

Most Out-of-School Girls from Excluded Minority Groups, Says Book

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Three quarters of the millions of girls worldwide who don't go to school belong to ethnic, religious, linguistic, racial or other minority groups excluded from mainstream society.

That's the key finding of a new book, *Inexcusable Absence: Why 60 million girls still aren't in school and what to do about it*, published by the Center for Global Development and launched June 21 in Washington, DC.

The book highlights the often vast differences between girls from minority and majority groups in enrolling in and completing school—a previously neglected phenomenon, says Maureen A. Lewis, acting chief economist for the Bank's human development network.

"Everyone we've talked to has been quite amazed by it, because it's not on the radar screen," says Lewis, who co-authored the book with former Bank Education Sector Manager Marlaine E. Lockheed.

While girls are catching up to and even surpassing boys in school in many countries, girls from excluded minority groups remain at the bottom in terms of education.

The number of out-of-school girls worldwide has fallen from 60 million to an estimated 43 million in 2006, but the problem persists in countries where minorities are economically and socially disadvantaged, and women are secluded.

Most out-of-school girls live in Africa (47 percent) and South Asia (25 percent), but in Latin America girls from minority groups represent the highest proportion of out-of-school girls..

- In Guatemala, a lower-middle-income country, 62 percent of Spanish-speaking girls but only 26 percent of indigenous, non-Spanish-speaking girls complete primary school.
- Girls from the Hill Tribes of Lao PDR, a low income country, complete fewer than two years of schooling, while girls from the dominant ethnic group living in urban communities go to school an average of eight years, the same number as their brothers.
- Only 9 percent of Roma girls in the Slovak Republic, an upper-middle-income country, go to secondary school, compared with 54 percent of Slovak girls.

Benefits of Closing the Education Gender Gap

Studies have shown that closing the education gender gap has a positive impact on economic growth. Educated girls are more likely to enter the work force, earn higher incomes, delay marriage, plan their families, and seek an education for their own children.

In contrast, lack of education and skills makes it much harder for girls and their families to rise out of deep poverty and to protect themselves from domestic violence and HIV/AIDS.

"With its positive impacts on economic and social development, countries cannot afford to neglect girls' education," say Lewis and Lockheed.

But minority parents often have not gone to school themselves and are less likely to see school as

important, especially in places where the quality of education is poor, the school itself is in bad condition, or teachers are frequently absent, notes Lewis.

Parents also fear their daughters won't be safe or will be mistreated at school. They may want them to help out at home, or not "see any reason why a girl would need to leave," Lewis says.

"It's a combination of them not wanting to be part of the larger society in some cases, and in other cases, they're discriminated against," she says.

Tailored Solutions

"If you want to reach this group, you can't do more of the same," she adds. "You've got to tailor things better, and that makes it more expensive and more difficult," says Lewis.,

One solution eases fears among the Roma of Eastern Europe by allowing mothers to attend school with small children.

Schools in Rajasthan, India, have hired part-time workers to escort girls from excluded groups to and from school.

Conditional cash transfers assist families that send children to school in Bangladesh, Ecuador, and Mexico, and other countries.

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

Other interventions could include:

- Altering education policies and addressing discrimination
- Expanding options for schooling, such as nonformal schools and distance learning
- Improving the quality and relevance of schools and classrooms
- Supporting compensatory preschool and in-school programs
- Creating incentives for households to send girls to school

But getting to school is in itself not enough, Lewis points out.

"Are they actually learning anything? Is the teacher there? Those kinds of things are as important as whether they actually go to school." The book observes that once in school, excluded girls tend to perform as well as excluded boys, and often surpass them on test of learning.