures, including female teachers, to gain status among peers.

Based on these findings, there is a need for systemic reform. This includes improvement of the physical and emotional environments in schools (for example, by reducing class sizes), increased sectoral and school-level accountability, improved institutional culture, the promotion of student participation, and increased parental and community involvement. In designing these responses, it is also critical to develop abilities to assess the influence of negative masculinity norms, combat gender stereotypes, and promote positive gender attitudes and behaviour.

Reference notes

5) Sifting of students after grade 8 was done using a simple rating by grades: each school developed a rating of its 8th grade graduates, listing the best performers on the top and a red line was drawn once the quota given from the ministry was completed. Thus, students with poorer grades whose name fell under the red line were unable to enter the 9th grade even though they may have intended to proceed to university.

6) Often, judgment of education achievement was mixed with judgment on discipline and morality. Teacher in charge of the class regularly wrote assessments of each student in terms of his/her educational achievement and character development, judged based on the communist ideology. In combination with other disciplinary and 'educational' measures (such as 'friendly criticism' sessions during which character and moral development of students was discussed by their peers and teachers), these assessments were part of an elaborate system of monitoring individual behavior. The system sought to identify, 'correct' and/or punish 'deviant' attitudes and behavior and reward behavior that was seen to be in line with the Party-State ideology. This focus on disciplining may have disadvantaged boys already during socialism as boys are more likely to display more lively behavior, which would often be seen in such a strict educational environment as deviant and immoral behavior, unbecoming a young pioneer and a future communist citizen.

7) Central Statistical Directorate, BNMAU-yn uls ardyn aj ahuy 65 jil (Ulaanbaatar, 1986), 34, 162, cited in Sanders (1987), 42.

8) ADB and World Bank, Country Gender Assessment – Mongolia (Ulaanbaatar, 2005), 36.

9) Government of Mongolia and UNDP, Mongolian Human Development Report 1997, 25.

10) World Bank (1996) cited in Human Development Report 1997, 25.

11) Human Development Report 1997, 25.

12) National Statistical Office of Mongolia, Men and Women in Mongolia (Ulaanbaatar, 1999), 25.

13) The reason this attitude developed during socialism is that often there was little difference in the earnings of laborers with higher education diploma such as doctors and teachers and laborers with vocational training such as long distance drivers. Also, during socialism, a higher education diploma guaranteed a good and 'clean' (office-based) job with a reliable salary. Hence educating girls could be seen as providing them with a life-long insurance and a way of ensuring they are not fully dependent on whether or not they happen to marry a good man. Common reasoning was: "Who knows what man my daughter may marry, what if he begins to drink and beat her? Then she should be able to still feed herself and her children should she have to divorce or separate from her husband." See also ADB and World Bank, Country Gender Assessment – Mongolia (Ulaanbaatar, 2005), 36; and Mongolian Education Alliance (2005), 67.

14) See also: ADB and World Bank (2005), 36-37 and Mongolian Education Alliance (2005).

15) Mongolian Education Alliance (2005), 57-58; and Save the Children Japan (2009), 10.

Thailand

By: Khon Kean University, Thailand

Thailand's education can be said to have begun in the 13th century. At that time, there were two levels of education – education provided by the Royal Institution of Instruction for princes and sons of nobles, and education provided by Buddhist monks to commoners. Unlike other countries in the region however, Thailand was never colonized by a Western power and thus its education structure can be said to have evolved much differently than its neighbours.

In 1932, the year that Thailand historically changed from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy system, the first National Education Scheme was also introduced, formally recognizing individual educational ability regardless of sex, social background or physical conditions. In the 1960's, the education system

benefited from many other improvements including extension of compulsory education to 7 years and special provisions made for children with disabilities.

There are numerous cases of boys dropping out of school or showing learning failure

Thailand's current education system is provided mainly by the Thai Government through the Ministry of Education and follows a 6-3-3 structure (six years of compulsory primary education followed by three years of lower secondary and three years of upper secondary schooling). These twelve years of basic education are provided for free and guaranteed by the constitution. The system comprises of four levels: pre-school education, primary education, secondary education and higher education¹⁶.

The disparities

In recent times, there has been a phenomenon in which educational opportunities were at a disadvantage for males. There are numerous cases of boys dropping out of school or showing learning failure, not to mention that many have less opportunities for further education.

An OECD PISA (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Programme for International Student Assessment) assessment on Thai students' learning achievement in reading, mathematics and science in 2009 revealed that male students received an average assessment score lower than girls¹⁷.

Particularly at higher levels of education (i.e. secondary and tertiary), there were disparities in the disadvantage for boys. Boys often dropped out of school in order to contribute to the household income or face classroom conditions (e.g. gender-based violence and corporal punishment) which they could not cope with and so discouraged their attendance and participation in learning activities.

Why is this happening?

The main causes and variables connected with male students' learning—including religious, social, family and formal education factors—have created a common attitude towards boys. This is evident in the more flexible way the families raise their sons, but a stricter way for their daughters. The schools, on the other hand, reflect the attitude well through their organization of learning activities that disregard male students' nature, i.e. learning activities that don't seem to be challenging enough to rouse their curiosity, the strict rules and the

passive role they have to play when sitting in class. All of these are incompatible with boys' nature, whereas girls seem to possess greater patience and learn much better under the same circumstances.



