

**EDUCATION FOR ALL: A GENDER AND  
DISABILITY PERSPECTIVE**

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# Education for All: A Gender and Disability Perspective

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## Introduction

In light of the international commitment to Education for All (EFA), how are girls with disabilities faring? In truth, we don't know, although from what we can extrapolate from the meager research that exists on the subject, they are not faring well. Widespread cultural biases based on gender and disability greatly limit their educational opportunities. Why don't we know more? Those committed to gender equity, by failing to consider disability, and those committed to disability equity, by failing to consider gender, have unwittingly rendered girls with disabilities invisible.

Girls with disabilities are a large, diverse group, although it is difficult to determine exactly who and how many are included. This is so in part because there are many definitions of disability, not only across countries but also within countries. However, what these varied definitions demonstrate is that disability is now viewed as a social construct rooted in cultural, political, legal, and economic factors as much as in biology. While the World Health Organization (WHO) is currently leading an effort to achieve a new international definition that considers many factors, no consensus has yet been reached. Here, the definition includes girls with physical, sensory, emotional, intellectual, learning, health, or other disabilities that may be visible or invisible, stable or progressive, occurring at birth or during childhood.

Given the multiplicity of definitions, there are no clear statistics on the number or percentage of girls with disabilities, or people with disabilities, for that matter. WHO estimates that between 7 percent and 10 percent of the world's population has some type of disability and that 80 percent of that number lives in developing countries (WHO, 1999). UNESCO and others speculate that the number of children with disabilities under the age of 18 around the world ranges from 120 to 150 million. Even assuming that girls make up somewhat less than half of all children with disabilities, as some research suggests (Groce, 1999), the number of girls with disabilities worldwide is substantial.

### *Double Discrimination in Education and Beyond*

Available data, most focused on literacy, indicate that women and girls with disabilities fare less well in the educational arena than either males who are disabled or their nondisabled female counterparts. For example, UNESCO, the World Blind Union, and other international organizations estimate the literacy rate for women who are disabled as 1 percent, compared to an estimate of about 3 percent for people with disabilities as a whole (Groce, 1997). Statistics from individual countries and regions, while often reflecting a higher percentage, confirm that gender inequities exist (Nagata, 2003).

In terms of school enrollment, UNESCO suggests that only 2 percent of children with disabilities are in school, with girls who are disabled particularly underserved ([www2.unesco.org/wef/countryreports/usa/rapport\\_2\\_h.html](http://www2.unesco.org/wef/countryreports/usa/rapport_2_h.html)). These educational findings reflect only a fraction of a larger picture of double discrimination based on gender and disability that pervades the lives of girls and women with disabilities in all areas of human experience, including employment, income, health care, marriage, and parenting. Underlying double discrimination are negative attitudes toward women compounded by negative attitudes toward disability that cut across cultures and levels of development. Women and girls with disabilities are commonly stereotyped as sick, helpless, childlike, dependent, incompetent, and asexual, greatly limiting their options and opportunities.

### *Invisibility of Girls Who Are Disabled*

The most formidable barrier to educational equity for girls with disabilities may be their invisibility. They are not on the radar screen of either those committed to educational equity for girls, because as a rule, disability is not included in their work, or those committed to educational equity for children with disabilities, because with similar oversight, gender is not considered. The literature on girls with disabilities and their education, therefore, is sparse. This holds true for countries at all levels of development, including the United States (Rousso, 2001b). Research in this area is limited and consists largely of small qualitative studies. Although invaluable in identifying barriers, such research rarely includes comparisons with both boys who are disabled and nondisabled girls, making it difficult to identify the joint impact of gender and disability bias.

### *Informal Sources of Information*

Given the lack of research, much of the information in this report is anecdotal, and includes, most significantly, responses to the author's request for information on barriers to education for girls who are disabled, sent out to a broad range of women's disability and educational organizations in Africa, the Asian Pacific region, Australia, Eastern and Western Europe, Canada, and Latin America.<sup>1</sup> Out of roughly two dozen responses, a few made reference to recent reports on the status of women and girls with disabilities in their country, and some generated reports on girls with disabilities and their education in response to requests for information. Most simply shared their perceptions on the issue or acknowledged that they had no information on the subject.

### *Programs and Policies*

Available information demonstrates the dearth of programs and policies specifically addressing the educational needs of girls with disabilities, and the failure of gender equity and disability equity programs to serve their needs.

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis, et al., 2002, and [www.MIUSA.org](http://www.MIUSA.org) were among the resources used to generate the list of potential contacts.

In the United States, there are at best a handful of programs designed for girls with disabilities (Froschl, et al., 2001). Although policies and programs aimed at girls in the general population do exist, girls who are disabled are seldom included. Similarly, while strong disability-rights legislation over the years produced a range of efforts to promote educational equity for children who are disabled, few are gender-specific and few include gender-specific components to address the unique barriers facing girls with disabilities.

