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Advocacy Brief

# Single-Sex Schools for Girls and Gender Equality in Education

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# **Single-Sex Schools for Girls and Gender Equality in Education**

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## Introduction – Single Sex Education

Policy makers in many education ministries are debating the value of single-sex education. In single-sex education, all learners are either girls or boys. The heart of most debate is whether girls will be safer and get a better education if they learn only with other girls or in mixed classes with boys.

Educators have three main choices of educating girls. There can be single-sex education in separate boys' or girls' schools, co-education of girls and boys in the same classes in the same school, or mixed models. Mixed models can take various forms. They include co-educational schools where boys and girls study several subjects in mixed classes but also have girl-only or boy-only classes for specific subjects like mathematics or science. A common example is schools that have separate physical education or vocational skills classes for girls and boys who study other subjects together. Separate boys' schools and girls' schools may also bring their students together for some joint education for sport or extra-curricular activities.

## Context and Scope

The debate on single-sex education has been ongoing for a long time. However, recently, a fresh dimension has become important: the role single-sex schools can play in advancing gender equality.

The right of each girl and each boy to equal and free education is central to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Gender equality is about each girl and each boy, each man and each woman being able to enjoy their human rights and their potential as individuals in economic, socio-cultural, civil and public life. It is about men and women being partners and making decisions together so there is peace and harmony in their homes, communities and societies. Schools have an important role to play in preparing girls and boys to listen and communicate effectively with each other to build this respectful partnership.

This brief is written in response to the information needs expressed by education policy teams in Asian countries where girls face more barriers than boys to quality primary and secondary education. Therefore, emerging research is explored from the view of the girl child in two contexts:

- Access to education
- Quality and relevance of education

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is then used to provide a framework of five principles and linked actions. Education policy teams are encouraged to use this framework to determine if single-sex learning, co-education or a mix is best in their environment

The brief targets primary and secondary education levels. It draws on learning from inside and beyond Asia. As much more research to date focuses on gender issues in single-sex schools than in single-sex classes, the literature review reflects this bias.

Although the focus here is on girls' education needs, it is essential to explore what different affects separating or integrating girls' and boys' learning will have on boys and on families, in addition to the girl learners. The choice of how to educate girls can be expected to influence girl-boy relations and may impact boys' quality of education and also girls' and boys' family life.

# **T**he Research and Debate – Access to Education

This section explores key research findings that shed light on potential advantages and disadvantages girl-only schools have on girls' access to education.

## **The Case in Favour of Girls' Schools**

**Religion and culture:** In certain religious and cultural contexts, girls' parents prefer single-sex schools and may only allow their daughters to attend a girls' school. Creating single-sex schools for girls may be necessary in order to comply with religious or cultural traditions. This is one of the reasons for the number of Catholic, Islamic, and Hindu schools in Asia that have only girl or boy students.

**Safety:** Parents may be reluctant to send their girls to school with boys if they have serious concerns about their daughters' safety or reputation in co-educational schools. An example is Cambodian parents' fear of their adolescent daughters being raped or becoming pregnant, reported in a Participatory Poverty Assessment Report of the Asian Development Bank (ADB, 2001).

**Distance:** Walking long distances every day to school may expose girls to sexual threats or physical attack. In these circumstances, creating schools for girls close to home is a viable policy option for increasing their access to education. A research paper from the Population Council titled: *The Effect of Gender Differences in Primary School Access, Type, and Quality on the Decision to Enrol in Rural Pakistan* found, "The presence of a public school for girls in the village makes an enormous difference for girls in primary enrolment given parents' reluctance for girls to travel far from home." (Lloyd et al., 2002). The Cambodia ADB report recommends creating single-sex dormitories for girls as one alternative, when no suitable school is located in the immediate community.

**Second chance education:** Girl-only formal or non-formal education could be a viable policy option for girls who dropped out and are too old to be socially comfortable to re-enter formal classes. Lok Jumbish in India operates a second chance education camp for older girls who might otherwise feel shy or embarrassed to participate in co-educational schools. Participating adolescent girls as well as their female teachers report the Lok Jumbish education camps to be an empowering experience (Mathur, 2001). In Afghanistan, many girls were deprived of an education by the Taliban. Now they are over the school-leaving age but seek their right to an education. As married and unmarried women typically do not attend school together in Afghanistan, women-only schools are being piloted to fill this need. (Bauer, 2002).

## **The Challenges Facing Girls' Schools**

The existing literature includes little reflection on whether fewer girls would go to school if there were separate schools for girls and for boys. More gender analysis is required as there are potential issues. Here are two.

