



Discussion #8: Challenges Facing Minority Girls in Education

Moderator: Ms. Gay J. McDougall, United Nations Independent Expert on minority issues

Dear eDiscussion participants,

Thank you for participating in this eDiscussion.

As is evident from the posts, all of our respondents raised the various constraints that girls from minority backgrounds face when accessing mainstream education. Factors 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 severely limit the capacity of minority girls to receive a quality education. In particular, one respondent highlighted how minority girls often face multiple barriers, which further hinder the education of minority girls.

Multiple barriers typically weaken the effectiveness of education interventions designed to overcome a specific constraint, and thus, these interventions, despite the best of intentions may still fail to address the needs of girls from minority groups. For instance, 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.

Moreover, many of the barriers faced by minority girls are seen as “private” and therefore harder to challenge / address in the public sphere. Yet whether it is attitudes in the home that are preventing a girl’s education, or the racism of other pupils at school, minority girls should not be expected to face these issues without state support. In this context, respondents highlighted good practices and innovative projects that address the needs and priorities of minority girls, including initiatives for the Roma community of Eastern Europe, minority girls in India, Bangladesh, Ecuador, Mexico, and indigenous groups in Chile.

Disaggregated data was identified as being important to expose the barriers that prevent girls and women from accessing to education and learning, and who may suffer from multiple discrimination. In addition, the role of teachers in ensuring that quality education is available to minority girls was also discussed.

In sum, the purpose of this eDiscussion was to highlight the issues around minority girls’ right to education. As I wrap up this UNGEI eDiscussion, I hope that there will be other opportunities to further engage with you all on the topic of education for minority girls and to correct what the State of the World’s Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2009 observed (in the context of education of minority girls), “the serious shortage of information about these issues means that the day-to-day reality faced by minority girls remains hidden and is a severe barrier to addressing their situation.”

Thank you for your interest!

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

Dear colleagues,

This is a very interesting topic especially for us the minority group (that is those of us who come from the English speaking region of Cameroon, called Anglophones) we are a minority in terms of numbers. Anglophones make up thirty five percent of the population of Cameroon. We are being discriminated upon in terms of educational infrastructure, human and material resources.

Another aspect of discrimination is based on language used for teaching. Sometimes the government sends or transfers Francophone teachers who can't express themselves well in English. In the final analysis the children go home without understanding the lesson for the day. Discrimination is also portrayed in the textbooks used in schools. Some of these textbooks depict the majority group as the strong, powerful, intelligent, kingmakers and pacesetters.

The rights of the children are trampled upon and as human beings at one point in time an oppressed person must stand up for his or her rights and the end result is conflict. Both the Anglophones and the francophone are not in harmony with each other. The two subsystems of Education are suffering from weak government policy.

Hear from you next time.

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Dear colleagues,

I would like to pick up on a point made by Dr Amina Osman. She said that Teacher training, including training of teachers from minority communities, should include, inter alia, anti-discrimination, gender sensitive and inter-cultural training.

The focus with ethnic minority groups is often on out-of-school factors; with very little examination of what happens when / if a girl from an ethnic minority actually gets to school. We know that in many communities, the girls may be allowed to enrol in school but that their drop out rate tends to be high. There is a need to focus on both the pull out factors that is, girls are withdrawn for many of the reasons already discussed (e.g. need for household labour, early marriage), and the push-out factors that is, what happens in schools that might drive the girls away.

Teachers have a vital role to play in bringing about attitudinal change, but if those teachers simply reinforce the attitudes of the community, girls will formally learn that education is not really for them. Many projects focus on recruiting teachers female and male from ethnic minority groups, based on assumptions such as that having such role-models, or having speakers of ethnic minority languages will help solve the problem. And of course, it will to some extent.

