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 tell, 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 disabled girls invisible.

Girls with disabilities are a large, diverse group, although it is difficult to determine exactly who and how many are included, in part because there are many definitions of disability, not only across countries but also within the same country. These varied definitions demonstrate that disability is a social construct, as much rooted in cultural, social, political, legal and economic factors as in biology. While the World Health Organization is currently leading an effort to achieve a new international definition that considers many of these factors, no consensus has yet been reached. Here, girls with disabilities are defined as those 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 diversity of definitions, there are no clear statistics on the number or percentage of girls with disabilities, or people with disabilities, for that matter. WHO has estimated that between seven and ten percent of the world's population has some type of

disability and that 80 percent of these live in developing countries (WHO, 1999).

UNESCO and others estimate that the number of children with disabilities under the age

of 18 around the world varies 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 likely to be 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 their disabled male or

nondisabled female counterparts. For example, UNESCO, the World Blind Union and

others estimate the literacy rate for disabled women as one percent, compared to an

estimate of about three percent for people with disabilities as a whole (Groce, 1997).

Statistics from individual countries and regions, while often higher, nonetheless confirm

the gender inequities (Nagata, 2003). In terms of school enrollment, UNESCO suggests

that only two percent of disabled children are in school, with disabled girls even more

underserved (www2.unesco.org/wef/countryreports/usa/rapport_2_h.html). These

findings in education are part of a larger picture of double discrimination based on gender

and disability that pervades the lives of women and girls with disabilities in all areas,

including employment, income level, health care, marriage and parenting. Underlying the

double discrimination is negative attitudes about women compounded by negative

attitudes toward disability that often cut across cultures and level of development.

Disabled women and girls are commonly stereotyped as sick, helpless, childlike,

dependent, incompetent and asexual, greatly limiting their options and opportunities.

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The invisibility of disabled girls

The biggest 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 disabled girls and education is sparse. This holds true for countries at all levels of development, including the United States (Rousso, 2001b). Research is limited and consists largely of small qualitative studies. Such research, while invaluable in identifying barriers, rarely includes comparisons with both disabled boys and nondisabled girls, making it difficult to identify the joint impact of gender and disability bias.

Informal sources of information for this paper

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 disabled girls, sent out to a broad range of disability, disabled women's and educational organizations in Africa, the Asian Pacific region, Australia, Eastern and Western Europe, Canada and Latin America[1]. Out of the two or so dozen responses received, a few made reference to recent reports on the status of disabled women and girls in their country, and some created reports on disabled girls and

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[1] Lewis et al, 2002, and www.MIUSA.org were among the resources used to generate the list of potential contacts.

education in response to the request. Most simply shared their perceptions on the issue or acknowledged that they had no information.

Lack of programs and policies for disabled girls

Available information demonstrates the dearth of policies and programs that specifically address the educational needs of disabled girls, and the failure of gender equity and disability equity programs to serve them.

In the United States, there are at best a handful of programs specifically designed for girls with disabilities (Froschl, et al, 2001). While there are a range of policies and programs to promote educational equity for girls, these have largely overlooked disabled girls. Similarly while strong disability rights legislation has produced a range of efforts to promote educational equity for disabled children, few have been gender-specific or have included gender specific components to address the unique barriers facing disabled girls.

Beyond the US, little program development is underway for girls with disabilities. For example, the South African Development Community (SADC) notes: "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 the query about policies and programs for disabled girls, what was most frequently mentioned was residential special education centers for girls. While these were clearly examples of gender-segregated schools, there was no evidence that their programs were gender-sensitive, that is, designed with girls' unique needs in mind.

A heterogeneous group

It is important to acknowledge the heterogeneity of disabled girls. Their access to education is affected not only by their gender and disability but also their type of disability, the socioeconomic status of their family, their race/ethnicity, whether they live in an urban or rural area, and a host of other factors.

