

Level The Field Working Paper - No. 4

WHAT ABOUT THE BOYS? HOW BACKLASH AGAINST GIRLS' EDUCATION IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO DO BETTER

A work in progress aiming to stimulate dialogue and new ways of thinking around the tensions, debates and challenges facing girls' education.



How can we make the ‘what about the boys’ debate more productive?

If you have ever worked on a girls’ education programme for any length of time, there is undoubtedly one question that you will have heard – be it from Ministry of Education actors, teachers, parents, students, researchers, donors, even your own colleagues – which is, ‘what about the boys?’.

At best, this question comes from a place of curiosity or scepticism. At worst, it is rooted in exasperation, resentment or backlash. Arguably, such stances are underpinned by observations or data that have shown that girls have caught up with boys, and in some cases, are doing better. These interpretations have led to a perception that focusing on girls in education programming is having a negative effect on boys – one that overlooks and disadvantages them. At this point, any discussion prompted by the ‘what about the boys’ question has the potential to descend into an uncomfortable impasse - one that can feel binary and charged with injustice.

The aim of this working paper is not to bemoan this question, nor the debate and impasse that often results. Rather, I aim to reflect on the process and assumptions that often lead to this impasse.

I come from a position of having had to respond to the question myself and have found that clarifying a few key points can be incredibly helpful. Thus, I would like to pose some questions to girls’ education advocates (and all other interested parties) before they embark on the next ‘what about the boys’ debate. These questions aim to facilitate greater clarity during discussion, in order to help identify gaps in analyses, make rationale more compelling, and support a common goal amongst all parties.

Overall, it is understandable, reasonable and quite frankly necessary to ask, ‘what

about the boys?’ Which makes it all the more important to ensure that the related discussions and debates are as helpful and productive as possible. It is hoped that this working paper will help with this end.



Question #1: Who is asking the question?

The 'what about the boys' question can come from a variety of people and perspectives. As such, it might be helpful to **consider where the 'asker' is located within the education system, as this often indicates how their perspective may be motivating the question. It also gives an idea of how best to frame a response.**

For example, at the global level, actors such as donors, economists and statisticians, amongst others, may be looking at the 'big picture'. When someone from this group asks, 'what about the boys', they may be focused on global targets, as well as getting a compelling return on their investment needed to reach these targets. They may also be looking at global-level data that show that gender gaps in access and learning have significantly reduced.

At the country level, actors such as Ministry of Education (MoE) officials may be looking at the national-level picture/data, often with limited budgets that never seem to meet all the priorities. When someone from this group asks, 'what about the boys', they may also be influenced by their own experience and observations of education in the country – although this varies, it is not uncommon for MoE actors to come from privileged groups in which they've observed girls to have excelled.

At the school and community level, when parents, teachers and boys themselves ask 'what about the boys', it often comes from a personal perspective - one that is not rooted in data sets, but rather from observations and a sense of unfairness that comes when a programme is seen to be giving more resource, attention and support to girls over boys.

Being mindful of who is asking 'what about the boys?', and how their worldview may be motivating their question, will start to point to how to best frame a response. The following questions and some reflections on them, aim to help with this effort.



Question #2: Which girls and boys are we referring to?

Most people understand what is meant by ‘girls’ and ‘boys’ in conversation, however, when discussing girls and boys within the realm of educational opportunities, a bit more clarity may be helpful. This is because **there is a vast spectrum of advantage and disadvantage that girls and boys experience both inside and outside of school** (see figure 1).¹ At one end of the spectrum, there are girls/boys who have all the opportunities they need to realise their full learning potential. At the other end are girls/boys who have very few opportunities, if any. The majority of the population within a context usually falls somewhere in between.