However, teachers drawn from ethnic minorities, coming from disadvantaged groups themselves, are also often disadvantaged themselves. It is quite common for entry barriers to training courses to be lowered in order to admit them, and they have to struggle to make the grade. Such would-be teachers should be given whatever additional support (financial, linguistic, academic) is needed to help them complete their training on a par with

others. Once they get in to schools, teachers from ethnic minorities can often be regarded by majority group teachers as other, which can be discerned by the children in the school. Thus, the training of majority group teachers in cultural sensitivity and non-discrimination is vital.

In addition, because ethnic minority teachers are from a minority culture, they carry with them the cultural values of the minority-group, which in many cases question the importance of formal education for girls. These values and those of majority-group teachers can be manifested in schools by, for example, teachers not encouraging the full participation of girls in class, by assigning tasks that reinforce gender divides, by giving career counselling that limits the options of girls, or by focussing only on their futures as wives and mothers.

Dr Osmans point about the need for the training of teachers all teachers to include issues of discrimination, gender training and inter-cultural training is a major one. And for that to be effective, there has to be training of trainers. Lecturers in colleges are often from relatively well-off, urban centres, and are usually predominantly from majority groups. We need to consider how sensitive they are to the issues Dr Osman raises, and address those issues within the training colleges. There is also the need to provide such training for those already in the education system practising teachers, head-teachers and school committee members.

On a separate matter, while there are many initiatives that focus on education for minority groups, and those initiatives normally have stated aims such as XXXX, especially girls or YYYY, girls in particular, it seems that the focus is on the minority group as a whole, on the assumption that by targeting the group as a whole, girls are included. That is, a project targeting minority groups can be assumed to be helping increase girls participation in education simply because girls are part of those minority groups. What can be seen in such projects could be, for example, an overall increase in enrolment. But a closer examination may show and again, Dr Osmans point on the need for disaggregated data is important that although there may be an increase in the number of girls, the gender gap is actually widening. That is, more parents have been convinced of the need to send their sons to school but not necessarily their daughters. The especially girls or the girls in particular focus has been lost.

Perhaps the declared focus on girls is the problem. It is not usually the girls who make the decisions about whether they go to school or not. It is the parents, the extended family, the community, and the cultural practices that prevail. Therefore, it is essential to address both the attitudes and practices of those in the community those who make decisions about enrolling or not enrolling a girl, who decide whether or not a girl will be pulled out of school and those within the school system (also members of the community, often with similar attitudes to the community as a whole), who may consciously or otherwise, contribute to a girl being pushed out of school.

Therefore, to be successful in addressing the challenges facing minority girls in education, both in-school issues (through teacher training, PRESETT and INSETT, and through the training of head-teachers and school management committee members), and out-of-school issues (through advocacy targeting parents and community leaders) need to be addressed.

Janet Raynor
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Dear colleagues,

I would like to suggest the following common issues.

- 1. Sexual Harassment, Abuse and Violence in schools which leads to high drop out for girls.** In most cases there are strategies for responding to the issue rather than prevention.
- 2. Dysfunctional Reporting Mechanisms in School and within the Communities.** Weak reporting mechanisms refer to the inability of stakeholders to report safety concerns to relevant authorities and the inadequate enactment of the law. This includes the inability of the children to report safety and security concerns to their parents and teachers; teacher's inability to report security and safety concerns to the head-teacher, or district education office; parent's inability to report to relevant authorities such as the police and courts of law and the inadequate follow up and enactment of the law.
- 3. Unfriendly School Environment** - means inadequate school infrastructure, child abuse, inadequate and in some cases absence of female teachers, ineffective methods of conducting guidance and counseling especially for girls faced with adolescent reproductive health challenges. These issues may affect the safety and security of children in schools.
- 4. Low level of Involvement and support of Parents/Guardians to their Children's Education** - Lack of clear policies to promote continuing education programmes for school age pregnant girls and child mothers; limited or no provision of guidance and counseling for both girls and boys in schools to empower them in the prevention, protection and response to abuse in schools and lack of frameworks on reporting, referral and follow up mechanisms with clear linkages within schools, from school to homes, school to community and school to statutory bodies to address child abuse and respect children's rights

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