**Protection:** A brother may escort his sister to class if both go to the same school. However, if their schools are far apart, the parents may keep the unprotected girl at home. This clearly shows one of the many ways that choices made for educating girls have an impact on boys, and vice versa.

**Parental involvement:** The involvement of fathers and mothers is vital in parent-teacher associations and school management committees. If a family has two sons, who go to different primary and secondary schools, and two daughters who go to two other primary and secondary schools, how much quality volunteer time and energy will the parents give to these schools? It is unlikely their time will be equally invested in the school of each child. Surveys confirm that parents who are closely involved with their children's schools are more likely to ensure their children go to school and go regularly.

## Reflection

The issues of girls' safety, social and cultural identity, and comfort are all critical issues to be considered in access of girls to education. Educators must listen and be guided by the wishes of the girls and of their parents. Often, in discussions where they are comfortable to speak and express their ideas, girls and their parents will offer practical ideas or solutions.

Separate facilities for girls are only safer than co-educational schools if the local community and education system invest consistently in ensuring security. In southern Africa, girls' schools and girls' dormitories have been the target of male predators. Some have been referred to as 'candy shops'.

Finding the right solution in each location requires creativity. Girls' schools are one possible option for increasing safe and culturally-appropriate school access for girls. Other options exist and more can be created. Some examples: community escorts for girls to and from school, community codes of conduct, religious and community leaders using their influence to create safe learning space for girls.

## **T**he Research and Debate – Quality and Relevance of Education

This section explores key research findings that shed light on potential advantages and disadvantages girls' schools have on the quality and relevance of education.

### The Case in Favour of Girls' Schools

**Subject performance:** Research findings suggest that girls do better in certain subject areas such as mathematics and science when boys are not in the class (Robinson and Gillibrand, 2004). In one of the earlier studies, Jimenez and Lockheed (1989) assessed the performance of 3,265 eighth graders in single-sex and co-educational schools in Thailand. Girls in girl-only schools scored higher in mathematics. Boys scored higher than girls in co-educational mathematics classes. These differentials were largely because of peer effects.

In girl-only mathematics and science classrooms, research indicates that girls are engaged in learning more of the time, show more cooperative learning behaviour and identify better with their female classmates than when they are in co-educational classes.

The same studies show there are no differences in what girls and boys can learn; but there may be different ways to engage and teach girls as compared to boys. Because of the gender differences in learning, a pattern is emerging in Asia of single-sex non-formal education for target groups of vulnerable adolescent males and females.

**Classroom dynamics:** The culture in co-educational schools may discriminate against female teachers and girl students. This can be the real, although often unintended, impact of education systems that have been shaped and managed largely by men. Without a conscious effort to make the school empowering and valuing of girls, as well as boys, discrimination can hurt girls. It can impair their self-confidence and achievement, as well as lower their career and education goals.

Under the UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education's gender in education programme, classroom observation was conducted in 12 Asian countries which exposed discriminatory practices. Many teachers primarily call on pupils who raise their hands or call out. This inadvertently silences girls in cultural contexts where boys tend to be more aggressive and outgoing. Often, after posing questions, teachers give less 'wait time' to girls to think through their answer. This sends a message that they are less capable than boys. In a majority of classrooms observed, art featured more photos and graphics of male authors and heroes than of females. School texts, art and teaching aids that



focus on men as being the leaders, thinkers and creative minds can condition girls to set learning and career goals that are lower than their potential. In many schools in Nepal and other countries, girls are required to help clean the classrooms, while boys are allowed to play.

These types of discrimination are systemic and can flow into co-educational or single-sex environments. However, it is contended that education staff in schools built specifically for girls have more potential to clearly see and respond to girls' needs.

**Curriculum:** In single-sex settings, if girls are given the opportunity to learn new or traditionally male skills, they can learn without the judgment, teasing and competition of boys. Science, carpentry and computer courses are examples. Having a nurturing learning environment contributed to the success of the Underprivileged Children's Education Program in Bangladesh, where close to 95 percent of the poor adolescent girls who gained electronics and electrical repair training got jobs using this training (Masum, 1999; USAID, 2002). A critical factor was the support of qualified female trainers. A recent UNESCO study on the use of technologies in education in the Asia and Pacific region looked into gender-based issues and trends in information and communication technology (ICT) applications. Findings indicate that educators expect female-only ICT learning environments will increase the skill and confidence level of both girl students and teachers.