Beyond the United States, little program development is underway for girls with disabilities. For example, the South African Development Community (SADC) notes that: “Despite the fact that the disabled girl-child deserves special attention, no country in the SADC has given the matter specific attention. Very little has been done to address the education needs of the disabled girl-child” (SADC, 1999). In response to queries concerning policies and programs for girls who are disabled, what many mentioned most frequently was residential special education centers for girls. Although these centers are clearly gender-segregated schools, there is no evidence to suggest that their programs are gender-sensitive, or, designed with girls’ unique needs in mind.

### *A Heterogeneous Group*

It is important to acknowledge the heterogeneity of girls who are disabled. Their access to education is affected not only by their gender and disability but also by their type of disability, the socioeconomic status of their family, their race and ethnicity, and whether they live in an urban or rural area, as well as a host of other factors. Among these factors, the circular relationship between poverty and disability stands out.

Poverty causes disability, particularly in women and girls. In the face of limited resources, they are more likely than their male counterparts to be deprived of basic necessities such as food and medicine (Groce, 1997). Disability, in turn, contributes to poverty because of the additional expenses that it can entail. Therefore, girls who are disabled are more likely than their nondisabled peers to grow up in poor families, a reality that in itself places them at an educational disadvantage. From what is known, girls with disabilities in rural areas are even less likely to have access to education than those living in cities. Some research indicates that girls with mobility disabilities have more access to education, particularly if it is community-based, than do girls who are blind, deaf, or have other disabilities, since mobility-impaired students, if they can get in the building, are less likely to need modified teaching techniques and devices. How gender interacts with these various other factors is not always obvious.

### **Barriers to Education**

Girls with disabilities confront multiple barriers to obtaining an equitable education or, indeed, any education at all. Attitudinal barriers, such as gender bias compounded by disability bias, seem to be the most formidable. However, other barriers are almost as significant.

### *Cultural Bias and Rigid Gender Roles*

The most frequently mentioned barrier to education for girls with disabilities is cultural bias against women, leading to preferential treatment and allocation of resources and opportunities to male children at the expense of their sisters. Education, respondents noted, is deemed less important for girls, who are expected to become wives and mothers. Boys, destined to become breadwinners, are given priority in schooling.

While some view this kind of gender bias as the major barrier to educating girls who are disabled (Fahd, et al., 1997), many believe disability bias limits still further the opportunities of girls who are disabled. Families often assume that a daughter who is disabled will not marry, which may add to her devaluation, since in some cultures, the prospect of a good marriage is the primary value given to girls. In contrast, it is assumed that boys, even those with disabilities, will marry and become breadwinners. In many cultures disability also is a source of stigma, so that having a daughter who is disabled may be viewed as a double liability leading to the devaluation of the whole family. To avoid being “shamed” some families not only deny girls who are disabled access to school, but hide them away entirely.

Finally, economics often becomes intertwined with gender roles. In impoverished families, the limited resources available will be used to educate the boys, with the expectation that they will ultimately help support the family. Girls are not likely to be educated, particularly girls who are disabled and need costly disability-related equipment or special transportation.

### *A Pervasive Problem Across Countries and Cultures*

Barriers like those just described cut across countries and cultures, as can be observed from the following responses sent from around the world:

*From Kenya:* “The African society places more value on boys than girls. So when resources are scarce, boys are given a priority. A disabled boy will be sent to school at the advantage of the girl” (Naomy Ruth Esiaba, development consultant and activist, personal communications, 4/11/03 and 4/17/03). There are similar examples from Ghana (Nyarko, 2003) and Tanzania (Macha, 2002).

*From Costa Rica:* “There are more disabled women in Costa Rica than disabled men (51% compared to 49%), something you see in elementary school. But in secondary school and sheltered workshops there are more boys...In our culture, girls are supposed to stay at home while boys are supposed to go out and ‘earn a living.’ Girls are more ‘private,’ boys are more ‘public’” (Barbara Holst, Director, National Council on Rehabilitation and Special Education, personal communication, April 24, 2003). A similar report came from Mexico (Alicia Contreras, personal communication, 4/24/03)

*From the Palestinian Territory:* “The health and beauty of girls and women are a representation of family well-being, and a symbol of the good standing of the family. Female family members are not supposed to produce wealth independently; they are seen primarily as

mothers, supporting the lead of fathers, brothers and ultimately their husbands. It is expected that all daughters will marry; a successfully arranged marriage is an enhancement of the family's name and prestige. Because of the norms of female beauty and the role of women in the family, a disabled woman is seen as a failure on several counts. While disabled sons can be tolerated and often married, disabled daughters are merely a drain on already stretched resources; permanent family members with no hope of future marriage or social mobility. It is quite usual for a disabled woman to be hidden by her family" (Atshan, 1997, p. 54). Activist and scholar Anita Ghai describes a similar situation in India (Hershey, 2000).

