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Reducing the social exclusion of girls

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Across the globe, girls are systematically excluded from participation in social, economic, and political life. The absence of girls in these arenas has implications not only for the young women themselves but also for society as a whole, exacerbating poverty and perpetuating disparities in health, education, and economic achievement. Internationally, this marginalization makes it difficult or impossible for some countries to achieve society-wide goals, such as the Millennium Development Goals identified by the United Nations as benchmarks to reduce poverty.

Female social exclusion begins early in life and is especially notable at life transitions such as puberty and marriage. Exclusion is also evident in many of the obstacles girls encounter during the transition to adulthood. Adolescent girls encounter barriers to entering and staying in school, finding work, making friends, learning life skills, accessing health services, and participating in civic life. In some parts of Asia, sex-selective abortion and female infanticide reduce girls' chances of even starting life (Drèze and Sen 1989).

For a number of years, the Population Council has been studying the causes and effects of girls' social exclusion in developing countries, with projects in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Which girls are most excluded?

Girls' exclusion is most pronounced in countries that are extremely poor and those where women have been historically marginalized (such as in the Middle East). In many developing countries, the interaction of gender, culture, and poverty underlies female social exclusion. Recent estimates indicate that three-fourths of the 60 million girls aged 6–11 who are not in school belong to ethnic, religious, linguistic, racial, or other minorities (Lewis and Lockheed 2006). Girls who belong to these minorities suffer disproportionately relative to their male peers and to girls in the mainstream population. For example, among seven-year-olds in Guatemala in 2000, only 54 percent



Photo: Nick Swan

Because mobility is restricted for many girls, the primary requirement for social inclusion is a safe, supportive space where they can interact with peers and mentors.

of indigenous girls were enrolled in school, compared with 71 percent of indigenous boys and 75 percent of non-indigenous children. Among extremely poor indigenous girls the proportion enrolled was 43 percent (Hallman et al. 2007b).

In some instances, obstacles raised by gender, poverty, and ethnicity are compounded by geographic exclusion—being from “the wrong side of town” or residing in a remote community. Girls tend to have limited mobility relative to their male counterparts, so services and opportunities that are not in a girl's immediate neighborhood can be far out of reach. Girls may also lack the financial means to travel safely to access employment or educational opportunities.

Girls' social exclusion is a barrier to development

The social exclusion of girls perpetuates poverty at the individual and household levels by denying them access to education, services, resources, decisionmaking, and markets. Expectations and actual experiences of exclusion and discrimination can cause feelings of powerlessness among those left out, which may in turn result in low self-esteem and diminished

aspirations for the future. Research has shown that these feelings can lead to lower achievement among members of excluded groups. For instance, a study in India found that young people from low-caste and high-caste backgrounds performed equally well on tests when information about their caste was not disclosed. When castes were publicly announced, however, the low-caste children performed worse than their high-caste peers (DFID 2005). If parents expect that their daughters will be discriminated against in the labor market, they may choose not to invest in their education. As one young girl participating in a Council project in Guatemala (Colom et al. 2004; Dries-Daffner et al. 2007) noted,

At times it's just because we're women that they won't pay for our education, and they say that only boys should [study], because they're more intelligent. Some people tell my father, "Don't support her studies because she won't do what you want, you'll only waste your money and she'll get married and won't finish school, you better not send her to school."

In areas severely affected by HIV and AIDS, expectations of a shortened lifespan may serve to discount the value of the future and reduce human capital investments. Saving for the future or forgoing fulfilling activities today in order to be healthy and well-educated tomorrow may not seem sensible to girls threatened by HIV/AIDS. Conversely, results from South Africa indicate that girls with more future-oriented attitudes (e.g., those who have financial goals and are saving) are more knowledgeable about HIV and more likely to practice HIV-prevention behaviors (Hallman et al. 2007a).

The social exclusion of girls has consequences at the country level. Even when national economies grow, excluded groups are left behind. Social isolation and relative economic deprivation are associated with poorer mental health, especially among females, and can further reduce the ability of excluded individuals to be productive members of society (Patel and Kleinman 2003). As the gap between the poor and non-poor increases, poverty becomes deeper and more intractable.

Underlying causes of girls' exclusion

Whether intentional (due to tradition or discrimination) or unintentional (due to a desire to protect girls from harm or threats to their chastity), the outcome is the same: girls' lives are in every way more limited than those of boys.

Starting at an early age, girls residing in the same communities and households as boys are more excluded from investments and opportunities. In many settings, puberty is the time

when gender role expectations become differentiated and intensified. Boys experience more freedom of decisionmaking and mobility, while the movement of girls outside the domestic sphere becomes increasingly circumscribed (Mensch et al. 2003), often because of parents' fear of male attention, the temptation of unsanctioned activities, and the potential damage to their daughters' reputations (Brady 2003; Colom et al. 2004). That boys are given the bulk of household attention, resources, and freedom is linked to the perception that boys contribute more to the household economy and that they can be counted on for old-age security of parents. In contrast, girls are perceived to contribute less in terms of their labor and income-generating capacity, and, in some contexts, are even seen as a drain on household finances because of the costs associated with their marriage. The extra investment in boys is evident in their achievements relative to girls in education, literacy, and participation in the labor force.

