EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE HIDDEN CRISIS IN GIRLS’ EDUCATION

Recent progress in getting more girls to enroll in primary school is a cause for celebration. Girls now make up just 53% of the children out of school, as opposed to 60% at the start of the Millennium. Yet this welcome development should not lead to complacency about the issue of education for women and girls. This report reveals the reality behind this apparently sunny picture, showing that once girls get into school they face numerous challenges and are far less likely than boys to keep attending, achieve learning outcomes, and make progress to secondary education.

Using a rights-based framework, the report first examines the efforts of 80 low income countries in making a full cycle of education available to girls. Our Availability Table groups countries according to their performance in terms of girls’ presence in education throughout the educational cycle up to tertiary level. Countries such as Ecuador, Tanzania and Bangladesh appear in the category of ‘Strong Performers’ because they have made progress not only in enrolling girls in school, but also in improving their ability to complete primary and progress to secondary school and beyond. At the other end of the scale, countries such as Zambia, Burkina Faso, Pakistan and Mali have mixed results, showing some improvement in getting girls into year 1 of primary school but a dramatic drop in performance when looking at the experience of girls in later years.

A look at the aggregate picture also shows some worrying overall trends: in 47 out of 54 African countries, girls have a less than 50% chance of going to secondary school; average primary school completion rates for boys in sub-Saharan Africa stand at 56%, but only 46% for girls. This gaping inequality is a denial of girls’ rights and carries with it a serious social and economic cost.

- Educated women are more empowered and better able to demand their rights, as well as having healthier, more economically-secure families.
- A girl who completes basic education is three times less likely to contract HIV.
- Children born to educated mothers are twice as likely to survive past the age of 5.
- A 1% increase in the number of women with secondary education can increase annual per capita economic growth by 0.3%.

Making rights a reality

Understanding why education is not yet fully available at all levels means digging deeper into the policies and practices of governments. Three further dimensions of the right to education are used to highlight experiences and practices — both negative and positive — in helping girls overcome the formidable barriers to staying in school, improving the quality of their education, and having an enriching learning experience.

Accessibility of education looks at what is entailed in making education accessible for every girl and boy, and providing an environment in which all can learn effectively, regardless of location and economic or social status. States should ensure that education is free from all cost, that financial obstacles are overcome including through provision of incentives to poor families, and that school facilities are child-friendly, free from physical barriers, sanitarily adequate and close to home.

Acceptability of education discusses the need for states to provide education where the form, content and structure are acceptable for girls as well as boys. States must consider ways to ensure that women teachers are recruited, supported and given equal rights. They must also ensure that teaching and learning processes and spaces be made appropriate and safe for girls, and recognize the link between girls’ ability to learn and female literacy.

Adaptability of education stresses the importance of structuring education so that it is adaptable and responsive to the diverse needs of girls and boys. It looks at the obstacles thrown up by child labor, child marriage and teenage pregnancy and proposes policies and practices that can be used to overcome these.

The rights-based framework and the case studies underline the importance of ensuring rights not only to but also in and through education for girls. They also highlight key principles that should guide action for change: non-discrimination, participation, accountability and empowerment.

Two in-depth case studies on Mali, and Bangladesh, shed further light on the role of public policy in extending the right to education to all, in the face of scarce resources and strong gender inequalities in society at large. Bangladesh has made impressive gains in ensuring that education is available and accessible to girls. Hardly a surprise then, that it has achieved gender parity in both enrollment and completion of primary school and that its government is going on to pilot innovative approaches to ensuring that education becomes both acceptable and adaptable to girls’ particular needs. Mali is not as far down the road to gender equality in education but has made a good start in opening up opportunities to make
education available to girls, with a remarkable 97% increase in girls’ enrollment over the last 10 years. It now needs to consider how to translate its notably strong legal frameworks into policy and practice to deliver deeper change in favour of gender equality by removing the obstacles to education being accessible, available and adaptable.

**Good governance**, and particularly **gender-responsive budgeting** situated within wider **macroeconomic frameworks that favour gender equality**, are paramount in achieving gender equality in education. The experiences of countries at the top and bottom of the availability chart are examined, pointing to a need extend public investment in education, protect wages and extend credit opportunities to women and girls.

**Global governance: the role of the international financing institutions**

Globalization and related paradigms and institutions have a huge impact on national policies, resources and priorities at national level. Education values and needs are often superseded by governments’ need to adhere to policies promoted by the **International Monetary Fund (IMF)** and **World Bank**.