### *Middle and Upper Class Girls with Disabilities*

Such testimonies to the contrary, girls with disabilities from middle and upper class families appear not only more likely to attend school than those from poor families, but also may have greater access to both educational and vocational opportunities than do their nondisabled counterparts. Assumed unfit to fulfill the traditional female roles of wife and mother, some girls with disabilities from relatively wealthy families appear to have greater freedom to explore other life options. For example, a woman from Yemen reports: "I know this sounds strange, but being a disabled woman has given me certain privileges that I would have never dreamt of had I been an able-bodied Yemeni woman....I guess my parents are not afraid for my safety and honour. They probably think, 'She is disabled, who in the world would want anything to do with her.'" (Abu-Habib, pp. 16-17.)

### *Promising Strategies and Programs*

In India, activists for women with disabilities, such as Dr. Anita Ghai, successfully advocated for more positive images of women with disabilities in the media (Hershey, 2002). Similar strategies are under way in Egypt and Lebanon (Nagata, 2003). A New York City-based mentoring project for adolescent girls who are disabled (see below), provides parents with exposure to adult women with disabilities who have completed their education and are employed, thus helping to expand their educational and vocational aspirations for their daughters with disabilities (Rouso, 2001a).

Young role models can be helpful, too. A Save the Children, UK project in Nepal (as reported in Lansdown, in press) found that once some children who are disabled go to school they became role models for other children and their families. Parents of girls who are disabled also may serve as role models for other parents. A group called Jan Madhyam, or "of the people," helps communities educate children with disabilities. The fact that one of the founders of the program is the mother of a daughter who is disabled has led parents to seek services for their own children who are disabled (Kolucki, 2002).

### *Issues of Violence and Safety*

While violence is a barrier to education for all girls, it may be more of an issue for girls with disabilities. Available data suggest that girls who are disabled experience violence within the family, institutions, and community at higher rates than do their nondisabled peers; and the

violence they face may be more chronic and severe, including the withholding of essential care. Part of the explanation for this may be the disability itself, making it more difficult for some girls to assess violent situations or defend themselves. They also may not know how to flee or how or to whom to report incidents of violence. However, negative cultural attitudes may be a greater danger than ignorance. Often perceived as sick, helpless, asexual, and powerless, girls with disabilities are seen as easy targets. They also are regularly deprived of the skills and opportunities they need to recognize and address violence, including adequate sex education. Finally, the police and community members may fail to respond appropriately to incidents of violence against girls who are disabled, doubting the credibility of the reporter (Rousso, 2001b).

Most available data on violence against people with disabilities focus on adults and children from industrialized countries, with no disaggregation by gender, although there also are a few studies on women who are disabled. The results consistently show that in general people who are disabled, particularly women, face higher rates of violence than their nondisabled counterparts (Sobsey, 1994; Petersilia, 1998, and Crosse, Kaye and Ratnofsky, 1995; Waxman-Fiduccia and Wolfe, 1999, all cited in Rousso, 2000).

### *Combined Sexual and Disability Harassment and Violence in School*

Sexual harassment in school is recognized as a widespread problem for girls who are not disabled (AAUW, 1993; Stein, 1993). Similarly, there has been growing recognition that students who are disabled often face disability harassment (Faibich, 1995). However, little attention has been paid to the combined sexual and disability harassment that female students with disabilities may encounter. The limited data available, mainly pilot studies from the United States that focus on sexual harassment for students and girls with disabilities, suggest that students with disabilities face higher rates of harassment in school than nondisabled students, and girls who are disabled face higher rates of harassment than boys who are disabled or nondisabled girls; girls with multiple disabilities are at particularly high risk (Joint Commission of the Chancellor and the Special Commissioner for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse, 1994, as cited in Linn & Rousso, 2001; and Rousso, 1996, as cited in Linn & Rousso, 2001). Reports from other countries, including Mexico, Latin America, and Australia ((INMUJERES, 2002; Alicia Contreras, personal communication, 4/24/03; Bramley, et al., 1990; Hastings, n.d.) also acknowledge sexual and disability harassment in school as a barrier to learning for girls with disabilities.

Harassment by teachers and other adults also may be particularly widespread and severe in residential schools (Sobsey, 1994; Alicia Contreras, personal communication, 4/24/03). According to Sobsey, possible reasons include unrealistic views held by family members and the community of residential settings as havens, as well as administrative procedures that encourage and condone abuse, dehumanization, and detachment, and a subculture that supports abuse.