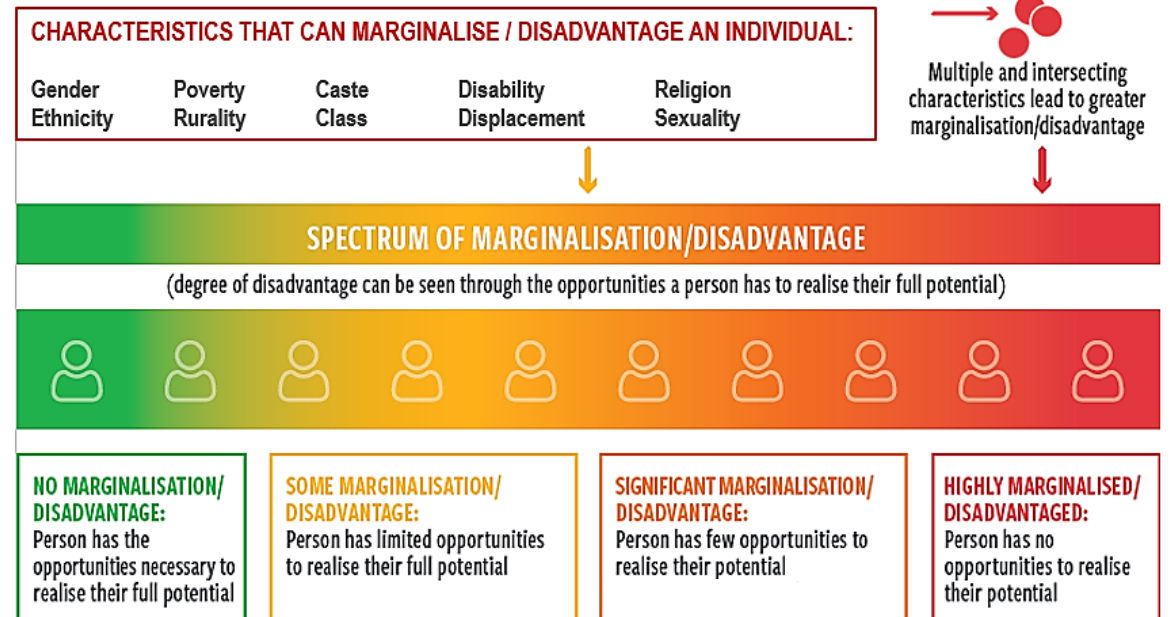
When the question of ‘what about the boys’ is asked, it often refers to highly disadvantaged boys and their concerning outcomes, such as not learning, dropping out or failing to progress. Generally, these outcomes are implicitly compared to the general population, rather than to girls from the same highly marginalised group. This is not to say that these boys aren’t facing serious disadvantages due to poverty, rurality, caste, or displacement, amongst others; however, within these marginalised groups, any privileges that exist are rarely distributed equally amongst men and women, and boys and girls. **This is due to unequal gender norms, which disadvantage girls even further. Thus, those who are truly overlooked, are generally the marginalised boys’ sisters.**

Given this situation, how can we make the ‘what about the boys’ debate more productive? If the ‘asker’ resides at a global or national level and marginalised boys are the subject in question, it may be worth asking who these boys are being compared to - girls from the general population? Or girls from the same marginalised group? The former provides a less accurate comparison as population data will include children from more privileged ends of the spectrum. **In order to more fully, and fairly, see who is being left behind, comparisons need to be made with girls from the same background as the boys in question. By doing so, it is likely that disadvantages will be further magnified for girls due to unequal gender norms.**

The best way to demonstrate this is to look at educational outcomes/data that have been sex-disaggregated by the poorest wealth quintile, rural location, and any other background characteristics available. At the school level, this disaggregated analysis could also be had by comparing disadvantage between boys and girls from within the same family, as opposed to the broader school or community population.

It should be noted that this is not meant to be a competition of disadvantage. However, in order to better debate the point of who is the most overlooked and thus might need to be prioritised, it may be helpful to be clear about exactly *which* boys and girls are being referred to, and whether the comparison being made is fair.

Figure 1. The spectrum of advantage/disadvantage across a population of girls and boys



Question #3: What do we mean by ‘girls are doing better’?

There are a number of indicators that are used to gauge progress in education, such as enrolment, test results, and completion of primary/secondary, amongst others. For some of these indicators, global and national-level data appear to show that girls have caught up with boys and in some cases, are doing better. Before celebrations begin, it may be worth asking: **1) which girls and boys are not included in these data?; and 2) are these indicators giving the whole (or enough of the) picture?**

Generally speaking, most education indicator data that is reported by MoEs automatically excludes girls and boys who have dropped out of school because they are no longer in the MoE’s remit - they are ostensibly invisible to the education system and its data. Although there are laudable efforts to address this situation,² we should be mindful of these gaps. **Global/national education data only capture progress for children who are enrolled in school, which include those at the more privileged end of the spectrum, but not those at the other end who have dropped out.** This is not to dispute the significant gains made by girls within these populations. Indeed, there are many girls who feature at the top of national exam league tables. However, we cannot use these exemplars to generalise across *all* girls. This is because these exemplars likely come from the more advantaged end of the spectrum, which is not representative; and secondly, because there are large numbers of out-of-school girls not being counted as part of the general population of girls.

