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Mapping Social Protection Intervention Pathways to Address Barriers to Girls' Education

A Visual Guide

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Introduction

In the 30 years since girls' education was first raised as an international policy priority through the launching of the Education for All movement in 1990, tremendous progress has been made in getting girls into school.[1] UNESCO (2020) reports that since 1995, an additional 180 million girls have been enrolled in school and that, on a global basis, gender parity in primary and secondary education has been reached. Indeed, in many developing countries, of children who enrol in school, girls are now more likely to complete primary school and transition into secondary school than boys.[2] That said, this aggregate picture hides not only regional, national and sub-national diversity (including disparities across income groups), but girls' continuing disadvantage – which has almost certainly been amplified by covid-19.[3] Of the children who are completely denied their right to an education, three-quarters are girls.[4] The 129 million girls who are denied access to school are disproportionately located in the world's poorest and most conflict-affected countries.[5] Furthermore, improvements in enrolment have not always been accompanied by improvements in gender parity.

While gender gaps are closing in many countries (e.g. Nepal) – they are static (e.g. Ethiopia), or even growing in others (e.g. Burkina Faso) – as boys' enrolment is climbing faster than girls'.[6] In addition to participation barriers, girls also face barriers to learning.[7] Psaki et al. (2021) observe that while the learning crisis impacts girls and boys, in many LMICs girls' learning levels tend to be lower than boys', most often because girls are afforded less time to study due to care and domestic work burdens.[8]

Driving recent progress in girls' education has been a multitude of actors and initiatives, working in tandem to identify – and overcome – the barriers that stand between girls and learning.[9] An array of barrier mappings, most of which focus on a similar set of factors (e.g. poverty, child marriage, conflict) but none of which appear to have been undertaken with the specific goal of identifying social protection intervention pathways, are available online. There is also an ever-growing body of evidence that addresses what works to support girls' education and learning.[10] That evidence overwhelmingly concurs that social protection (see Box 1) is

Box 1: Social protection

Social protection consists of a broad array of policies and programmes aimed at reducing poverty and vulnerability across the life course.[a] It includes not only 'pro-poor' instruments such as cash and asset transfers (aimed at supporting household consumption more broadly as well as at supporting access to education and other outcomes), public works programmes, school feeding, and subsidies and fee waivers for accessing services-- but also various instruments aimed at supporting life-course transitions, such as maternity, paternity, and parental leave, childcare and early childhood education, schemes aimed at helping young people transition into work, and old-age pensions.[b] Although enshrined as a right in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), social protection has sometimes been misconceptualised only as a 'safety net' of last resort, aimed only at protecting individuals and households from extreme deprivation. However, as was recognised by UNICEF in its 2012 Social Protection Strategic Framework [c], there is increasing consensus that well designed and comprehensive social protection programming can go beyond protection and promote resilience, support human capital development and empowerment, and even transform the structural inequalities that are the root causes of poverty and social exclusion.[d] To move towards those more transformative ends, core poverty-targeted programming is increasingly coupled with 'plus' programming that is aimed at addressing socio-cultural – including gender – barriers. Examples include life-skills education for children and adolescents, sexual and reproductive health education, 'empowerment' classes for girls and women that seek to raise awareness of rights and gender norms and support the development of agency, and courses addressing masculinities for boys and men so that they can become champions of gender equality.[e]

a. Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2004
b. UNICEF, 2019
c. UNICEF, 2012
d. UNICEF, Innocenti, 2020; Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2004; Molyneux et al., 2016; Holmes and Jones, 2013
e. Cluver et al., 2014; Chakrabarti et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2021; Promundo, 2021; Powell-Williams, 2020; UNICEF, 2019

a valuable tool. It supports girls' participation (enrolment, attendance, and progression) in basic and secondary education in low- and middle-income country (LMIC) contexts around the globe and often also supports their learning.[11] With the caveat that most research has focused on cash transfers (conditional and unconditional and including subsidies for school fees) and school feeding, rather than other forms of social protection, which shapes the evidence base, the primary impact pathway identified by evaluations is reduced household poverty, which results in an improved ability to invest in education. A smaller body of evidence, however, has pinpointed myriad other ways in which social protection can support girls' education. These include freeing girls' time for learning (by providing health insurance that keeps mothers healthy)[12], delaying their sexual debut (and preventing the pregnancies that drive drop out)[13] and shifting social norms about girls' mobility (e.g. by providing them with bicycles)[14]. Critically, research repeatedly underscores that to address the myriad and intersecting economic and social barriers that stand between girls and learning it is necessary to take a multi-sectoral approach.