### *Safety Concerns and Overprotectiveness*

The risks and realities of sexual abuse limit the educational opportunities for girls with disabilities in a variety of ways. First, according to reports from Kenya and Tanzania, as well as

elsewhere, perceived risks cause reluctance in parents to send their daughters who are disabled to school, particularly when schools are a long distance away (Naomy Ruth Esiaba, personal communication, 4/11/03; Macha, 2002). In addition, the risk of violence may reinforce the stereotypical views held by some parents that their daughters who are disabled are helpless and in need of constant protection, which translates into keeping girls not only “safe,” but also isolated at home.

Attorney and consultant Jenny Kern, in her work with women who are disabled in Costa Rica notes that a major issue these women identified as restricting to their lives was parental overprotectiveness, very much intertwined with parents’ fears about their daughter’s sexuality and sexual vulnerability. This was not an issue raised by men who are disabled (personal communication, 4/25/03). Research from Mexico similarly identified parental overprotectiveness as a barrier for girls with disabilities (INMUJERES, 2002).

### *Consequences of Abuse*

Once sexual abuse occurs, it may lead not only to severe trauma but also to pregnancy. Research conducted in the United States indicates that girls with disabilities have higher rates of adolescent parenting than their nondisabled peers, and that sexual abuse is a major factor in pregnancy (Rousso, 2001). This often causes adolescent girls with disabilities to drop out of school, whereas boys who are disabled rarely drop out of school to assume parenting responsibilities.

Most recently, the view of girls who are disabled as asexual, combined with the erroneous assumption that having sex with a virgin is a cure for HIV/AIDS, has led to widespread sexual abuse of girls with disabilities by men with HIV/AIDS, particularly in Africa, putting the girls at great risk for the disease (Save the Children, Sweden, 2001; African Women with Disabilities, 2001).

Finally, there is anecdotal information about daughters with disabilities being sold into prostitution by poor families to raise money to meet basic needs, in the Philippines, for example (Groce, 1999). Girls who are disabled may be viewed as “good catches” by prostitution rings because of their disability-related limitations. Escape for these girls is thought to be impossible.

### *Promising Strategies and Programs*

Several organizations for women with disabilities around the world have developed advocacy strategies and information to raise public awareness of issues of violence against women and girls who are disabled. For example, Women with Disabilities Australia has developed a *Women With Disabilities and Violence Information Kit* that includes poetry and articles written by women who are disabled. Some research also is available, as well as annotated bibliographies, resource materials including internet sites, and information on Australian Government initiatives to combat violence (WWDA, 1998).

Sex education also can be used to empower girls with disabilities to make good choices in social and sexual situations and to detect danger. In the developing world, a few small programs seek to provide girls who are disabled with sex information and social skills in a culturally sensitive way. For example, Barbados has a small, successful program that includes help with dressing and putting on make-up, information on sex and sexuality, and a job training component (Groce, 1997). In Pakistan, a “Modesty Class” geared to girls with intellectual disabilities addresses female anatomy, sexuality, and sexual abuse (Miles, 1996, as cited in Rousso, 2000).

### *Distance to School*

Distance to school constitutes an educational barrier for many girls, partly because of safety and cultural prohibitions against females traveling unescorted. For girls with disabilities, such barriers are intensified.

In some areas, the only schools that serve students with disabilities are segregated special education schools, often located in urban centers. Students with disabilities from rural regions must travel to attend school, and often live at the school. However, cultural expectations that girls stay close to home may prohibit participation by girls who are disabled (Fahd, et al., 1997).

### *Inaccessible Transportation Systems and Barriers to Walking*

Even if families allow their daughters with disabilities to attend a school away from home, transportation systems may be inaccessible to girls with mobility and other types of disabilities, particularly in developing countries. Community-based schools also may present travel challenges. Walking a mile or two to school may be prohibitive for a girl with mobility impairment or problematic for a girl who is blind, unless assisted by friends or family (Drieger, 1998).

### *Boys Who are Disabled May Have the Advantage*

Although boys with disabilities may face some of the same travel barriers, gender roles and related stereotypes about males as strong, sturdy, and independent work to their advantage. Contreras (personal communication, 4/23/03) describes how in Mexico, parents are willing to let boys with mobility disabilities use less reliable, more dangerous forms of transportation, such as a bicycle, or adapted motorcycle, which they would never allow their disabled daughters to use. There also is the cultural expectation that boys will figure out transportation for themselves, which encourages problem solving. Finally, Contreras notes that because friendships are often gender-segregated, boys with disabilities tend to forge friendships with their nondisabled male peers, where the code is to help one another. Thus, boys with disabilities can rely on their nondisabled friends to lift them onto inaccessible buses and into barrier-filled school buildings. In contrast, stereotypes about girls, particularly girls who are disabled, as fragile and dependent, combined with safety and cultural issues, may cause parents to discourage risk-taking, creative problem solving, and reliance on peers.