The IMF has achieved prominence as the ‘go-to’ multilateral agency for macroeconomic policy advice and funding. As such, it plays a critical role in formulating macroeconomic policies for those countries resorting to IMF loans. The policies advised by the IMF often require severe constraints on public spending. This in turn limits countries’ ability to invest sufficiently in girls’ education and increases the opportunity costs of educating girls from poor families. It is imperative that the role and policies of the IMF be reconciled with international human rights law including those enshrining the rights of the child, the right to education and women’s rights. It is vital that national Ministries of Finance work with the IMF to adopt macroeconomic policies that afford countries the greatest amount of flexibility for spending, avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach that ignores the gendered impact of economic policy frameworks. The fiscal flexibility which the IMF afforded to low-income countries during the worst months of the recent financial crisis should be continued over the medium term to address in an ongoing manner impacts resulting from a range of financial situations, including speculation in food commodities and fuel and inflows of ‘hot money’.

The **World Bank** must be consistent in considering gender impacts of its policy and lending instruments, which implies engendering all Bank operations and monitoring thereof. Despite strong gender research, multiple gender strategies and operational policies, and much rhetoric about gender equality, the World Bank is often failing to translate their statements, strategies and policies into tangible reform in their investments. Education operations must be made gender-sensitive and especially seek to promote fee abolition, gender-responsive budgeting and demand-side incentives to target marginalized groups. In order for the new World Bank ‘Learning For All’ strategy to address the educational needs of marginalized girls, it must include significantly increased investments in adult literacy and early childhood development as key pillars of their learning agenda, while ensuring that girls complete primary and transition to quality post-primary education, particularly through the provision of free secondary education. Its definition of learning should be expanded to include inputs, processes and outcomes that lead to transformation of gender norms rather than reductionist targets for reading and mathematics currently prioritized in Bank benchmarking frameworks.

**Righting the wrongs: towards a global partnership for girls’ education**

The Education For All Fast-Track Initiative (EFA-FTI) has become the pre-eminent global mechanism for fostering policy dialogue and promoting aid effectiveness principles in basic education. It has also injected funding to countries that have demonstrated their commitment to achieving universal primary completion and gender equality in education. EFA-FTI is now poised to undertake a major replenishment effort based on its commitment to upscale support to ensure that girls access and remain in education throughout the school cycle. However, to make this commitment real, EFA-FTI needs to overhaul its frameworks, tools and financial practices to require sustained and integrated attention to gender equity objectives in primary and secondary education by governments and donors. By promoting policies and practices that have the potential to spearhead a breakthrough in girls’ education, the EFA-FTI partnership can galvanize each of its members to align their education investments behind shared gender equality objectives to increase the demand for, and supply of, quality education for girls. On this basis, donors should make substantial and long-term commitments to FTI replenishment, while ensuring that their own operations are comprehensively gender-sensitive.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Strong government plans, backed by resources, must be the centerpiece of efforts to achieve gender equality in education. All governments should conduct a gender audit of national education strategies. This must be complemented by gender-responsive budgeting to ensure that policies and plans to promote and foster girls’ right to education are fully funded. All government plans should address the following:

1. Governments should conduct a gender audit of national education strategies, complemented by gender-responsive budgeting to ensure that policies and plans include:
   - Progressive elimination of the cost barriers preventing girls from completing primary school and progressing to secondary and tertiary. This should include abolition of fees and other charges and demand-side measures such as stipends, school feeding programs and subsidized or free transportation to school.
   - Improvements in the school infrastructure, such as building separate latrines and ensuring secure school premises.
   - Recruitment policies that ensure balanced representation of men and women in the teaching profession.
   - Measures to eliminate gender bias and stereotypes in teaching and learning, such as ensuring positive representation of women in textbooks, and training in gender-equitable classroom practice.
   - Laws and practices to eliminate and properly address all forms of gender violence within schools.
   - Tracking of progress against equity-based targets for enrollment, progression and learning in a way that disaggregates data by gender, age, grade, wealth, and location, among others.

2. Governments should be open and transparent in their budgeting and planning processes and especially engage women’s groups as part of their commitment to broad-based civil society participation in education sector planning and budget oversight.

3. Governments must also table and enact laws to prohibit discriminatory practices in school administration, such as exclusion on grounds of pregnancy or child marriage.