Recognising the potential for enhancing education outcomes with stronger and more systematic links between social protection and education systems, in this guide we present a thought exercise that builds on existing research with the aim of examining barriers to girls' education (enrolment, attendance and progression) and learning so as to identify potential intervention pathways for social protection and education linkages across the course of childhood and adolescence. The guide includes a set of maps that seek to visually represent, in an accessible way, different types of barriers and how social protection could contribute to tackling these.

We have delineated two interwoven educational outcomes:

1) Participation in education, which encompasses enrolment, attendance and progression
2) Learning.

This relationship is bidirectional. Girls must participate in school to learn and girls who are not learning often have their participation in education truncated.

We have delineated 12 barriers to girls' participation in education:

At the macro level (national/sub-national):
1) Laws, policies, systems and finance that disadvantage girls, especially those from marginalised groups (including girls with disabilities or girls who are refugees, or from ethnic or religious groups that face discrimination, or are pregnant or mothers).

Spanning the macro and meso levels:
2) National and local labour market realities-- such as few, highly segregated, and inequitably paid job options-- that limit girls' ability to translate education into employment and economic empowerment (and thus reduce demand for girls' education).

At the meso level (community and school):
3) Barriers that limit girls' physical access to schooling, including inadequate educational infrastructure (especially in remote areas and for those with disabilities) and transportation as well as violence in the community.
4) Gender norms at the community level, including those that limit support for girls' education, stigmatise menstruation, lead to child marriage, and more broadly prioritise girls' reproductive potential over their productive potential and broader human rights (including social and economic sanctions for girls and families who transgress).
5) Peer pressure, which while shaped by broader community norms can evolve quickly and in surprising ways.
6) Discriminatory beliefs and behaviours that leave girls with disabilities or those from marginalised groups excluded from school.
7) Poor school environments, where infrastructure (including for menstrual hygiene management) and human resources are inadequate and teacher and peer violence are common.

At the micro level (household and girl):
8) Poverty and financial barriers, which include real and opportunity costs that can limit girls' enrolment, attendance, and progression as girls are truant for days, weeks and months.
9) Physical health barriers, including malnutrition, illness and disability (much

of which in LMICs is the result of poor nutrition and inadequate healthcare).

10) Mental ill health, which often manifests as a spill-over effect of household and community violence (and limits girls' interest in and engagement with education).

11) Barriers linked to reproductive biology (and the limited services and supports that help girls deal with these), including menstruation, pregnancy and motherhood.

12) Limited aspirations for education on the part of caregivers, girls and marital families, which are shaped by poverty and limited opportunities – including for quality education, gainful employment and adult marriage – available in the community.

We have identified 10 barriers to girls' learning—which overlap with barriers to participation, may prevent boys from learning as well, but are also often gendered:

At the school level:

1) Low number of contact/instructional hours, resulting from the school calendar, daily school schedule and teacher absenteeism.

2) Poor-quality 'soft' resources, including teachers who are poorly trained or violent; pedagogies, curricula, and learning materials that are not child-friendly, sensitive to multicultural contexts, gender-responsive or disability-inclusive; and disciplinary practices that condone violence.

3) Inadequate school infrastructure and equipment, including school buildings that are poorly adapted, insufficient books and desks, and lack of school water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities (including menstrual hygiene facilities).

4) Violence and discrimination at school, perpetrated by both teachers and peers and including gender-based violence as well as discrimination and stigma directed at those with disabilities and those from marginalised groups.