### *Assistive Devices to Get Out the Door*

Boys also may have the advantage in obtaining assistive devices and other rehabilitation services needed to get to and participate at school (Lakkis, 1997). Women receive only one fifth of the rehabilitation in the world (International Disability Foundation, 1999, as cited in Rousso, 2000) and, particularly in developing countries, men have greater access to rehabilitation services and to prosthetic and orthotic devices than women (Turner, 1998, as cited in Rousso, 2000). Gender bias in access to rehabilitative services and devices is in itself a barrier to education for girls with disabilities.

### *Transportation for Girls with Disabilities May Cost More*

Finally, transportation to school for girls with disabilities may cost more than that for boys with disabilities because of the possible need for escorts for safety and cultural reasons. Their transportation costs also may be greater than that for nondisabled girls because of the need for additional assistance or alternative arrangements to deal with inaccessible transportation systems or the inability to walk to school, and the need for assistive devices. For families with limited resources, the extra costs may prevent girls with some disabilities from going to school.

### *Promising Strategies and Programs*

Community-based inclusive education, supported by a range of international policy documents, while of considerable benefit to all students who are disabled, may prove particularly beneficial to girls who are disabled by lessening the distance barrier as well as helping to address safety issues (UNESCAP, n.d.-b). In Mexico, Whirlwind Women is providing girls who are disabled with wheelchairs and the skills to maintain them, thus facilitating their ability to travel to school and participate in other aspects of community life independently (Alicia Contreras, 4/24/03).

### *Physical Environment*

The architectural inaccessibility of school buildings (including stairs, narrow corridors, inaccessible desks and equipment, inaccessible bathrooms) is often a major barrier for girls with disabilities. As with getting to and from school, differences in male and female socialization in Latin America and elsewhere may enable boys to more readily ask for help from friends, and friends, because they are male, may be better able to help. Also, boys who are disabled are more likely to “rough it” and take risks to get over barriers, such as flinging themselves up and down stairs (Alicia Contreras, personal communication, 4/24/03).

### *Toileting and Menstruation*

Inaccessible toilets, as well as the nature of some disabilities, might mean that a girl who is disabled would need help with toileting. Since many cultures emphasize modesty and privacy, the need for such personal assistance may be highly problematic; it also may intensify safety concerns. Reports from Uganda, Mexico, and Australia identify inadequate toileting facilities as

a barrier to education for girls with disabilities (DWNRO, n.d.; Alicia Contreras, personal communication, 4/24/03; Bramley, 1990).

Menstruation, which some girls with disabilities might need help to manage, can be a compounding factor, particularly when bathrooms are inaccessible or unsanitary. Menstruation can trigger fear for some parents for a daughter who is disabled, underscoring for them her budding sexuality and sexual vulnerability. The absence of provisions at school enabling the girl to manage her period in a safe way can intensify such parental fears and further discourage school attendance (DWNRO, n.d.; Alicia Contreras, 4/24/03). A girl's need for help with such personal tasks may reinforce negative stereotypes about her ability to function as a student and also increases staff anxieties about issues of sexuality (Alicia Contreras, 4/24/03).

### *Promising Strategies and Programs*

Disability rights legislation that mandates barrier-free educational environments, such as in the United States and other industrialized countries, is an important step in eliminating architectural barriers for all students with disabilities. Accessible facilities may prove particularly beneficial to girls, in light of the above.

### *Access to Special Education Services and Supports*

To participate in school, students with disabilities may need sign language interpreters, opportunities to learn Braille, modification and flexibility in teaching methods and assistive devices, as well as physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy, and other related services. In industrialized countries, access to services depends upon being identified by school personnel as having a disability or "special educational need." Available data suggest that girls who are disabled are less likely to be referred for or to receive needed special education services in school than boys who are disabled.

### *The Role of Behavior and Bias in Access to Services*

In the United States, two-thirds of all students receiving special education services are boys. According to research by Wehmeyer and Schwartz (2001, as cited in Rousso, 2001b), gender-based behavioral differences (boys were more disruptive than girls) and gender bias (teachers expected more from boys than girls) were the most significant explanations for gender inequity. In order for girls to receive services, they had to have more significant levels of disability than boys. Also, girls receiving services were often placed in more restrictive educational settings than boys.