While the main locus of change in the quest to achieve gender equality in education is the State, the role of international institutions remains vital. The global community must actively engage in efforts to secure equal rights to, in and through education for girls and boys.

1. The United Nations Secretary-General should convene a high-level event at the UNGASS in September 2011 to raise political awareness of the enduring challenge in gender equality in education, and set out a global strategy to ensure that concrete action is taken to up-scale interventions to achieve gender equality in education at all levels.

2. The high-level event should establish a process for eliciting new commitments to achieve gender equality in education which should report back in 2012.

3. The IMF and Ministries of Finance should ensure that macroeconomic modelling, advice and policy making are gender sensitive and account for the disproportionate burden on women of public sector spending constraints.

4. The World Bank should ensure that all agreements with and operations in client countries are gender sensitive, and that the new Learning for All strategy prioritizes gender parity in access and learning throughout all levels of education.

5. All education donors should make robust 3-year commitments to the FTI replenishment, while scaling up their bilateral support in alignment with agreed gender targets in primary and secondary school, including the progressive elimination of all cost-barriers to education. Bilateral support needs to be predictable and should be targeted towards regions and countries where girls are disadvantaged relative to boys.

6. The international community should create an International Commission on Rape and Sexual Violence to provide monitoring and legal redress for girls living with the trauma or threat of sexual violence.

7. Pursuit of the goal of gender parity in enrollments has obscured the need for balanced attention to, and investment in, policies that will ensure that girls can stay in school and acquire the learning they need to empower them throughout life. The post-MDG framework should include comprehensive targets that address governance and implementation issues, as well retention, completion and learning for girls and boys.
It is 2011, and 1 in 4 women cannot read this sentence. This is a tragedy and a denial of rights on a massive scale. In 2005 the world missed the first target agreed within the framework for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education by that year. Although civil society organizations and educationalists protested, the omission passed with little comment or attention from the global community as a whole. Since that date, continued progress has been made at least in the sphere of primary education, with disparity in enrollments gradually shrinking such that girls now represent 53% of out of school children, a marked improvement against the position at the start of the decade when 60% of out of school children were girls (UNESCO 2000). Similarly, the global Gender Parity Index (GPI) in national enrollment rates (NER) which reflects the ratio of girls to boys in primary education now stands at 0.98, a significant shift from the 0.93 of twelve years ago (UNESCO 2000).

This development should not, however, lead to complacency in the international community about the status and experience of girls in education, especially in poorer countries. Despite the presence of more girls in the classroom, millions of girls around the world continue to face discrimination, violence, neglect, exploitation and abuse. Whereas education can play an emancipating role in empowering and equipping girls with the same life chances as boys, systemic discrimination against women and girls conspires to keep many of the most marginalized females from entering school, learning fundamental skills and pursuing post-primary education. In many countries, the role of women is defined in terms of the domestic, unremunerated work they do to keep households running, and their reproductive role in the family. Economic dependence on men, lack of participation in public spheres such as local governance structures and the labor market, physical and sexual violence and socio-cultural definitions of the ‘appropriate’ role of women all intersect to systematically deny women and girls equal rights — including the one right which has the most chance of transforming their power and self-determination: education. The gendered basis of discrimination against women and girls is even further compounded by other aspects of marginalization such as being a member of ethno-linguistic or religious minorities, being of African descent, living in rural areas, being disabled, or living in the lowest income quintile. Stark intra-national divides between those living in easily accessible areas and those in more marginalized regions can be exacerbated by the cross-cutting disadvantage of gender. For example, in Bolivia, Honduras, Tanzania, Madagascar and many other countries, rich urban boys will spend more than twice as long in education as poor rural girls.

Marginalization due to location, ethnicity, and disability are not exclusive to women and girls, but ‘the deeply engrained gender roles and relations in society tend to intensify these barriers for girls’ (ASPBAE 2010 p.xxi). Indeed, many of the factors that cause marginalization and discrimination against girls are interdependent and exacerbate each other (UNGEI 2010a). While in some countries, such as Brazil, there are indeed more girls than boys in school, choosing to focus on girls is a powerful means by which to facilitate better educational opportunities for the marginalized and socially excluded in all arenas (UNGEI 2010). Gender is an entry-point to assess marginalization due to its cross-cutting nature which reinforces or mitigates discrimination and disadvantage — and measures to ensure that girls can access quality education often benefit other marginalized groups (Dunne, 2009).