**Puberty challenges:** Adolescent girls and boys are very sensitive to 'looking foolish' in front of their opposite-sex classmates. Gaining the skills to interact with members of the opposite sex takes energy and distracts their attention from learning. Single-sex learning can help students focus and improve their academic achievements.

**Violence:** In poorly managed schools, there is the risk of male teachers and boy classmates physically or sexually abusing the girls. In addition to sexual abuse, there are other forms of violence, intimidation and embarrassment. Co-educational schools that lack separate toilets for girls or have long lines at latrines without privacy humiliate girls and put them at risk. Day-to-day harassment, verbal abuse, and bullying can build up and destroy girls' ability to concentrate and their joy of coming to school. These concerns are much reduced in girls' schools staffed with female teachers.

**Self-esteem:** In girl-only learning environments, girls are exposed to more successful female role models. The top students in all academic subjects and the leaders in sport and extra-curricular activities are girls. Building onto this, some research indicates that adolescent girls feel better about themselves in many ways when they are educated in girls' schools as opposed to co-educational schools (Strabiner, 2002). In general, they feel better about their bodies and their body image as well as about their academic abilities. By promoting self-esteem, single-sex schools may better equip girls to fight for their human rights in gender-biased male-dominated societies. (Stabiner, 2002).

**Social support:** There are few women business leaders or women in high public office in most patriarchal societies. This is often reflected in gender-biased curriculum. Therefore, girls may not be aware of the full range of opportunities available to them or the challenges to success. Girls are in particular need of role models and guidance on their choice of studies and careers. In girls' schools, most teachers and administrators are women. These role models may inspire young girls to become change agents and overcome societal barriers. Interacting with female role models and receiving personal encouragement and advice helps girls to succeed in life (Lehrer, 2000).

**Peer education:** Single-sex learning environments are proving effective in peer education. This has particular significance for HIV/AIDS and life skills education, where peers can act as support and share information (UNICEF, 2003).

## The Challenges Facing Girls' Schools

**Cost:** Single-sex school systems require more funds for land, school construction and maintenance. To provide equal quality management, supervision and human support to separate girls' and boys' schools requires more trained staff at each level than does an equally efficient co-education system. This eats into the amount of the education budget that can flow into the classroom to the learners. Critics see this as trading off quality for bricks and mortar.

**Teacher quality:** Lack of qualified teachers in girls' schools can sharply reduce the quality of the education girls receive. In Pakistan, a major bottleneck to expanding education in Balochistan and North West Frontier Province in the mid-1990s was the dire lack of teachers, especially female teachers. The shortage was due to the low number of educated local women and the social and cultural constraints on women living and working outside their own locales (Sathar and Lloyd, 2000). To address this situation, teacher recruitment and qualification criteria were relaxed. This, in turn, caused a drop in the quality of teaching and learning in the girl-only schools. Sustained commitment to teacher training and upgrading will be needed to fill the quality gap.

**Mobility constraints:** Creativity and resources may be needed to ensure female teachers can travel efficiently to and from girls' schools. Quality in many girls' schools in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province was low because women teachers were often absent or late. Cultural constraints on teachers, often related to *purdah* and *izzat* (honour), restrict their mobility. Subsidizing safe daily van transport of a group of female teachers into schools in teacher-short districts is increasing enrolment, retention and teaching quality. The on-the-road exchange between the women is improving their classroom teaching (Angers, 2007). This is an interim intervention until local teachers are trained.

**Social skills:** Critics of single-sex education argue that girl-only schools are unnatural social settings which isolate girls from boys. In well-managed co-educational environments boys and girls learn to respect and value each other's ideas. They learn to listen and communicate with each other. Isolating girls and boys in single-sex schools is considered a barrier to them developing the effective interpersonal skills they will need to function as grown-ups in their society (Schmuck, 2005). This concern has led some Christian missionary schools in Nepal to start co-educational classes up until fifth grade, a break from traditionally operating single-sex schools.

**Systemic gender bias:** Single-sex schools can lead boys and girls, who are not witnessing the ideas, talents and skills of the other sex, to rigidly stereotype the other sex. This can reinforce the existing gender bias in society. In addition, some contend that creating schools for girls suggests girls have problems and need special attention. This may cause girls to think less positively of themselves.

**Limited networking:** Girl-only schools do not facilitate girls forming friendships with boys that could later provide useful links to professional and political networks which are dominated by men. If girls do not have links to their male age group, they do not have these potentially valuable connections.