The researchers concluded: "The present system is inequitable, not necessarily because more boys than girls are being served, but because girls who have equivalent educational needs are not provided access to supports and services that might address those needs... The suggestion from these findings is that girls, who are not as likely to be acting out, are not likely to be referred for learning problems, and thus will have the experience more significant problems to gain the support they need.... [T]he problem at hand may not be male overrepresentation, but

indeed female underrepresentation” (p.278). A similar finding regarding girls’ more limited access to special education services, particularly girls with emotional disabilities, was noted in research conducted in Great Britain (Dawn, et al., 2000).

### *The Situation in Developing Countries*

It is less clear how gender affects access to special education services in developing countries, in part because special education services are often so scarce for both genders. However, one indicator of gender bias may be access to separate special education centers. Previously discussed factors, such as parental bias, safety issues, and transportation, may discourage girls’ participation at such centers. However, in some regions, these centers are gender segregated, and simple comparisons between the numbers of schools provided for girls and boys may serve as an indication of gender bias. For example, in India, despite the fact that there is a higher rate of blindness among females compared to males (54% vs. 46%), of the 10 special schools available for blind students in New Delhi, only 1 is exclusively for girls and 1 other is co-ed, whereas the remaining 8 are exclusively for boys (Mohit, 1977, as cited in Save the Children, 2000).

### *Nature of the Educational Setting*

Unfortunately, there is little information on how gender affects the nature of the educational placement for students with disabilities, once they have been identified as needing services. However, the Wehmeyer and Schwartz United States-based study (2001, as cited in Rousso, 2001b) suggested that girls with disabilities tended to be placed in more restrictive, less inclusive settings than boys with disabilities.

### *Promising Strategies and Programs*

A few teacher education resources on gender and disability issues on both the pre-service and in-service levels are now available in some industrialized countries, such as the United States (Rousso and Wehmeyer, 2002; Rousso and Wehmeyer, Eds., 2001; Greenberg and Shaffer, 1990). Some of these resources address not only issues of gender bias in referral to special education services, but all types of gender and disability bias in work with students with disabilities, including curricular and student-teacher interaction issues. In field testing, *Gender Matters* (Rousso and Wehmeyer, 2002), a set of in-service training modules, increased educators’ knowledge and awareness of gender issues for students with disabilities.

### *Gender and Disability Bias in Curricula*

Studies of gender bias in educational materials and resources used by students with disabilities are highly limited; even less is known about disability bias and its intersection with gender bias. What we do know suggests that curricular bias may be a significant issue for girls who are disabled.

### *Invisibility of Women with Disabilities*

In the United States, studies of materials used by students receiving special education services showed either a stereotypical representation or underrepresentation of women and girls with disabilities (Shaffer and Shevitz, 2001; Wehmeyer and Schwartz, 2001; Council of Chief State School Officers, 1986; Women and Disability Awareness Project, 1984; all cited in Rousso, 2001). In Australia, bias in curricula also has been identified as a problem (Hastings (n.d.)).

The impact of such bias may be compounded by the relative absence within most school systems of educators who are women with disabilities, including those in industrialized countries (Magrab, 2000) and by the widespread invisibility in the media of women who are disabled in the media (Rousso, 2000). All of these factors contribute to the lack of positive role models for girls who are disabled and their parents.

### *Promising Strategies and Programs*

In the United States, a few mentoring and role model projects have linked girls with disabilities. For example, the Networking Project for Disabled Women and Girls, sponsored by the YWCA of the City of New York, provides a range of intergenerational activities for women and girls with physical disabilities (Rousso, 2001a). These include group and one-to-one mentoring, theme-centered workshops on such topics as owning your own business, living on your own, sexuality, and parenting; visits to women's worksites; and events celebrating the achievements of women with disabilities in varied fields, such as the arts. An outside evaluator found that the project increased career aspirations and independent living skills for those girls most consistently involved. Similar programs also have been developed in other areas of the United States, including Chicago (Rousso 2001b).

### *Vocational Courses, Counseling, and Expectations*

Reports from disparate countries, including the United States (Rousso and Wehmeyer, 2002), Australia (Tomas, 1991; Bramley, 1991), Russia (Iarskaia-Smirnova, 2001), India (Mohit, 2000), Jordan (Nan Hawthorne, Content Developer, eSight Careers Network, personal communication, 4/15/03), and the Asia Pacific Region as a whole (UNESCAP, n.d.-b), suggest that vocational courses and counseling for students with disabilities, to the extent they exist, are gender stereotyped, tracking girls to lower paying jobs with fewer opportunities for advancement. Vocational expectations of teachers and parents for girls who are disabled, and the girls' own expectations for their vocational future, tend to be grounded in gender stereotypes. In the United States, the lack of adequate vocational training helps explain the higher rates of unemployment for girls who are disabled upon leaving school (Doren and Benz, 2001, as cited in Rousso, 2001b).

