

International Day of the Girl Child: Focus on Education – Missing Stories in the Blogs

By Stephanie Ortoleva, President, [Women Enabled, Inc.](#)

The United Nations has designated [October 11 as International Day of the Girl](#), with a focus on Education. But as I read many well-written and strong feminist posts on this issue, the concerns of millions of girls with disabilities are missing from the dialog. Who are the missing girls? The deaf girl in India who attends a school for deaf children and who was raped by her teachers. The blind girl in the United States who wants to be a scientist, but is not permitted to take the classes and who is told a blind person can't be a scientist, especially not a blind girl. The girl with a disability in Pakistan whose parents keep her at home and will not even let her attend school because they are ashamed. These are only a few of the untold stories. But The statistics about education of girls with disabilities tells us even more starkly.

Estimates of the percentage of children with disabilities not attending school are extremely variable. However, in general, children with disabilities are less likely to start school and have lower rates of staying and being promoted in school than their peers without disabilities. The correlation between low educational outcomes and having a disability is often stronger than the correlations between low educational outcomes and other characteristics such as gender, rural residence or poverty. The limited statistics that are available indicate that although the literacy rate for adults with disabilities is 3%, only [1%](#) of women with disabilities are literate, based on comprehensive research completed by Harilyn Rousso for UNESCO. These percentages are significantly lower than those for women in general. The [UNESCO Institute for Statistics](#) reports: "In 2008, 796 million adults worldwide (15 years and older) reported not being able to read and write and two-thirds of them (64%) were women. The global adult literacy rate was 83%, with a male literacy rate of 88% and a female literacy rate of 79%.

In 2010, According to a journal article by [Francis Huebler](#), this statistic improved marginally to a male literacy rate of 89% and a female literacy rate of 80%, with the percent differential between the genders remaining the same.

The [World Bank and World Health Organization Report](#) states that out of the 51 countries included in the analysis, "50.6% of males with disability have completed primary school, compared with 61.3% of males without disability. Females with disability report 41.7% primary school

completion compared with 52.9% of females without disability, a difference of 8.9% between males and females with disabilities.”

There is a direct correlation between poverty, being a child with disabilities and low education participation, with the girls with disabilities from lower socio-economic backgrounds rarely attending school.

Girls with disabilities have the lowest education participation rates of all groups and they have few opportunities for vocational training, all of which further contributes to their low employment rates.

Under international law our participation is our human right. The [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (CRPD) in its Article 7 on Children with Disabilities and its Article 24 on Education focus on the girl child with a disability and her right to education.

The [United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women](#) (CEDAW) in its Articles 10, guarantee to all women and girls the right to education. Furthermore, in several of its General Recommendations, the CEDAW Committee has specifically addressed the rights of women and girls with disabilities and the [Final Conclusions from the 55th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women](#), which focused on women and education and employment in the STEM fields, specifically incorporated these rights for women and girls with disabilities. Thus, the synergy between the CRPD and the CEDAW is a vital tool for advancing our rights in this area.

[Barriers](#) to the participation of women and girls with disabilities in education are based on culture, family structures, societal attitudes and stereotypes, institutional systems, law and legal processes, economic realities, patriarchy and paternalism. Specific barriers include:

- **Cultural bias** - Often, women are denied education because it is believed that they will become wives and mothers and such resources are provided to male children. But for women with disabilities, are often seen as unlikely to assume such roles, and thus are the last to receive family resources.
- **Double discrimination** - Women and girls with disabilities face double or intersectional discrimination based on both gender and disability (as well as other identities) and stereotypical attitudes based thereon further limit our opportunities.