There is a circular relationship between poverty and disability. Poverty causes disability, particularly in women and girls, who in the face of limited resources are more likely than their male counterparts to be deprived of basic necessities, such as food and medicine (Groce, 1997). Disability, in turn, can contribute to poverty, because of the additional expenses that it can entail.   Thus, disabled girls are more likely to grow up in poor families, a reality that in itself places them at an educational disadvantage. From what we know, disabled girls living in rural areas also have less access to education. In addition, there are some indications that girls with mobility disabilities may have more access to education, particularly community-based education, than 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 certain.

Barriers to education for girls with disabilities

Girls with disabilities face multiple barriers to gaining access to primary and secondary school and to obtaining an equitable education once they are enrolled in school. In many cases, attitudinal barriers—gender bias compounded by disability bias—are key, although transportation, architectural and other types of barriers are also significant.

Cultural bias against women and rigid gender roles

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

While some view gender bias as the major barrier (Fahd, et al, 1997), many others believe disability bias limits disabled girls' opportunities still further.   Families often assume that a disabled daughter 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 become breadwinners, as well as marry. In addition, in many cultures, disability is a source of stigma, so that having a disabled daughter is seen as a double liability that can lead to the devaluation of the whole family. Hence in some families, not only are girls with disabilities denied access to school, but they are also hidden away.

Finally, economics is often 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 not disabled girls, who may be more costly to send to school if they need disability-related equipment or special transportation.

A pervasive problem across countries and cultures

These cultural barriers cut across countries, cultures and levels of development:

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 in the Middle East: "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 disabled girls may have an advantage

Girls with disabilities from middle and upper class families not only are much more likely to attend school than those from poor families, but also may have greater access to both educational and vocational opportunities than their nondisabled counterparts. Assumed unfit to fulfill the traditional female roles of wife and mother, some girls with disabilities 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/programs

- Changing cultural/parental attitudes through the media – In India, disabled women activists such as Dr. Anita Ghai have successfully advocated for more positive images of disabled women in the media (Hershey, 2002). Similar strategies are underway in Egypt and Lebanon (Nagata, 2003).

- Access to role models for parents – In a New York City-based mentoring project for disabled adolescent girls (see below), providing parents with exposure to adult

women with disabilities who had completed their education and were employed

expand their educational and vocational aspirations for their disabled daughters

(Rousso, 2001a). Even young role models can be helpful. A Save the Children,

UK project in Nepal (as reported in Lansdown, in press) found that once some

disabled children in a community went to school, they became role models for

other families. Parents of disabled girls can also serve as role models for other

parents. In a program called Jan Madhyam, or "of the people," a program that

helps the communities deal with problems and to educate children, the fact that

one of the founders of the program was the mother of a disabled daughter, led

other parents to seek services for their disabled daughters/children (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 disabled girls experience violence

within the family, institutions and community at higher rates than their nondisabled peers.

And the violence they face may be more chronic and severe, taking some unique forms,

such as withholding essential care. Part of the explanation may be the disability-

limitations themselves, making it more difficult for some girls to assess violent situations,

to defend themselves and/or flee, or to report incidents of violence. However, negative

attitudes may be a greater barrier. Often perceived as sick, helpless, asexual and

powerless, disabled girls are seen as easy targets. They are also 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 disabled girls, doubting the credibility of the reporter (Rousso, 2001b).

Most available data on violence against people with disabilities focus on adults and children from developed countries, with no disaggregation by gender, although there are also a few studies on disabled women. The results consistently show that disabled people/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).

Sexual/disability harassment and violence in school

Sexual harassment in school is recognized as a widespread problem for nondisabled girls (AAUW, 1993; Stein, 1993). Similarly, there has been growing recognition that disabled students 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/girls with disabilities, suggest that students with disabilities face higher rates of harassment in school than nondisabled students, and disabled girls face higher rates of harassment than disabled boys 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/or disability harassment in school as a barrier to learning for girls with disabilities.

