

Level The Field Working Paper - No. 1

# WHO ARE THE MOST MARGINALISED? UNPACKING THE SPECTRUM OF MARGINALISATION

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



# ‘Marginalisation’: An intuitive term with multiple interpretations

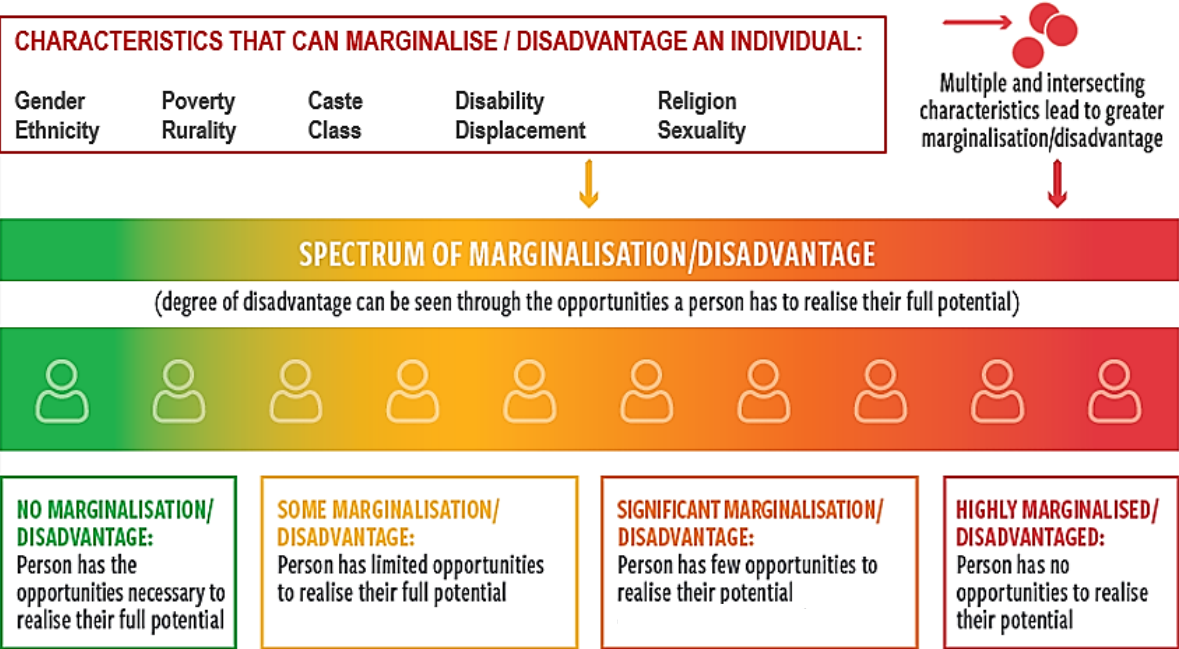
A look through the myriad of reports, websites and projects related to international development (including this one) and you’ll find a common phrase: ‘the most marginalised’. It is an evocative phrase, prompting images of people living with the greatest odds against them. But these ‘people’ and their ‘odds’ can vary widely, depending on interpretation. Thus, it is helpful to have a shared view of marginalisation, what leads to it and the degrees to which it occurs.

Generally speaking, there are a number of identity characteristics that, depending on context, can contribute to how a person is treated within the home, community and society at large; particularly with regard to the power, respect, recognition, resources and safety they are afforded. In many contexts, social norms underpin the degree to which different identity characteristics are valued. If a person possesses characteristics that are *not* valued by others (often implicitly or unconsciously), the effects can entail limited levels of power, respect, recognition, resources and safety within their home, community and society. This type of treatment can be viewed as marginalisation, which can lead to greater challenges for that person and ultimately, poorer outcomes in the long-term.

Characteristics such as poverty, rurality, being from an ethnic minority or ‘low’ caste, having a disability or being displaced, can in many contexts, lead to limited levels of power, resources and safety, amongst others. Often within such groups, the scant privileges that remain are rarely distributed equally amongst men and women, and boys and girls. This is due to unequal gender norms, which put women and girls at an even greater disadvantage than their male peers.