- **Invisibility** - Girls with disabilities are often kept in the home and their births may not be registered, making them invisible to the education system, either because of assumptions about our abilities or embarrassment on the part of our families. Additionally, misconceptions about our abilities may make us invisible to teachers even if we attend school.
- **Violence against women and girls with disabilities** - Women and girls with disabilities are more likely to experience gender-based violence than their non-disabled sisters, sometimes because we are erroneously perceived as sick, helpless, asexual, and powerless, or on the other hand, we are seen as hypersexual or just lucky to have sexual experiences at all wherever we can because we are undesirable. Additionally, women and girls with disabilities living in residential facilities or schools are even more likely to experience such abuse.
- **Pregnancy, HIV-infection and other results of sexual assault and rape** - As a result of sexual violence and rape, women and girls with disabilities may become pregnant or contract sexually transmitted diseases from the abuser.
- **Bullying and teasing** - Disabled girls are sometimes subjected to bullying and teasing by their peers based on both our gender and our disability, negatively impacting our emotional and cognitive development, as well as causing low self esteem
- **Economic resources for Education** - Male education is prioritized as it is believed that a male child can contribute financially to the family, and women and girls with disabilities are not viewed as worthy of an education since many assume their disabilities will preclude success.
- **Schools in inaccessible locations and/or lack of transportation** - Schools that provide special education and/or education for children with disabilities in integrated settings are often located in cities and families are reluctant to send daughters to the city or there is no accessible transport to such schools. Boys are often seen as more independent and permitted to travel to urban locations.
- **Access to assistive technology and rehabilitation** – Men and boys have greater access to such services.
- **Accessibility of school facilities** – Often the school buildings and facilities themselves are inaccessible, posing yet another barrier.
- **Accessible toileting facilities and assistance in toileting** - Provision of toileting assistance places a particular burden on women and girls with disabilities, especially with respect to menstruation which is often a taboo topic and access to appropriate hygiene products is non-existent or in very short supply resulting in increased isolation for women and girls with disabilities and further impairs their ability to attend school or work.
- **Availability of special education** – Girls with disabilities are less likely to receive special education, in some instances because teachers expect more from boys than girls and sometimes because girls, who may be less likely to act out due to cultural control pressures, are not referred for services based on a learning or other disability. And even if a girl receives special education services she may be tracked toward pursuing traditional gender-identified career paths.
- **Competitive classroom climate and teaching strategies** – Competitive educational approaches are challenging to some girls with disabilities. Mainly for the same reasons

discussed earlier, like bullying, being outnumbered by males in the classroom, and low self-esteem. In addition, many teachers are trained to teach more life skills to students with disabilities rather than focus on competitive subjects.

- **Digital divide** – Women and girls with disabilities are at the bottom of the digital divide and the least likely to have access to technology.
- **Belief that girls do not do math and science** – We are presumed not to have aptitude in these subjects and are steered into gender stereotypical subjects, as well as the “talent myth” which is based on the erroneous assumption that skills in STEM fields are an innate aptitude and cannot be learned.
- **Counseling based on stereotypical roles for women and girls** – Counselors often steer girls with disabilities toward gender-stereotyped jobs and generally they are less likely to afford girls with disabilities vocational education and many counselors hold the incorrect societal perception that girls with disabilities have limited aptitude or interest in STEM and other challenging subjects.
- **Girls with and without disabilities have limited interaction** - Both groups would benefit from such interactions, as they contribute to networking and peer support, and reduction of fear and stigma.
- **Absence of women with disabilities as role models** – The invisibility of women with disabilities in educational materials, as educators, in the workplace and in the media creates a dearth of positive role models for women and girls with disabilities.
- **Shortage of women with disabilities as mentors** – Having a responsive and supportive mentor makes the world of difference for academic and professional success and increased self-esteem.

Let’s spread the facts and then, let’s change them!

For more information, see Stephanie Ortoleva’s [chapter](#) on this subject in the forthcoming book: Asha Hans, Editor, “Women and Girls with Disabilities – Global Perspectives,” Sage Publications, 2014 (ordering information will be on the Women enabled, Inc. website in the Reading and Listening room.), Also see the Women Enabled, Inc. website in the “[Education and Employment in Science, Technology, engineering and Math](#)” section and the Publications Section for several other articles on women and girls with disabilities.