Harassment by teachers and other adults 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 of residential settings as havens, administrative procedures that encourage and condone abuse, dehumanization and detachment that often goes on in institutions, and a subculture that supports abuse.

Safety concerns and overprotectiveness

The risks and realities of sexual abuse limited the educational opportunities for girls with disabilities in a variety of ways. First, according to reports from Kenya and Tanzania, as well as elsewhere, it makes parents reluctant to send their disabled daughters to school, particularly when schools are a 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 disabled daughters are helpless and in need of protection, which translates into keeping these girls not only "safe," but also isolated at home. Attorney/consultant Jenny Kern, in her work with disabled women in Costa Rica, notes that a major issue these women identified as restricting 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 disabled men (personal

communication, 4/25/03). Research from Mexico similarly identified parental

overprotectiveness as a barrier for disabled girls (INMUJERES, 2002).

Consequences of abuse

Once sexual abuse occurs, it can 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 (Rousso, 2001). This often causes adolescent girls with disabilities

to drop out of school, whereas disabled boys rarely drop out of school to assume

parenting responsibilities.

Most recently, the view of disabled girls 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 disabled girls by men with HIV/AIDS, particularly in Africa, putting

them at great risk for the disease (Save the Children, Sweden, 2001; African Women with

Disabilities, 2001).

Finally, there is anecdotal information about disabled daughters being sold into

prostitution by poor families to raise money to meet basic needs, for example in the

Philippines (Groce, 1999). Disabled girls may be seen as "good catches" by prostitution

rings since because of disability-related limitations, some have more difficulty escaping.

Promising strategies/programs

- Violence prevention – Several disabled women's organizations around the world

  have developed advocacy strategies and information to raise public awareness of

issues of violence against disabled women and girls. For example, Women with Disabilities Australia has developed a Women With Disabilities and Violence Information Kit that includes poetry/articles written by disabled women; research findings; annotated bibliographies; resource materials including internet sites; and information on Australian Government initiatives to combat violence (WWDA, 1998).

- Sex education – Sex education can empower disabled girls to make good choices in social/sexual situations and to detect danger. In the developing world, a few small programs seek to provide disabled girls 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). Also, 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. Issues include safety and cultural prohibitions against females traveling unescorted. For girls with disabilities, the barriers may be 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. Cultural

expectations that girls stay close to home may prohibit participation by disabled girls (Fahd et al, 1997).

Inaccessible transportation systems and barriers to walking

Even if families would allow their disabled daughters 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 may also present travel challenges. Walking a mile or two to school may be prohibitive for a girl with a mobility impairment or problematic for a girl who is blind unless assisted by friends or family (Drieger, 1998).

Disabled boys may have the advantage

While 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 is also the cultural expectation that boys will figure out transportation for themselves, which encourages problem solving. Finally, she notes that because friendships are often gender-segregated, disabled boys tend to forge friendships with their nondisabled male peers, where the code is to help one another. Thus, disabled boys can rely on their nondisabled pals to lift them onto inaccessible buses and into barrier-filled school buildings. In contrast, stereotypes about girls, particularly

disabled girls, as fragile and dependent, combined with safety and cultural issues, may cause parents to discourage risk-taking, creative problem solving or reliance on peers.

Assistive devices to get out the door

Boys may also 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 disabled girls.

Transportation for disabled girls 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/cultural reasons. Their transportation costs may also 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/or the need for assistive devices. For families with limited resources, the extra costs may prevent girls with some disabilities from going to school.

- Community-based inclusive education, supported by a range of international policy documents, while of considerable benefit to all disabled students, may prove particularly beneficial to disabled girls by lessening the distance barrier as well as helping to address safety issues (UNESCAP, n.d.-b).