Figure 1 illustrates several characteristics that when combined, can lead to degrees of marginalisation that lie on a spectrum.<sup>1</sup> To the left is a person with characteristics that do not lead to any form of marginalisation - which can be viewed as privilege - in that they have the power, respect, recognition, resources and safety necessary to realise their full potential. At the other end is a person with multiple characteristics that put them at a severe disadvantage and limit their ability to realise their full potential. In between lies the majority of people who experience some form of disadvantage, but to differing degrees.

Figure 1. How intersecting characteristics can lead to differing degrees of marginalisation

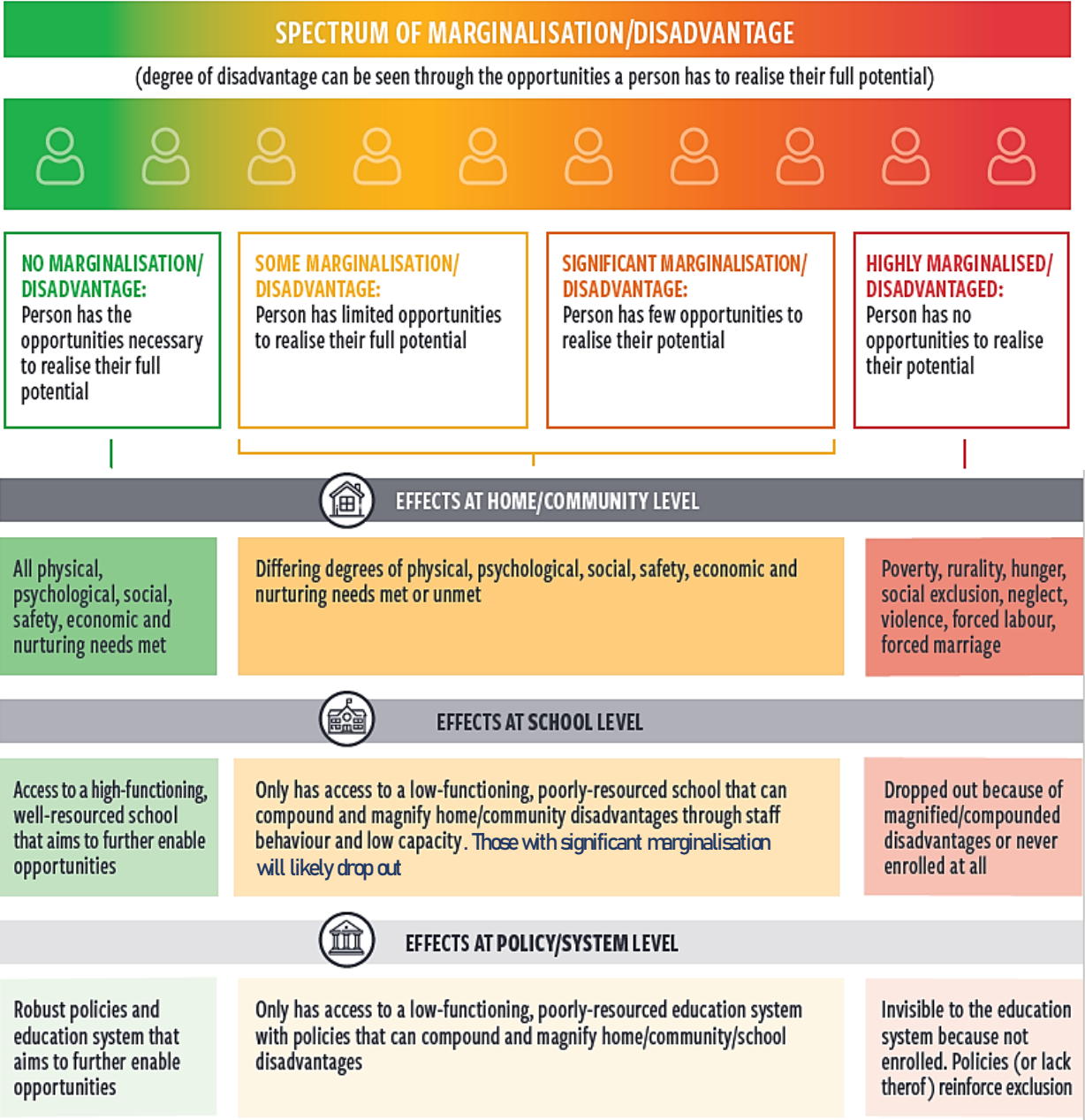


# Levels of disadvantage in education

The figure to the right illustrates how degrees of marginalisation with regard to education can occur at multiple levels. For example, at the home and community level, a child from a poor, rural and socially excluded caste or ethnic group will often have many physical, psychological and safety needs unmet, which will affect their ability to realise their full learning potential. If that child is a girl, unequal gender norms will further compound this situation as a brother’s needs and education will often be prioritised if family funds are limited.

At the school level, a girl from a poor, rural, socially excluded group will likely have access to a low-functioning school, which will limit her learning potential not only through poor teaching and a lack of resources, but also through discrimination and bias by school actors, as schools are often a reflection of the norms within which they are located.<sup>2</sup> These significantly marginalised girls are the most at-risk of dropping out. Girls experiencing even greater marginalisation will have already dropped out early or in some cases, will have never been enrolled in school in the first instance.

The disadvantages experienced at the school level often reflect, and/or are compounded by, issues at the policy and system level. For example, poor teaching and a lack of resources are a result of MoE training and budgets. Logistical issues at the system level will further limit the number of resources and teachers deployed to rural schools. Moreover, budgeting and policies (or lack thereof) will also reflect the norms and biases that influence ministry actors, particularly with regard to caste, disability and teenage pregnancy.





# How the marginalisation spectrum can support analysis and planning

The spectrum presented in this brief working paper is not intended to overwhelm, but instead aims to support analytical clarity in a number of ways:

