



Preface

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, indisputably crucial to development, has received a lot of attention—but surprisingly little hardheaded analysis to inform practical policy solutions. In *Inexcusable Absence*, Maureen Lewis and Marlaine Lockheed start with an arresting fact: 70 percent of out-of-school girls are “doubly disadvantaged” by their ethnicity, language, or other factors. Remarkable increases in primary schooling over the past decade have brought gender equity to the education systems of many poor countries; yet the problem of these “doubly disadvantaged” girls has yielded little to these advances.

Building on this key point, Lewis and Lockheed propose new strategies for reaching these girls and their parents. Their study is a fine successor to the Center's 2005 contribution to the United Nations Millennium Project series: *Toward Universal Primary Education: Investments, Incentives and Institutions*. Like all of our work at the Center, it aims to provide guidance for donors, activists, and the development community on practical steps to improve the lives of the poor and secure a more prosperous world. In this case, we hope it will also catalyze new thinking and new initiatives on the part of educators and advocates throughout the developing countries.

Getting socially excluded girls into school is not simple. Reaching them is costly, in part because it often requires fresh

approaches that may differ from mainstream educational policies. Attempts to change the “culture” of families who are reluctant to send their daughters to school can be controversial. In the classroom, the inclusion of local languages for instruction may make schools more accessible; conversely, limited proficiency in official languages could restrict students’ future opportunities in mainstream society. By the same token, gender-segregated schools have the potential to draw more students, but run the risk of establishing a second-class system if sufficient resources are not channeled towards them.

But these problems have been addressed before—in the developed world. Canada, New Zealand and the United States faced challenges in reaching their own excluded groups—indigenous peoples, Maoris, and black Americans and Native Americans, respectively. The authors use these experiences to inform potential strategies to reach the excluded girls in the developing world.

Getting the excluded girls to school is a realistic goal. And giving girls the opportunity of attendance leads to high returns: the book finds that once girls are given access to school, they often overtake boys in the number of years completed and on measures of learning, at least until adolescence. This suggests that lack of opportunity is the single biggest reason that girls’ achievement levels lag behind boys’.

Maureen Lewis and Marlaine Lockheed have contributed a much needed understanding both of the complexities of the problem, and of how they can be addressed. *Inexcusable Absence* will be an important tool for policymakers, informing interventions that can make a profound impact on the lives of the 60 million out-of-school girls.

Our decision to undertake the research and analysis that underpin this volume was catalyzed by the keen interests of two of our Board members. Belinda Stornach, then the CEO of Magna International Inc. in Canada and now a Member of Parliament, aware of the barriers girls face in attending school in many parts of the developing world, asked me if the Center had ideas and analysis that could make a difference. And our Board Chair Edward W. Scott, Jr., has not rested in his gentle insistence that we address the problem of discrimination against girls and women all over the world. Preparation and publication of the book was made possible in part by grants from the Nike Foundation, the Jacob and Hilda Blaustein Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, among other sponsors, and by the core support that Ed Scott provides for the Center’s work.

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