- In Mexico, Whirlwind Women is providing disabled girls 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 disabled girls. As with getting to and from school, differences in male and female socialization in Latin America and probably 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, disabled boys are more likely to "rough it" and/or 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 disabled girl would need help with toileting. Since many cultures emphasize modesty and

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privacy, the need for such personal assistance can be highly problematic; it can also 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 disabled girls might need help to manage, can be a compounding factor, particularly when bathrooms are inaccessible and/or unsanitary. Menstruation can trigger fear for some parents of disabled daughters, 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 parental fears and further discourage school attendance (DWNRO, n.d.; Alicia Contreras, 4/24/03)

Schools may lack the resources or willingness to provide personal assistance, and a disabled girl's need for help in such personal tasks can reinforce negative stereotypes about her potential and raise staff anxieties around sexuality. (Alicia Contreras, 4/24/03)

Promising strategies/programs

- Disability rights legislation that mandates barrier-free educational environments, such as in the US and other developed countries, are an important step in eliminating architectural barriers for all disabled students, but may prove particularly beneficial to girls.

Access to Special Education Services and Supports

To participate in school, students with disabilities may need sign language interpreters, opportunities to learn Braille, modification/flexibility in teaching methods

and assistive devices, as well as physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy and other related services.   In more developed countries, access to services depends on being identified by school personnel as having a disability and/or "special educational needs." Available data suggest that disabled girls are less likely to be referred for and receive needed special education services in school than disabled boys.

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 the 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 ten special schools available for blind students in New Delhi, only one is exclusively for girls and one other is co-ed, whereas the remaining eight 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 US-based study (2001, as cited

in Rousso, 2001b) suggested that girls with disabilities tended to be placed in more restrictive, less inclusive settings than disabled boys.

Promising strategies/programs

- A few teacher education resources on gender and disability issues on both the pre-service and inservice levels are now available in some developed countries, such as the United States (Rousso and Wehmeyer, 2002; Rousso and Wehmeyer, Eds., 2001; Greenberg and Shaffer, 1990). Some of these address not only issues of gender bias in referral to special education services, but all types of gender/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 disabled students.

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 disabled girls.

Invisibility of women with disabilities

In the US, 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 has also been identified as a problem **(**Hastings (n.d.).

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

Promising strategies/programs

- Mentoring/role model projects--In the United States, a few projects have linked disabled girls with disabilities. For example, the Networking Project for Disabled Women and Girls, sponsored by the YWCA of the City of New York, provided a range of intergenerational activities for women and girls with physical disabilities (Rousso, 2001a). These included 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 disabled women 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 have also been developed in other parts of the US, including Chicago (Rousso 2001b)

<u>Vocational courses, counseling and expectations</u>

Reports from varied 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 disabled girls, 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 disabled girls 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 US, found that while students with disabilities of <u>both</u> genders had limited access to math and science courses, skills and knowledge, girls faced some unique barriers. These included doubly negative assumptions by teachers based on disability and gender about disabled girls' ability to do math and science; the tracking of disabled girls to lower level classes; teaching strategies that disadvantaged disabled girls

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by emphasizing speed and competition; disabled girls' more limited opportunities for informal math, science and technology experiences; and disabled girls' lack of access to role models.

Australian and Russian studies report similar findings (Bramley et al, 1990; Iarskaia-Smirnova, 2001).

Promising strategies/programs: Math, science and technology

- In the US, Project GOLD (Girls On-Line with Disabilities) at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, provided a club for girls with physical, sensory, and/or other disabilities in grades 4 to 8 who had an interest in mathematics, science, technology, and/or 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 deaf girls who major in science, math, engineering, and technology in college, and who enter careers in those areas (RIT, 2000).

- The UN agency ECSWA has sought to reduce the gender divide of Information Technology for people with disabilities in the Arab world by giving priority to blind women and girls in its Braille computer and information technology training centers (Nagata, 2003).

Recommendations

<u>More research on school enrollment, outcomes and barriers</u>

We need more reliable data on such basics as the number of disabled girls who are of school age, their school enrollment levels and their educational outcomes. This will require developing a consistent definition of disability as well as disaggregating data on disabled children by gender, and disaggregating data on girls by disability status.