1. It can help highlight the range of marginalised children currently within the education system (see circle 1 in figure 2). It also demonstrates that although a poorly-functioning school can disadvantage all the children within it, this disadvantage lies on a spectrum in which those with multiple and intersecting characteristics will be affected further. These children could be deemed 'the most marginalised' within a school context.
2. It can also highlight the range of marginalised children that sit outside of the education system (circle 2). Due to the significant disadvantages that these children experience at home and in the community, they have already dropped out or never entered school. And as a result of not being enrolled, these children are invisible to school and MoE data, budgets and planning. They could thus be considered 'the most marginalised' overall.
3. With more analytical clarity regarding how, why and to what degree children are marginalised, clearer solutions and pathways for change can be developed. For example, precise theories of change can be designed for those most marginalised *within* and *outside* of the education system. For the former, activities would aim to stem the number of girls and children dropping-out, whilst inputs for the latter would support the transition of out-of-school children either back into school or into an improved quality of life.<sup>3</sup>

It goes without saying that multiple and intersecting forms of marginalisation is complex and that adequately addressing all types of disadvantage will remain a challenge. However, with a clearer articulation of marginalisation and the degrees to which it occurs, more people might share a similar interpretation of how/why/ where it occurs, and hopefully be prepared to do something about it.

Figure 2. The differing degrees of marginalisation within and outside the education system



## 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’](#) as well as the GEC/FCDO Think Piece, [‘Foundational Learning for All: Including the most marginalised is possible, pragmatic and a priority’](#).
2. Peppin-Vaughn, R (2007), ‘Measuring capabilities: an example from girls’ school’. In M. Walker and E. Unterhalter (eds), Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach and Social Justice in Education (pp. 109-130). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
3. Level The Field has developed two theories of change – one for the most marginalised girls within education systems, and one for those who remain outside of the system. See [‘Revisiting the five dimensions of out-of-school children and concrete pathways for change’](#) for more details.

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