

As we move into Discussion #8: *Challenges Facing Minority Girls in Education*, we have had several responses to our first question: In your experience, what are the critical barriers faced by minority girls in accessing education?

All of our respondents touched on the more common issues that girls from minority backgrounds face in accessing mainstream education such as poverty, living in remote or marginal areas, cultural differences, including unavailability of mother-tongue education, lack of security, domestic work, and early marriage. One respondent stressed how minority girls often face multiple barriers, making single interventions largely ineffective.

One striking point raised by a respondent was that 'bad education policies, programmes and strategies can violate human rights as much as good policies and strategies enhance rights and freedoms'.

Some interesting solutions were given to break the barriers in accessing education by the Roma community of Eastern Europe, minority girls in India, Bangladesh, Ecuador, Mexico, and indigenous groups in Chile.

Contributors also touched on the fact that certain barriers to girls' education are invisible in the private sphere and pointed to the need for disaggregated data. Both of these issues point raise the following question: what can be done at the level of policy and practice to make girls more visible?

One respondent notes that girls who are denied access to education often have nowhere else to go. We may add an additional barrier - the perception that even educated girls from minority and indigenous groups find few opportunities outside of their community. Moving from access and visibility to quality and relevance, what does it mean for education to be high quality when targeting ethnic minority and indigenous girls?

Thank you for your interest and thoughtful contribution!

*Ms. Gay J. McDougall*  
*United Nations Independent Expert on minority issues*

---

Any list of the barriers faced by minority girls in accessing education would include such factors as poverty, geographical remoteness, insecurity (particularly in conflict zones), and the pressure of domestic work or caring duties. Such factors can of course weigh on girls from other communities as well, but they are more likely to affect girls from minority communities where rates of poverty are disproportionately high. In addition to these barriers are the widespread unavailability of mother-tongue education for minorities, and the double toll of discrimination - from both outside and within the community - which often keeps minority girls out of education.

However, I would like to stress two factors which arise as a result of the others, and which I think it is particularly important to address. The first is the problem of multiple barriers. Most minority girls out of school don't face one barrier; they face several. That means that many education interventions designed to overcome a specific problem can still fail to address their needs. Subsidized school places may not attract girls from a minority if the route to school is perceived as hazardous for girls; mobile facilities may not work if the classes offered are seen by the community as not reflecting its particular needs or values. Effective solutions need to be designed with the particular community in mind and, crucially, in close consultation with key members of that community.

The second factor is the lack of remedies. Minority girls denied an education typically have nowhere to go. This is partly because many of the barriers are seen as belonging to the private sphere, and therefore harder to challenge publicly. Yet whether it is attitudes in the home that are preventing a girl's education, or the racism of other pupils at school, the burden of initiative should not fall on the girl, it should fall on the state, specifically on local education authorities, to overcome such obstacles in an appropriate way.

**Mark Lattimer**  
Minority Rights Group International (MRG)

---

On account of the intersection of discrimination on the basis of ethnicity or religion and gender, women and girl members of minority communities suffer disproportionately from lack of access to education and high illiteracy levels. Lack of education represents an absolute barrier to girls' and women progress and empowerment. Bad education policies, programmes and strategies can violate human rights as much as good policies and strategies enhance rights and freedoms. Unwanted assimilation imposed through the medium of education, or enforced social segregation generated through educational processes, are harmful to the rights and interests of minority communities and to the wider social interest.

If most out of schools girls live in Africa and South Asia, it is in Latin America that girls from minority groups represent the highest proportion of out-of-school girls. For example, in Guatemala only 26 per cent of indigenous, non Spanish speaking girls complete primary school (as compared to 62 per cent of Spanish speaking girls). Language is one barrier, as are other cultural and social factors such as early marriage, distance to school especially for girls in rural areas, few female teachers, and parental fear of allowing the girls to go to school. Parents and families fear that their daughters will not be safe or will be mistreated in schools.

Some interesting solutions to break the barriers are for instance allowing mothers to attend school with small children (Roma of Eastern Europe); hiring part time workers to escort girls from minority groups to and from school (Rajasthan); conditional cash transfers to assist families that send children to school in such countries as Bangladesh, Ecuador and Mexico, for example.

In Chile, targeting resources to low performing schools significantly reduced the achievement gap between indigenous and non indigenous children.

Other interventions could include:

- Education policies addressing discrimination
- Expanding options for schooling and learning such as alternative, diverse and flexible forms of learning (non formal education, boarding schools, mobile schools, interactive radio instruction). Diverse learning systems should be considered to deliver quality formal and non formal education that is contextualized, culture specific and relevant within an integrated system of education.
- Creating incentives for households to send girls to schools
- Recruiting female teachers from the community. Teacher training, including training of teachers from minority communities, should include, inter alia, anti-discrimination, gender sensitive and inter-cultural training.

Disaggregated data is important to expose the barriers that prevent girls and women from accessing to education and learning, and who may suffer from double discrimination, and

such data should include research into causes of poor school enrolment and dropout rates where applicable

**Amina Osman, PhD**  
Education Section, UNICEF

---

Barriers to education for minority and indigenous girls fall into three overarching categories: poverty, culture and discrimination. Ethnic minority and indigenous groups are often among the poorest communities and commonly live in remote or marginal areas with few accessible or acceptable school facilities. Because schooling involves both direct and opportunity costs, families may prioritize the education of boys over girls. Girls are also disproportionately responsible for household labor. In the Karamoja region of Uganda, girls are often kept out of school to complete chores or care for younger siblings or elderly family members. The decision to keep girls out of school is also tied to the impact of culturally ascribed gender roles on the perceived value of education; Karimojong girls may be kept out of school to safeguard their attractiveness as future wives.

It is common for girls to be seen as the bearers and reproducers of culture. When learning content is irrelevant to the lifestyle of minority and indigenous groups, mainstream schooling is perceived as ineffectual and as a potential threat to the perseverance of identity. Government curricula may entirely ignore minorities or—implicitly or explicitly—promote an assimilationist agenda. One assimilationist strategy is the prohibition of teaching in the mother tongue, as is the case in Syria and Turkey where, despite having large Kurdish populations, classes are taught only in Arabic or Turkish, respectively. This poses a distinct challenge for minority girls who tend to have fewer opportunities to interact with the majority culture thus reducing opportunities to learn the majority language. Due to stereotyped views, limited experience with the majority language may be misinterpreted by peers and even teachers as lack of intellectual capacity.

Ethnic and minority girls disproportionately face discrimination in the form of teasing and the threat of physical violence. Girls from ethnic minority groups in Vietnam report embarrassment over their lack of nice cloths, food and transportation to travel the frequently long distances to school. Adolescent girls often drop out of school when there are no safe and separate sanitary facilities because they are ashamed or because monthly absences cause them to fall too far behind. Sexual maturity also brings the risk of unwanted pregnancy. Harassment and attacks can occur on the way to school or on school grounds. For girls, sexual violence is a particular threat. Minority and indigenous girls may be targeted in part because perpetrators from the majority community expect impunity. In the case of a Dalit girl in India, the perpetrators of sexual assault were six of her professors.

**Sarah Kliener**  
Education Section, UNICEF

---