Population Council research provides evidence from a number of settings that adolescent girls lack protective social networks and support. In Allahabad, India, 93 percent of boys but only 22 percent of girls reported being able to travel unaccompanied to visit a relative (Sebastian et al. 2004). In the urban slums of Nairobi, two-thirds of boys, compared with only one-third of girls, reported having a safe place to meet same-sex friends (Erulkar and Chong 2005). Among adolescents in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, boys reported an average of 4.7 friends compared to girls with 2.7 friends (Erulkar et al. 2004a). In KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, 76 percent of boys versus 48 percent of girls reported having many friends. Poorer girls reported having the fewest friends, and even girls in the richest wealth quintile had fewer friends than boys in the poorest quintile (Hallman and Diers 2004). In Ethiopia and South Africa, girls were significantly more likely to feel insecure in their neighborhood and to have experienced harassment; they were also less likely to report they had sources of support during times of crisis (a place to stay or someone to borrow money from). In rural areas of both Guatemala and Ethiopia, boys were much more likely than girls to have engaged in social events (Colom et al. 2004; Erulkar et al. 2004b). In rural Upper Egypt, the only non-familial social outlet for girls is attending school (Brady et al. 2007).

For many girls, marriage is the only socially acceptable avenue for exiting a poor and overly protective natal home, and many girls eagerly anticipate marriage with the view that it will expand their social horizons (Colom et al. 2004; Brady et al. 2007). This expectation frequently does not materialize, however. Council research shows that married girls have

more limited peer networks (Amin, Mahmud, and Huq 2002), less social mobility and freedom (Erulkar et al. 2004b; Santhya and Jejeebhoy 2003), more limited access to media and other sources of information (Erulkar et al. 2004b; Amin, Mahmud, and Huq 2002), and lower educational attainment (Mensch 2005) than their unmarried age mates. Compared with women who marry later, married adolescents have husbands much older than themselves (Clark, Bruce, and Dude 2006; Mensch, Bruce, and Greene 1998). They also have less freedom of movement (Amin, Mahmud, and Huq 2002), less autonomy and decisionmaking in household and reproductive decisions (Santhya and Jejeebhoy 2003), and, in some settings, increased risk for gender-based violence (Kishor and Johnson 2004), sexually transmitted infections, and HIV infection (Clark, Bruce, and Dude 2006).

Promising strategies for including adolescent girls

Although there is still much work to be done, several approaches are proving beneficial for girls. Because mobility is restricted for many girls, especially at the approach of puberty, the primary requirement for their social inclusion is a safe, supportive space where they can interact with peers and mentors, strengthen their social networks, and enjoy freedom of expression and movement. Safe spaces for girls can serve as locations for any number of beneficial services, including financial and business education, health interventions, assertiveness training, and skills building for sexual negotiation. Safe spaces also act as a foundation for building girls' capacity to organize and mobilize themselves.

To fully participate in civic life, girls need access to documentation, such as ID cards and other government documents. They also require access to health and other youth-oriented services. The results of several Council studies reveal that the most socially isolated adolescents are the least likely to have contacts with youth centers, adolescent-friendly clinics, and peer education programs (Lardoux and Jones 2006). Ironically, the very adolescents most in need of services—girls who are young, poor, rural, married, not attending school, and/or living without one or both parents—are the most underrepresented (Bruce et al. 2006; Lardoux and Jones 2006). Efforts must be made to increase available services and ensure girls' access to those services.

Program recommendations

Poverty reduction and other programs must be designed to effectively reach these excluded girls and provide them with information and services. To succeed, programs must learn

from and adapt to the local context. Additionally, programs can help empower girls by changing community attitudes. If parents and other gatekeepers recognize the value of including girls, they are more likely to become a visible part of their community. Council work in Egypt (Brady et al. 2007) demonstrated that it is possible to change community attitudes about girls.

Research gaps

Additional research is needed across the globe to learn more about which girls are excluded, to examine the effects of isolation on their lives, and to develop context-specific approaches to meet girls' needs. By disaggregating existing data (such as the Demographic and Health Surveys and other countrywide data), researchers may gain a better understanding of the trends behind the averages. The relationship between girls' social exclusion and their rights must be analyzed further. Researchers should also explore the negative effects of social exclusion on poverty reduction and achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, as well as other human development measures. In the end, girls' rights are human rights. Socially isolated girls are a group that we cannot afford to leave behind.

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