## *Bias in Math and Science Education*

Math and science education is clearly linked to employability in a world that is becoming increasingly technological. In this area, there has been relatively little research or activism on behalf of girls with disabilities.

Wahl (2001, as cited in Rousso, 2001b), in a comprehensive review of the literature in the United States, found that although students with disabilities of both genders had limited access to math and science courses, skills, and knowledge, girls faced some unique barriers. Those barriers included doubly negative assumptions by teachers based on disability and gender about the ability of girls with disabilities to succeed at math and science; the tracking of girls who are disabled to lower level classes; teaching strategies that disadvantaged girls who are disabled by emphasizing speed and competition; more limited opportunities for informal math, science, and technology experiences for girls with disabilities; and a lack of access to role models for girls who are disabled. Australian and Russian studies report similar findings (Bramley, et al., 1990; Iarskaia-Smirnova, 2001).

### *Promising Strategies and Programs*

In the United States, Project GOLD (Girls On-Line with Disabilities) at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis provided a club for girls with physical, sensory, and other disabilities in grades 4 to 8 who had an interest in mathematics, science, technology, and computers (Rousso, 2001b). Another project, Improving the Mathematical Skills of Deaf High School Girls, a partnership between the National Technical Institute for the Deaf and Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, aims to increase the number of girls who are deaf and who major in science, math, engineering, and technology in college, and who enter careers in those areas (RIT, 2000). The United Nations' agency ECSWA has sought to reduce the gender divide of Information Technology for people with disabilities in the Arab world by giving priority to women and girls who are blind in its Braille computer and information technology training centers (Nagata, 2003).

## **Recommendations**

### *More Research on School Enrollment, Outcomes, and Barriers*

More reliable data should come from increased research on such basics as the number of girls with disabilities who are of school age, their school enrollment levels, and their educational outcomes. This requires developing a consistent definition of disability as well as disaggregating data on children who are disabled by gender, and disaggregating data on girls by disability status.

To fill in major research gaps on how gender and disability bias interact while mainstreaming the educational issues of girls who are disabled, we should ensure that all research on educational equity for girls include disability, and all research on educational equity for children with disabilities include gender.

In addition, we need studies specifically focused on girls who are disabled to identify their issues more fully, building on research already undertaken, for example, in the Middle East, Mexico, and Uganda (Abu-Habib, 1997; INMUJERES, 2002; DWNRO, n.d.). Women and girls who are disabled should be active participants and collaborators in planning and implementing all research.

#### *Including Disability in Educational Equity Policies and Programs*

All educational policies and programs for girls should include girls with disabilities in an explicit, fully integrated way (Hastings, n.d.). Girls who are disabled should be included in all educational programs serving girls. Research suggests that girls who are both disabled and nondisabled benefit from such inclusive experiences, enabling them to appreciate their commonalities and learn from their differences (Froschl, et al., 2001).

Worldwide, there have been some positive signs of inclusion. A girls' parliament at the South African Parliament in Cape Town, a kick-off event for the Girls Education Movement, gave a prominent role to girls with disabilities (McClain, 2003). In the United States, the Women's Educational Equity Act Program, a 30-year-old federal program established to promote educational equity for girls and women, early on made educational equity for girls and women with disabilities a priority area for funding. The availability of funds spawned a range of projects, including a national conference focused on educational equity for women and girls who are disabled (Rousso, 2001b).

Internationally, advocacy by disabled women's groups has led to the inclusion of women and girls who are disabled in documents promoting educational equity for girls and women as a whole, such as the Platform for Action of the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women (Duncan and Berman-Bieler, 1998, as cited in Rousso, 2001).

#### *Including Gender in Educational Equity Policies and Programs*

Similarly, policies and programs designed to promote educational equity for children with disabilities should explicitly address the unique needs of girls. For example, in Lebanon, a pilot program developed to integrate blind children into mainstream schools was much more successful with boys, demonstrating the need for gender-specific outreach strategies to address the resistance of parents to send their daughters who are blind to school (Fahd, et al., 1997).

We should learn from those disability programs that are successful in engaging girls, such as the KAMPI Breaking Down Barriers for Children project in the Philippines (Venus Ilagen, personal communication, 4/2/03). Internationally, for example, advocacy by organizations for women who are disabled led to the inclusion of gender issues in disability policy and agendas, such as in the Agenda for Action for the Asia Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons of 1993-2002 (UNESCAP n.d.-a).

