

## What works to support girls with disabilities reaching and staying in school?

### The question and the problem

A recent [multi-country analysis](#) by UNESCO revealed that children with disabilities were more likely to be out of school than children without disabilities across Low and Middle Income (LMIC) countries, with some evidence from the available datasets that girl children with disabilities were more likely to be out of school than boy children with disabilities. Access to quality education can break cycles of poverty, decrease risk of violence and increase both access to livelihoods and individual wellbeing. It is therefore vital to understand what works to support girls with disabilities reaching and staying in school. In line with the [Sustainable Development Goals](#), [Incheon Strategy](#) and [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#), this brief is part of a series on girls' and women's empowerment

### Recommendations

- Recommendation #1: Generate better evidence on what works to improve outcomes for children with disabilities overall, and disaggregate this by gender
- Recommendation #2: Collect more nuanced data on barriers to education among girls with disabilities in specific settings
- Recommendation #3: Prioritise inclusive and safe sexual and reproductive health support for girls with disabilities in schools
- Recommendation #4: Involve boys and men in supporting girls with disabilities accessing school
- Recommendation #5: Think beyond primary education, to support girls with disabilities through to meaningful livelihoods and to mitigate against risk of violence
- Recommendation #6: Harmonise indicators and outputs to build national baselines and monitor change over time

“We know the best advocates for girls are girls.”

## Challenges

Challenge #1: Worldwide, girls faced greater barriers accessing school than boys before the pandemic, with disparities likely to have increased on account of Covid-19

- [UNICEF data](#) suggests that only two-thirds of countries globally had achieved gender parity in primary school enrolment before the pandemic. [Reasons include](#) overarching and institutionalised gender-based stereotypes and biases, early marriage and motherhood, limited access to sexual and reproductive health services and gender-based violence.
- Following widespread global school closures on account of Covid-19, and based on evidence from past crises, [UNICEF predicts](#) widening disparities and difficulties for girl children re-entering education. These disparities will be more keenly felt by vulnerable groups: girls living in poverty, with disabilities, in fragile contexts or from rural areas.

Challenge 2: Girls with disabilities may face additional barriers accessing school, compared with other girls, and with boys with disabilities

- Children with disabilities experience multiple barriers to accessing school compared with children without disabilities. These can include disability stigma, abuse and discrimination; poor health on account of limited access to child protection, health and (re)habilitative services; mental well-being; poverty; and resource allocation.
- Those who do access school are often disadvantaged compared to their peers due to unavailable personnel to support learning, physical inaccessibility of buildings and resources and limited or no access to [specialist curricula for inclusive learning](#) (e.g. braille or assistive technology).
- Girl children with disabilities are at risk of intersecting barriers on account of both their disability, and their gender. For example, in addition to the barriers above, there is evidence that [WASH-related barriers](#) - including a lack of accessible latrines and inclusive menstrual hygiene management facilities - [may be a key driver](#) for girls with disabilities dropping out of schools, and that their risk of [experiencing violence](#) and [contracting HIV](#) are both higher.

Challenge 3: There is some evidence on what works best to improve educational outcomes for children with disabilities in LMICs who are in school, but gaps remain

- We recently reviewed the evidence on [what works to improve educational outcomes of children with disabilities in school](#) and found limited evidence from LMICs on the types of intervention that improved outcomes. The brief emphasised a need for further, robust evidence from LMICs, particularly comparing inclusive education to specialist education approaches.
- [One large literature review](#) of 131 studies highlighted the limited evidence available on what types of systems were most appropriate for children with disabilities (for example inclusive versus segregated learning) and recommended incorporating academic performance indicators into research to better estimate school outcomes.
- A recent review of [educational technology \(EdTech\) in LMICs](#) identified 51 articles and 9 reports, predominantly from South America and Asia. The review found promising evidence of the role of EdTech in enabling participation of children with disabilities. However, less than 20% of included studies provided a gender breakdown of included participants.
- A separate review on increasing the accessibility of education, based largely on [evidence from high income countries](#), found some evidence of positive classroom outcomes but called for better data on relative costs to aid decision-making.
- Finally, a review of 72 predominantly high-income country studies on [the participation of children with disabilities in school](#) determined that attending and actively participating in school was affected by context (attitudes and knowledge of adults and peers; availability and accessibility of materials and structures) and psycho-social factors (child identity, preferences, health and competence).