Furthermore, the formal education system, arranged in the way that only the academically excellent students (mostly girls) are honoured, does not really leave enough room for the allegedly "lazy male students". Instead, they become recognized as "the group of students in the back of the room that the teachers often ignore and don't show much interest in their learning, in contrast to the more attentive girl students in the front rows who normally get

greater attention from the teachers," (from group discussion, 14th February 2011). The school guidance office normally should act as an important refuge for the students who need help or as an intermediary between the teachers and male students to help the former comprehend the latter's nature, but has failed to perform its task properly.

The attitude of parents, the school system and their treatment of boys have also inevitably led these boys to form a negative concept of themselves and, because of the pressure from their families and people around them that does not give them an opportunity to display proper learning behaviours in their own way, look elsewhere for ways of more freely expressing themselves.

The phenomenon of inequalities in education where boys get less opportunities than their female counterparts in the education realm, has not been fully understood by the public in general. It is nevertheless necessary for families, school administrators and society as a whole to begin to study it carefully before it gets any worse.

Reference notes

16) Ministry of Education, Thailand

17) PISA Thailand Project, the Institute for the Promotion of Teaching Science and Technology, 2010

Past and upcoming events

International Women's Day, 100th anniversary! / 8 March



For the past 100 years and counting, International Women's Day has celebrated the great progress made by women across the world. This year's theme, "equal access to education, training and science and technology: pathway to decent work" commemorates the notable accomplishments of all women who have made great contributions to society.

The East Asia and Pacific Regional UNGEI actively participated and contributed to the event that took place on 8 March at the United Nations Conference Centre in Bangkok. The programme included a photo slideshow of inspiring women in the region, a video advocating for women's education and poignant speeches from five young women representing diverse social groups.

To commemorate this event, EAP UNGEI also released a [joint statement](#) and a [UNESCO-UNGEI public service announcement entitled "Invest in girls' education"](#).

EFA High Level Group Meeting / 22-24 March

Some 40 global leaders met at the 10th Meeting of the High-Level Group (HLG) on Education for All (EFA) in Jomtien, Thailand on 22-24 March 2011.

The meeting was co-organized by UNESCO and the Kingdom of Thailand, with the latter also serving as host. The 2011 HLG meeting was based on new statistics and research findings from the 2011 Global Monitoring Report (launched on 1 March in New York), the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) data and regional reports on EFA progress from 1990-2010. Participants also revisited the original Jomtien vision of meeting basic learning needs, as well as reviewed progress towards the six EFA goals adopted in Dakar in 2000. To learn more and access related documents, please [click here](#). The March 2011 Jomtien Declaration can also be found [here](#).

Global Action Week / 2-8 May

This year's Global Action Week was celebrated under the theme: "It's a right, make it right! Education for Girls and Women now!"



EAP UNGEI worked with the Global Campaign for Education and schools across the region to roll-out The Big Story Lesson between the 2nd and 8th May.

The Lesson Plan was translated into several regional languages with the help of EAP UNGEI partners. It focuses on the importance of women and girls having an education. Many women and girls cannot read or write because they have never been to school. Some have been to school, but had to drop out because there was no money to send them to school.

Schools identified by EAP UNGEI partner agencies joined millions of others around the world to be part of this exciting global event. At the end of the lesson, students took part in a drawing activity in which results will be submitted to be part of the UNGEI Drawing Contest (see more below).

Although Global Action Week is over, we still encourage you to download and implement this in your school, classroom and community. Plus, submissions for the drawing contest are still open until 1st of August! For more information, please visit: http://www.ungei.org/infobycountry/2253_2806.html



[UNGEI Drawing Contest 2011 / 2012 Calendar](#)

This year you are welcome to submit drawings that will illustrate your thoughts on how girls' education can help us all. The 13 winning drawings will be featured in the UNGEI (EAP and SA) "Gender in Education Calendar 2012," which will be distributed widely throughout the Asia-Pacific region. The contest winners will also receive official certificates of merit and a copy of the Calendar 2012.

The deadline for submission is 1st of August and open to all nationals and residents of Asia and the Pacific region, 18 years and under. For more information please [click here](#).

Key resources

[UNESCO-UNGEI PSA: Invest in Girls' Education](#)

This public service announcement was created to commemorate the 100th Anniversary of International Women's Day – reminding us all of the importance of girls' education.



[2004 UNICEF State of the World's Children](#)

In line with this newsletter edition, this 2004 publication has a section specifically focused on the reverse gender gap entitled "What about boys?"

[EFA Jomtien declaration](#)

This declaration reemphasizes the commitment of global leaders to achieve the EFA Goals. Some 40 global leaders met at the 10th Meeting of the High-Level Group (HLG) on Education for All (EFA) from 22 to 24 March in Jomtien, Thailand.

Editorial board

The EAP UNGEI Secretariat would like to thank everyone who has made this Newsletter possible. All content of the EAP UNGEI newsletters are based solely on the contributions from UNGEI members and partners. Submissions have been reviewed by the EAP UNGEI editorial board: Adrien Boucher, David Braun, Maki Hayashikawa, Goy Phumtim, Malisa Santigul, Cyrene Siriwardhana and Chemba Raghavan.