### *Developing a Comprehensive Approach to Violence Prevention*

There is need for widespread research that documents the extent and nature of the violence that girls who are disabled face at home, in their communities, and in their schools, particularly residential schools. Legislation and policies should be developed that mandate zero tolerance of violence against girls who are disabled and severe penalties for perpetrators. Educational programs on violence prevention for girls who are disabled and their families should be widely offered. And all research, policies, and programs related to violence prevention for girls or for children with disabilities should include girls who are disabled in all aspects of the program. For example, many schools in the United States and other industrialized countries now include courses for students on teasing, bullying, and harassment. The issues of girls with disabilities should be incorporated into curricula and students who are disabled should be included as participants. Since girls with disabilities have less access to informal sources of sex education than their nondisabled peers (NICHCY, 1992, as cited in Rousso and Linn, 2001), there also is need for widespread sex education programs for girls and children who are disabled, developed in a culturally sensitive way.

### *Targeted Outreach and Scholarships*

Creative, targeted outreach strategies need to be developed to convince parents that their daughters with disabilities belong in school. These strategies could build on some of the promising media and role model programs currently under way to change cultural attitudes toward women who are disabled, while also addressing practical concerns, including issues of cost, safety, and transportation. In addition, mainstream media campaigns to encourage parents to send their daughters to school should include disability content and images. Particularly given the fact that girls with disabilities are overrepresented in poor families, scholarships specifically designated for girls with disabilities to cover fees and transportation costs could provide an important incentive for school enrollment.

### *Teacher Training and Recruitment*

Gender should be incorporated into training for teachers working with students who are disabled, drawing on the growing body of literature on women and girls with disabilities (see, for example, citations in Asch, et al., 2001; and Lewis, et al., 2002), as well as those teacher-training materials specifically focused on gender and disability issues (Rousso and Wehmeyer, 2002; Rousso and Wehmeyer, Eds., 2001; Greenberg and Shaffer, 1990).

There is need for more women educators with disabilities in both industrialized and developing countries to provide girls who are disabled and their parents with role models. Scholarships should be provided to women who are disabled to enroll in teacher training programs, and incentives given to school systems for inclusive hiring practices.

### *More Programs for Girls with Disabilities*

Although girls who are disabled need greater access to programs for girls and programs for children with disabilities, they also need programs specifically designed to address their unique needs. Given the barriers that girls with disabilities face, important programmatic elements should include:

- Access to role models and successful adult women with disabilities to help counter stereotypes;
- The teaching of self-advocacy skills, giving girls who are disabled the tools to recognize and confront barriers;
- A focus on skills, not deficits, providing girls with opportunities to appreciate and develop their strengths, talents, and interests; and
- The engagement of parents to facilitate girls' participation.

### **Conclusion**

Girls with disabilities are a large and diverse group whose educational needs have gone unnoticed by those committed to either gender equity or disability equity. Hence, there has been little research and limited policy and program development in the combined areas of gender and disability. Available information suggests that girls who are disabled face many barriers to a quality education. Double discrimination and underlying cultural biases based on gender and disability are key explanatory factors. Barriers include:

- Rigid gender roles, compounded by the stigma of disability, thus devaluing the importance of education for girls who are disabled;
- High rates of violence, resulting in safety issues, trauma, adolescent pregnancy, and susceptibility to HIV/AIDS, all of which impede learning;
- Issues of distance to school, compounded by inaccessible transportation systems, and limited access to assistive devices, such as wheelchairs;
- Inaccessible school buildings and unsanitary toilet facilities;
- More limited access to special education services and supports for girls who are disabled;
- Gender and disability biases reflected in curricula, thus rendering girls who are disabled virtually invisible; and

- Nonexistent or gender and disability biased vocational training and counseling, as well as limited access to math, science, and technology, so that girls with disabilities are not prepared to enter the new, technologically oriented world of work.

Recommendations to foster greater educational equity for girls with disabilities should include:

- More research on enrollment, outcomes, and barriers to the education of girls with disabilities;
- Explicit inclusion of girls who are disabled in all policies and programs for girls and in all policies and programs for children with disabilities;
- A comprehensive approach to violence prevention for girls with disabilities must be developed, including widespread sex education;
- Outreach needs to be targeted to parents to ensure that parents allow their daughters who are disabled access to education;
- Scholarships should be offered to girls with disabilities;
- Teacher education that includes training on gender and disability should be mandatory;
- Recruitment of women with disabilities as educators needs to be a priority; and
- More programs specifically designed for girls who are disabled that include access to role models and self-advocacy skills need to be encouraged and funded.

Despite the multiple barriers they face, girls with disabilities are not passive victims. Many understand very well the discrimination they face, and at least some of them already are prepared to fight for their rights. As one young woman from the United States said, “I may be a girl who’s disabled, handicapped, crippled, whatever you call it, but I’m tough and I can fight for my rights” (Rouso, 2001b). Hopefully, girls with disabilities will not have to fight alone for their rights, and those who are committed to education for all will become their staunchest allies.

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