Challenge 4: There is limited focus on intersectionality in the available literature – not only between disability and gender, but also between gender and poverty or between impairment type

- [Wapling \(2016\)](#), identified six themes across the literature on inclusive education: teacher-, child-, school-, parent/community-, or, mixed- focus, and external (e.g. policy, legislation). However, the review found very limited evidence of comparison even between children with and without disabilities, let alone among children with disabilities disaggregated by gender.
- A separate [review of 13 studies](#) seeking to identify what educational interventions worked to produce good outcomes for children with disabilities, revealed gender-disaggregated outcomes in only two studies: A three-country study on the impact of an early intervention programme in India, Pakistan and Zambia did not identify differences by gender. Similarly, no gender differences were identified in a study in Lebanon on improving reading skills among children with dyslexia.
- One good example from Kenya is an evidence-based intervention that drew on baseline research to [develop a 6-component Inclusive Education model](#). The model comprised different activities designed to enhance access to education for girls with disabilities, including teacher training, improving the school environment, family and community awareness and providing peer support. Adopting a quasi-experimental design, the study compared literacy and numeracy in an intervention and control group, determining positive outcomes in the intervention group, controlled for disability severity and grade. However, the study also experienced high attrition at follow up, and only explained up to 8% of variability in outcomes, highlighting the complexity of issues involved.

## How did we find answers

We conducted a review of systematic reviews on access to education and educational outcomes for girls with disabilities in low and middle income countries (LMICs). This evidence brief is based on the findings of one overview of systematic reviews and one impact evaluation (both focused on LMICS), two systematic reviews focused on LMICs, one systematic review focused on LMICs but with data predominantly from high-income settings, one global systematic review with data predominantly from high-income settings, one multi-country secondary analysis and two primary research studies.

## Evidence-informed Recommendations and Actions

Key Recommendations	Actions
Generate better evidence on what works to improve outcomes for children with disabilities overall, and disaggregate these by gender	Work with researchers to document disability-inclusive interventions (including programmes already underway) and their outcomes in terms of educational attainment. Disaggregate all outcomes by gender to assess whether interventions work equally for girls compared with boys. Take a whole-school approach, using <a href="#">guidance such as the Index for Inclusion</a> , to addressing barriers, across different intersecting components.
Collect more nuanced data on barriers to education among girls with disabilities in specific settings	<a href="#">Build on examples from the literature</a> that use participatory and visual methods (where appropriate) that engage directly with girls with disabilities, to establish and overcome barriers to accessing education in a meaningful gender-sensitive way. Collect data in different countries, and different educational settings, to maximise context-relevance, and include data collection on the psycho-social factors affecting girls' access.
Prioritise inclusive and safe sexual and reproductive health support for girls with disabilities in schools	Ensure that girls with disabilities have access to safe, accessible counselling on sexual and reproductive health that <a href="#">mitigates against increased risk of contracting HIV</a> and other sexual and reproductive health issues. Provide accessible information and spaces
Involve boys and men in supporting girls with disabilities accessing school	In many settings, boys and men remain the key decision makers around resource allocation and time use, and may be perpetrators of violence. Involve them in awareness raising, breaking stereotypes and mitigating barriers that prevent girls with disabilities from accessing and staying in school
Think beyond primary education, to support girls with disabilities through to employment or other livelihoods and to mitigate against risk of violence	Invest in approaches that support girls with disabilities beyond primary school, to maximise their potential for greater independence, economic empowerment, self-advocacy and self-sufficiency. This may require a twin track approach that includes <a href="#">strategies that support all girls</a> as well as targeted strategies tailored to girls with different impairments and disabilities.
Harmonise indicators and outputs to build national baselines and monitor change over time	Follow guidance from UNESCO Institute of Statistics, which is currently working with the Inter-Agency Group on Education Inequality to harmonise the definitions, calculations and disaggregation of education indicators for determination of national baselines, and to monitor change over time.

## Policy priorities

Generate and utilise data specific to your setting to establish the baseline enrolment status of girls with disabilities, and develop strategies to mitigate barriers to education. Determine and embrace a multi-sectoral approach that identifies contextual and individual barriers that prevent girls with disabilities' from attending, having access to the school curriculum and participating in school. Develop evidence-based policies that support not only access to education but successful/tangible outcomes for girls with disabilities, supporting them through adolescence into the labour-force and or within the wider community to meet international goals related to both educational equity and equality.

## Conclusion

Combined intersecting barriers marginalise girls with disabilities and limit their access to and outcomes from education. To overcome different barriers, policy-makers should generate their own data using standardised methodologies. This will foster development of localised evidence-based policies with comparable progress indicators.

## Acknowledgements

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## GAPS & RESEARCH NEEDS

Much more evidence, using conceptual frameworks that capture both context and individual factors, is needed on what works to support girls with disabilities accessing and staying in school. However, we do already know that they face double disadvantages based on their gender and their disability, and that the barriers to their education may be complex and intersecting. State Parties must invest in generating their own data, aligned to standardised indicators, so as to be able to develop evidence-based localised policies that work for girls with disabilities in their setting. These data are also needed at a higher level, to generate a more conclusive evidence base on what works to support girls with disabilities accessing and staying in school globally, remembering that what gets counted gets acted on.

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