**Macho culture:** In most systems where there are separate girls' schools, there are separate boys' schools by default. Research indicates that creating sex-separate schools would make a bad problem worse: boys' schools may fan the flames of sexism. A boys' school culture of macho male bravado causes alienation between boy students (Younger and Warrington, 2005). As girls and women are not valued and respected as equals, this macho culture could, in turn, worsen relations among boys and girls in the out-of-school social context.

**Sidestepping bad behaviour:** Some girls' schools are established in order to create safe and appropriate learning opportunities for girls. Instead of addressing the aggressive and inappropriate behaviour of boys and male teachers in existing schools, the girls are removed. Critics argue that the disrespect and violence against girls will not end until girls are treated well by their teachers and peers in all schools as well as in their communities. Creating safe bubbles for girls to learn in is giving silent approval to the bad behaviour elsewhere.

## **R**esearch Gaps and Reflections

Although the body of research on single-sex schools is growing, education planners need to be aware that the depth of gender analysis varies from study to study. Some of the studies referred to in this brief looked at girls' realities and learning from several aspects. Others were narrower in scope. The girl-boy links are often only fleetingly addressed.

Some findings may be relevant to certain environments while others may not. All are presented to stimulate thinking. The key factors that determine if girls go to school (access) and if they learn useful knowledge and skills (quality and relevance) may change from place to place. The situation of girls and their families differs according to the local socio-cultural fabric and economy.

It is interesting in the research that many factors that contribute to girls achieving well are those that should be present in every class environment whether single-sex, co-educational or a mixed delivery model. They include nurturing, responsive teachers, a respectful learning environment, non-discriminatory teaching methods, among other aspects.

It is important that policy makers do not make decisions on single-sex schooling based on issues that are system wide. The question of whether single-sex schooling is appropriate is one for the specific community and should be based on the needs of the girl learners, their parents and the local reality. The impact on boys should also be considered.

It is also evident from the research that schools in Asia have a long way to go to become girl friendly. This should be addressed at all levels of the education system, not pushed off the agenda by opening single-sex schools.

## **F**ramework of Principles

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) provides a useful framework for helping education policy teams decide whether single-sex or co-educational learning is most appropriate for girls in specific contexts.

The framework of principles are:

- Equal education for each girl and each boy.
- Girls have a voice in their education.
- Parents have a voice in the education of their daughters.
- Education cultivates a culture of peace and active citizenry.
- Education upholds human dignity.

# A

## pplying the Framework of Principles

### Principle #1 - Equal education for each girl and each boy

#### Action

Educators have three main choices of schooling models:

1. Single-sex girls' schools.
2. Co-educational schools in which girls and boys learn together.
3. A mixed model. Girls have a mix of girl-only classes and some joint academic, sport or extra-curricular activities with boys.

The first task for education policy teams is to engage local education officials in determining the realistic possibilities of using each of the three schooling models to meet girls' needs. Officials, working with relevant stakeholders, will need to assess which models can give each girl and boy an equal education. If the quality does not meet national standards, the next consideration is, which model will allow the highest and equal quality of schooling for girls and boys?

Essential questions include:

What are the capital and operating budget realities of schooling girls using the three different delivery models? There will be different resource needs for each model. What are they? Are they sustainable?

Are there adequate numbers of trained female teachers for girls' schools/classes and male teachers for male schools/classes if single-sex or mixed models are chosen? If there is a shortage of either female or male teachers, how will this be filled in a way that ensures each girl and each boy get the same quality of education?

### Principle #2 - Girls have a voice in their education

The spirit of the CRC is child participation. Girls have a right to freely express their views in matters that affect them. In this case, girls have the right to express their education needs and to have their views given due weight according to their age and maturity.

#### Action

Have local education officers who are well respected in the target community arrange small group discussions with girls to find out the barriers and problems they face related to education. What solutions do they see?

Explore gender dynamics. Start by asking what the girls like, and do not like, about going to the same school as the local boys. What would they like, and not like, about learning in the same class as boys? Have discussions with boys and ask them the same questions about girls.

Ask the girls what they want their school to be like. The aim is to identify what will make a school safe and comfortable for girls. The checklist below is useful. Most effective, however, is for girls to come up with the factors that are important to them. Including some of the girls' suggestions into school plans values the girls and may contribute to their retention and joy of learning.

### Characteristics of a Girl-Friendly School

The school is within a comfortable walking distance or dependable, affordable transport exists.

The girl learner feels safe in school and on the way to and from school. The school and community ensure there is no beating, sexual harassment, hurtful teasing or humiliation.

Her parents also feel she is safe.

She speaks and understands the language of instruction.

Teachers and managers value all students equally, whether students are male or female. School staff makes sure all students show the same respect to each other.