In addition to considering who is missing in the data, **it is also worth considering what age the data are reflecting. That’s because unequal gender norms** - such as girls doing excessive domestic chores, being vulnerable to sexual harassment/violence, or being married early - **will have more of an effect on girls’ educational outcomes as they get older.** Thus, indicators taken at the primary level such as foundational literacy/numeracy, are generally more reflective of a level field between girls and boys. From the ages of 5 to 7 years, young girls will experience less gender norm disadvantage and as such, can do as well as or better than boys on assessments for early grade reading and maths. However, as these girls get older and unequal

gender norms take hold, their outcomes will start to decline or not continue to be developed. For example, in Benin, 47.25% of girls achieved a minimum proficiency in reading at the end of primary; however, in that same year 47.02% of girls dropped out of school after they finished primary. The implication is that although a large proportion of girls flourished at a young age, this did not continue throughout their lives.³

This begs the question, should we be striving for parity of outcomes or parity of enabling factors? As noted, parity of educational outcomes have the potential to mask things like exclusion and life stage. A more telling picture would be whether girls/boys from the same background are afforded equal levels of power, respect, participation, resources and safety, as these are just some of the enabling factors that allow a person to realise their full learning potential. However, as noted earlier, gender norms often underpin unequal treatment of girls, particularly in marginalised groups, which can lead to a very limited share of enabling factors and thus, poorer outcomes.

Given this situation, how can we be more productive when someone states, ‘girls are doing better now, so what about the boys?’ At the global/national/community levels, when conclusions and generalisations like these are made, it might be helpful to interrogate the data/evidence that underpin these interpretations. Who is missing from the data? Is the exemplar representative? Will outcomes for young girls look the same in 5 to 10 years? It may also be helpful to note that educational indicators are only one part of the picture. **If we really want to see if girls are ‘doing better’, it may be worth asking whether they have equal or more power, respect, participation, resource and safety than boys from a similar background.**

Unfortunately, this won’t likely be the case and what will be needed are more solutions to tackle the complex and unconscious gender norms that result in girls and boys being afforded different levels of these enabling factors. [This paper](#), amongst others, has started this process, as it scrutinises how gender norms operate and provides concrete entry points, strategies and pathways for change.⁴

Question #4: What is intended when programmes focus on girls?

Generally speaking, when education programming has a focus on a particular disadvantaged group, such as refugees or children with a disability, the aim is often to make up for their disadvantages by providing extra support, particularly in contexts where there is none. One could argue that this extra support is an attempt to level the field for children experiencing severe levels disadvantage. Such an aim is no different for marginalised girls. However, this aim is not always clear because: 1) the short-hand term 'girls' education' suggests *all* girls (which implicitly includes those at the more privileged end of the spectrum who do not necessarily need support)⁵; 2) even if the term '*marginalised girls*' education' were used, there would still need to be significant clarification regarding what is meant by 'marginalised'.⁶

So when 'what about the boys' is asked, **one way to frame the aim behind a girls' education initiative is to take out the word 'girls' and ask the following:**

Do all the children in this context have the same opportunities to realise their full learning potential? If not, is that what we would ultimately like to see - everyone realising and contributing to their full potential? If so, who has the most disadvantage or 'unequal playing field'? Should they be prioritised?

Framing a (girls') education initiative as one that tries to level an unequal playing field, starts to signal that it is not inherently aiming to privilege girls to the detriment of boys. Rather, any extra support is trying to make up for multiple layers of disadvantage, which includes unequal gender norms that tend to disadvantage girls further.

Ideally, all education programming should aim to 1) address the disadvantages that unequal gender norms create for girls, particularly those from marginalised groups, so that they have a level playing field with boys in general; 2) address the disadvantages that unequal gender norms create for marginalised boys, so that they too have a level playing field with more privileged boys and girls; and 3) elevate the playing field for all, without leaving anyone behind. It should be noted that many interventions within point

1, such as implementing gender responsive pedagogy and reducing violence, will benefit everyone. It should also be noted that points 1 and 2 start to broach an additional impasse that is rooted in assumptions that reaching the most marginalised is too complex, too expensive, and not scalable, amongst others. Such tensions are intensified in times of limited budgets and demands for returns on investments. I attempt to address these tensions in a [forthcoming working paper](#).

Overall, when girls and boys have an equal playing field, both in education and life in general, everyone will benefit. The multiplier effect that comes with gender equality means that families will be better off, people will be healthier, there will be less violence and more security, and economies will develop.⁷ Which makes levelling the field a goal well worth aiming for.