At the household and girl level:

5) Limited capacity and/or school readiness (e.g. cognition damaged by malnutrition or malaria and inadequate stimulation in early childhood).

6) Irregular/distracted attendance (i.e. the barriers to participation above).

7) Physical illness, malnutrition or hunger—which even when not severe enough to keep girls at home can prevent them from learning.

8) Poor mental health, which can limit attention and retention.

9) Limited (natal and marital) family support for education (both in terms of provision of learning materials and light to study, and attitudes towards education).

10) Limited personal aspirations for education, shaped by other barriers at the household and community level.

For this visual guide, we have created eight maps aimed at supporting both 'wide angle' and 'micro' perspectives:

These maps aim to delineate areas where existing evidence suggests that social protection does play an impactful role in supporting girls' access to education and learning as well as areas where social protection might be leveraged for impact.

'Wide angle' maps (which focus on girls' participation and learning):

• A bird's eye view of the above barriers to participation and learning that includes sub-barriers (but not social protection intervention pathways). This is Map 1 in the guide.

• A pair of maps that detail barriers to girls' learning (and social protection intervention pathways), because learning first requires participation. This is Map 8 in the guide and has been laid out on two pages to improve readability.

Micro maps (which focus on girls' participation in education):

• Poverty and financial barriers – including sub-barriers as well as social protection intervention pathways. This is Map 2 in the guide.

• Barriers that limit girls' physical access to schooling– including sub-barriers as well as social protection intervention pathways. This is Map 3 in the guide.

• Physical and mental health barriers – including sub-barriers as well as social protection intervention pathways. This is Map 4 in the guide.
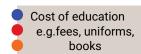
- Community gender norms and peer pressure – including sub-barriers as well as social protection intervention pathways. This is Map 5 in the guide.
- Barriers linked to girls' reproductive biology and the limited resources that girls have to deal with these --including sub-barriers as well as social protection intervention pathways. This is Map 6 in the guide.
- Aspirations for education – including sub-barriers as well as social protection intervention pathways. This is Map 7 in the guide, because it is important to first understand the factors and barriers that shape and limit aspirations.

Note that while these micro maps capture barriers that are in real life deeply interwoven, we have attempted to avoid as much interweaving as possible, in order to better focus the readers' attention on each map's core framing.

We have taken account of three 'age brackets'[1] in conceptualising these barriers:

1) Barriers that potentially impact girls' enrolment and attendance from the earliest days of formal education, which may or may not (depending on context) include pre-primary school (e.g. disability or school accessibility). In the maps, these are marked with a blue dot. 🔵
2) Barriers that tend to become more important as girls grow up and move through primary school (e.g. school quality and poverty). In the maps, these are marked with a red dot. 🔴
3) Barriers that become more important as girls experience the physical and social transitions related to adolescence (e.g. menstruation,

keeps some girls from ever enrolling but is more likely to lead girls to drop out over time, as the real and opportunity costs of education grow.[15] Costs can be especially high for adolescent girls, given that secondary schools in many countries are fee based or require expensive transport/ boarding (because schools are not local). These barriers have three dots: blue, red and orange.

🔵 Cost of education
🔴 e.g.fees, uniforms,
🟠 books

Note that dots are applied differently across maps. Some barriers have sub-barriers that share age-brackets. For example, barriers that limit girls' physical access to school (educational infrastructure, transportation, and community violence) are all important from the earliest days of enrolment, tend to become more important over time, and are particularly important in adolescence. Because the age brackets are the same across sub-barriers, the dots are placed on the main barrier rather than on the sub-barriers. Other barriers have sub-barriers that have different age brackets. For example, poverty and financial barriers include both the real cost of education (which is important from the earliest days of enrolment) and opportunity costs due to forgone child marriage (which does not typically become important until adolescence). Because of these age bracket differences, the dots are placed not on the main barrier, but on sub-barriers.

We have considered three intervention pathways:

1) Core social protection mechanisms such as cash