Also, to fill in major research gaps on how gender and disability bias interact while mainstreaming the educational issues of disabled girls, 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 disabled girls 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.).

Disabled women and girls should be active participants and collaborators in planning and implementing research.

<u>Including disability in educational equity policies and programs for girls</u>

All educational policies and programs for girls should be include girls with disabilities in an explicit, fully integrated way (Hastings, n.d.)

Disabled girls should be included in all educational programs serving girls. Research suggests that both disabled and nondisabled girls 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 federal program established in the 1970's to promote educational equity for women and girls, early on made educational equity for women and girls 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 disabled women and girls (Rousso, 2001b).

Internationally, advocacy by disabled women's groups has led to the inclusion of disabled women and girls in documents promoting educational equity for women and girls 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 for children with disabilities

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 blind daughters to school (Fahd, at al, 1997).

We should also learn from those disability programs that have been 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, advocacy by disabled women's organizations has 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 for disabled girls

There is need for widespread research that documents the extent and nature of the violence that disabled girls 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 disabled girls and severe penalties for perpetrators. Educational programs on violence prevention for disabled girls 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 disabled girls in all aspects. For example, many schools in the United States and other developed countries now include courses for students on teasing, bullying, and harassment. The issues of disabled girls should be incorporated into such curricula and disabled students should be included as participants.

Since disabled girls have less access to informal sources of sex education than their nondisabled peers (NICHCY, 1992, as cited in Rousso and Linn, 2001) there is also

need for widespread sex education programs for disabled girls/children, developed in a culturally sensitive way.

Targeted outreach and scholarships

Creative, targeted outreach strategies need to be developed to convince parents that their disabled daughters belong in school. These could build on some of the promising media and role model strategies currently under way to change cultural attitudes toward disabled women, 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 disabled girls 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 disabled students, drawing on the growing body of literature on disabled women and girls (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/disability issues (Rousso and Wehmeyer, 2002; Rousso and Wehmeyer, Eds., 2001; Greenberg and Shaffer, 1990).

There is need for more disabled women educators in both developed and developing countries to provide disabled girls and their parents with role models.

Scholarships should be provided to disabled women to enroll in teacher training programs, and incentives given to school systems for inclusive hiring practices.

<u>More programs for disabled girls</u>

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

- Access to role models, successful adult women with disabilities to help counter stereotypes
- Self-advocacy skills, giving disabled girls the tools to recognize and confront the barriers
- A focus on skills, not deficits, providing girls with opportunities to appreciate and develop their skills, talents and interests rather than to "fix" their limitations
- Engagement of parents to facilitate girls' participation.

Summary

Girls with disabilities are a large, 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. However, available information suggests that these girls 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, devaluing the importance of education for disabled girls

- 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 facilities

- Disabled girls' more limited access to special education services and supports

- Gender and disability bias in curricula, rendering disabled women and girls invisible

- Non-existent or gender and disability biased vocational training and counseling, as well as limited access to math, science and technology, so that disabled girls are ill-prepared for the world of work.

Recommendations to foster greater educational equity for disabled girls include:

- More research on enrollment, outcomes and barriers to education for disabled girls

- Explicit inclusion of disabled girls in all policies and programs for girls and in all policies and programs for disabled children

- A comprehensive approach to violence prevention for disabled girls, including widespread sex education

- Targeted outreach to parents to ensure that disabled girls have access to education.

- Targeted scholarships for disabled girls

- Teacher education that includes training on gender and disability

- Recruitment of disabled women educators

- More programs specifically designed for disabled girls that include access to role models and self-advocacy skills, a focus on assets and parent involvement.

Despite the multiple barriers they face, disabled girls are not passive victims. Many understand only too well the discrimination they face, and at least some of them are prepared to fight. 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" (Rousso, 2001b).

Hopefully, girls with disabilities will not have to take on the world alone, and those who are truly committed to "Education for all" will become their staunchest allies.

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