The way forward: An opportunity to debate better

In the midst of ever increasingly frustrating debates, it is hoped that these reflections on the process and assumptions surrounding the ‘what about the boys’ debate have created an opportunity to overcome backlash and find more productive ways forward. Suffice it to say, it is extremely important to acknowledge critical and contrary perspectives; but it is also necessary to show the gaps and omissions within them. This working paper has highlighted some ideas that will help to do so. In summary:

- 1. There is a spectrum of advantage/disadvantage that indicates the degree to which girls and boys have the opportunity to realise their full learning potential.** At the ‘privileged’ end of the spectrum, girls/boys have all the opportunities they need; at the other end, girls/boys have very few, if any. If a select group of girls or boys are highlighted as an exemplar - either for doing well or doing poorly – it is not correct to use these exemplars to generalise or compare across the rest of the population. Disadvantaged boys or successful girls need to be compared to the opposite sex with the *same* background characteristics (i.e., those at the same point on the spectrum). Otherwise, any gender gaps that are being highlighted (or disputed) are inaccurate and not entirely fair.
- 2. Temporarily taking out the term ‘girl’ or ‘gender’ from a programme/policy title can make the aim clearer.** If the aim is indeed to level the field for those with greater disadvantage, so that they have more opportunity to realise their full potential, then prioritisation doesn’t necessarily start with girls, but rather with those at the most disadvantaged end of the spectrum. Generally, this will entail marginalised groups; however, it is imperative to look *within* these groups, as unequal gender norms will be magnified and will always disadvantage girls further than boys.
- 3. Reframing girls’ education *interventions* as ways to level the field may help mitigate interpretations of unfairness.** Unequal gender norms - like early/forced

marriage, sexual harassment, or prioritising sons if family poverty is paramount - put some girls at a significant disadvantage, which is why girls’ education interventions try to address these. However, activities are not always explained in this way. So, when bursaries, uniforms, or books are provided to address the opportunity cost for a poor family to send their daughter to school, there is often an interpretation that *all* girls are receiving material goods and preferential treatment *over* boys. Those implementing such activities should take great care to explain/frame them; as well as note that a number of girls’ education interventions, like gender responsive pedagogy and reducing violence, significantly benefit boys too.

- 4. Although macro-level education data and indicators are important, they do not provide a complete picture.** Be aware of who is missing in the data (i.e., excluded children) and that the data are a snapshot in time (that may not capture how disadvantage develops with age). This is not to say that these data/indicators are not valuable, but they should also not be valorised. This is particularly important when the data indicate parity. Given the blind spots within global/national data, there is the potential for people to feel a false sense of security or complacency when it comes to girls and/or gender equality. If we truly want to see if girls and boys have parity in realising their full learning potential, we should instead look at the degree to which they are afforded equal amounts of enabling factors, such as power, respect, resource, participation and safety.

That said, when/if girls and boys do indeed have equal levels of power, respect, resource, participation and safety – no matter what their background – everyone will benefit, on multiple levels. However, the process of levelling the field in order to get to this point is not always clear and can unfortunately be misunderstood. Which is why engaging in productive ‘what about the boys’ debates are imperative. Hopefully, this paper has helped with this end.

References:

1. Additional uses and versions of the marginalisation spectrum can be found in the GEC Learning Brief, '[Educating girls: making sure you reach the most marginalised](#)'; the GEC/FCDO Think Piece, '[Foundational Learning for All: Including the most marginalised is possible, pragmatic and a priority](#)'; and the LTF Working Paper, '[Who are the most marginalised? Unpacking the spectrum of marginalisation](#)'
2. [The People's Action for Learning \(PAL\) Network](#) conducts data collection and learning assessments at the household level, which allows for the inclusion of children who may not be enrolled in school.
3. FCDO (2023) [G7 Global Objectives Report](#). London: Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office
4. Tao, S. (2024) '[Tackling the toughest barriers for girls: Social Norms](#)'. London: Level the Field
5. Many girls' education initiatives do not explicitly note that they focus on *marginalised* girls – in such cases, perhaps more clear framing is needed. However, some initiatives focus on the general population of girls (which could include the most privileged) in the name of gender equality – in these cases, perhaps more analytical clarity and framing would be helpful.
6. Tao, S. (2024) '[Who are the most marginalised? Unpacking the spectrum of marginalisation](#)'. London: Level the Field
7. Ravenga, A. and Shetty, S. (2012) [Empowering women is smart economics](#). Finance & Development, Vol. 49, No. 1

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