There are adequate numbers of trained teachers. She has female teachers as role models

Class discussion and activities reflect her needs and life experience as well as that of the other students.

Teachers encourage and support her to express herself, take time to help her understand things, and recognize her when she succeeds.

She gains new ideas, knowledge and skills that she can use in her everyday life and in her future.

She learns to listen to others, discuss and debate respectfully and solve problems herself and with others. In this way, she is building the social skills that she will use for her lifetime. She is best served if she learns to listen and communicate effectively with girls and with boys.

She has her own textbooks and learning materials. She has her own writing materials.

There is a safe, clean toilet. There is water for drinking and washing.

She has supportive parents or caregivers who value her education. They encourage her to attend school every day and give her enough time to study and enough food to eat.

### Principle #3 - Parents have a voice in the education of their daughters.

The CRC calls for respect for the girl's parents and the girl's own cultural identity, language and values. It is important to get input and ideas from parents. Valuing parents' input may lead to more active parent participation in school committees and to greater support for their daughter's education.

It is also important that parents think through the impact different schooling options will have on the family so they give honest, realistic input. Many Asian communities have histories of enthusiastic parents and local groups promising support to schools and school children that they are later unable to fulfil.

#### *Action*

Have local education officers who are well respected in the target community arrange separate group discussions with female and male parents. Explore with them the same issues as with the girls: problems, barriers, gender dynamics, and characteristics of a girl-friendly school.

Different school options (single-sex, co-education or mixed) may mean changes to the family's daily routine and resources. Look into these, including the effect on the out-of-school activities of their sons and daughters.

### Principle #4 - Education cultivates a culture of peace and active citizenry.

Peace, harmony and prosperity in homes, communities and societies is best achieved when men and women listen well to each other, communicate and debate issues respectfully and make decisions together. It is important to build these skills as children. Well-run schools offer a safe, supervised atmosphere for girls and boys to learn to share ideas and value each other.

### *Action*

In considering each of the three models, ensure there are ways that girls can have some supervised interaction with boys their own age. Explore alternatives to single-sex schools. For example: training teachers in all schools in participatory methods that engage and value girls as much as boys; hiring more female teachers where there is a shortage in co-educational schools; separating girls and boys for specific subjects.

### **Principle #5 - Education upholds human dignity.**

Research shows that fear of gender-based violence and invisibility are two ways that poorly managed schools put girls' dignity at risk. Schools need to be safe from all forms of violence, including sexual harassment, hurtful teasing, humiliation and beating. Teachers need to gain the skills to nurture the self-esteem and self-reliance of girls.

### *Action*

Using the three models, look into what mechanisms are needed to ensure girls are safe from physical and verbal harassment in the school/class as well as on the way to and from school. There may be different requirements at the school and community levels for girls' safety and security depending on the schooling model chosen.

Once the consultation, information-gathering and reflection called for in this five-step framework is complete, education policy makers and other stakeholders will be able to collectively determine whether single-sex, co-education or a mixed service model is best for the girls in the target community.

## **C**onclusion

Every girl and every boy has the right to a free, quality education. Research clearly shows that the relevance of education for girls largely depends on teaching-learning processes and content that are appropriate, engage girls and meet their needs.

Co-education, single-sex and mixed schools all have the potential to provide safe, empowering learning to girls. A priority for policy makers is to ensure teacher training and curriculum development respond to girls' as well as boys' learning needs in all schools.

Single-sex education is not a panacea for girls, but some situations make it an effective option. A prime example is when parents demand it as a condition of their daughters getting an education.

Girl-only schools should not be built to avoid making the mainstream school system safer and more girl friendly. When girl-only schools are built, sustainable funding must be in place to ensure the girls are educated to the same standard as local boys.

Two realities commend the mixed model for special consideration. They are the seemingly contradictory realities that 1) girls, especially adolescent girls, focus and achieve better learning outcomes in some subjects if boys are not in the same class; 2) girls and boys need to learn to listen, discuss and solve problems together so, as adults, they are equipped to be full partners in building peace and prosperity within their families, communities and societies. Schools or inter-school linkages that allow girls and boys some single-sex and some mixed-sex learning can meet both these needs.

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- Role of Men and Boys in Promoting Gender Equality
- A Scorecard on Gender Equality and Girls' Education in Asia, 1990-2000

For more information, please visit UNESCO Bangkok's Gender in Education website at [www.unescobkk.org/gender](http://www.unescobkk.org/gender) or write to [gender@unescobkk.org](mailto:gender@unescobkk.org)