

Gender Equality Study in Education in the West Bank and Gaza

Introduction

According to the 2018 UNICEF Country Report on Out-Of-School Children in the State of Palestine¹, 36.6% of girls with disabilities between the ages of 10 and 15 are out-of-school compared to 26.3% of boys with disabilities. However, data from the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS, 2017)² present a different situation: 23.8% of girls with disabilities are out-of-school compared to 29.9% of boys with disabilities. Furthermore, available evidence, including data from Humanity & Inclusion (HI), stresses that due to factors such as poverty or economic instability, parents tend to prioritize the education of children without disabilities over children with disabilities. For children with disabilities, parents tend to prioritize the enrolment in the education of boys with disabilities over girls with disabilities.

To investigate and analyze how gender and disability interplay to restrict or limit access to education, in 2020 HI conducted a Gender Equality Study in Education in the West Bank and Gaza. Primary sources were collected through 64 surveys and 15 in-depth interviews with parents of girls and boys with and without disabilities in the Bethlehem Governorate and the three governorates of the Gaza Strip. Moreover, the qualitative data were collected in semi-structured interviews and focus groups with key informants from Education and Protection clusters, education and Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) staff, and community members from West Bank and Gaza.

Major Findings from the study

The following present some of the major findings

from the study; the full version is available [at this link](#).

Multiple barriers affect education and increase drop-out

Parents of children with disabilities identified the following barriers faced by their children to attend and stay in school:

- fear of parents that children with disabilities will be the target of bullying, mockery, and ridiculed by other children;
- specifically for girls with disabilities: parents fear that they will be sexually abused;
- absence/lack of transportation to and from school;
- absence/lack of schools providing specific education services for children with disabilities;
- mainstream schools are not prepared to accommodate children with disabilities;
- economic constraints - specifically for parents in Gaza, who indicated that they cannot afford education costs. Boys with disabilities are kept out of school to work and support their families;
- feeling that children with disabilities are not progressing while in school.

Key informants of the study stressed that the Israeli occupation contributes to drop-out from school. For instance, in West Bank, access to education is heavily compromised by student arrest, detention, and school demolition orders. One informant shared, 'Although the enrolment of girls is higher than that of boys, in rural areas, girls including those with disabilities experience high drop-out rates due to the fear of parents that they will have to go through checkpoints.'

¹ Report can be accessed here: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/OOSC_SoP_Full%20Report_EN_2.pdf.

² More information here: www.pcbs.gov.ps/pcbs_2012/Publications.aspx, <http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Downloads/book2383.pdf>.

Policies and practices in the education system do not promote disability and gender inclusion

The education system is generally not perceived as disability and gender-inclusive by the parents. Indeed, 90% of surveyed parents perceive that children with disabilities do not have full access to mainstream public schools due to a lack of teacher training, persisting stigma, and inaccessible transportation and infrastructure.

Furthermore, parents highlighted that a girl with disability is more exposed to teachers' bias or discrimination than a boy with disability. This is due to the existing patriarchal beliefs and attitudes. Also, parents mentioned that girls with disabilities (especially those enrolled in schools with inaccessible infrastructure) face increased vulnerability and fear sexual harassment or abuse from the people providing assistance, especially when they need assistance to go and use toilets.

Social norms and beliefs regarding gender and disability shape educational opportunities

Only one out of ten parents declared that education is equally important for boys and girls, including those with disabilities. Parents generally support the traditional division of gender roles and tasks. Only 7.8% of surveyed parents consider that all professions shall be accessible to both genders, with no exception. Furthermore, 31.3% of them believe that women should not aspire and pursue the same jobs as men, as these are incompatible with their future duties as mothers. These deeply-rooted social norms impact parents' expectations regarding education: 78.1% of parents believe that school shall teach girls specific skills linked to their expected role as future mothers. According to 37.5% of parents, the reproductive or domestic tasks shall be further enforced on girls with disabilities.

Especially in Gaza's rural areas and in Bedouin communities, girls' early marriage is still frequent and perceived as a solution to the incapacity of large families to rear, feed, and educate all their children. Based on this study, the pressure of early marriage is higher for girls with disabilities. For example, 50% of parents from the West Bank and Gaza declared that they would be ready to marry off girls with disabilities under 16. More than 60% of these parents come from Gaza.

The traditional belief that disability is hereditary perpetuates stigma and discrimination against all the women and girls of the family. For instance, girls with disabilities are kept hidden at home, and their sisters are stigmatized as future mothers of children with disabilities.

Protection from violence and abuse is a crucial concern.

In this study, it was found that there is a widely shared perception that children with disabilities are weak, powerless, vulnerable and that they are seen as targets of attacks, insults, and bullying. This perception is at play as a barrier to education and a reason for drop-out, where 31.3% of parents think both boys and girls with disabilities will be more secure at home. However, 65.6% of parents believe instead that children with disabilities will be safer if they attend school, learn, and develop skills. These parents feel that this is more applicable to boys who are seen as more capable of defending themselves.

School closures and distance learning during COVID-19 amplified exclusion from education

More than half of the children surveyed (56.48%) could not follow online classes put in place during the pandemic due to no internet connection and limited school support. However, there is a clear gender gap in accessing distance learning: 64.91% of girls could not do their exercises during school closures compared to 47.06 % of boys. While boys without disabilities had better access to remote education than those with disabilities, the most deprived of education during COVID-19 were girls without disabilities: 70.37% of them had difficulty accessing remote education compared to 60% of girls with disabilities.

Recommendations

Advancing disability and gender-inclusive education in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) requires joint efforts by diverse stakeholders. Building on the findings of the study, we recommend:

Organizations of Persons with Disabilities, parents' associations, school committees supported by NGOs

- To intensify sensibilization activities, especially at family and community levels, to address disability stigma and gender stereotypes.
- To advocate for the provision of appropriate budgeted education that responds to the needs of girls and boys with disabilities.

International donors

- to adopt a twin-track approach to financing by providing resources to strengthen inclusive education systems that incorporate the principles of inclusive governance;
- and, at the same time, dedicating a specific funding stream to meet the specific needs of girls and boys with disabilities.
- Develop gender-sensitive guidelines on disability inclusion in humanitarian and development actions to strengthen accountability for the inclusion of girls with disabilities in dedicated education programming.

Concerned ministerial services

- To build the capacity and continuously support the education system and its teachers and school staff to promote and deliver disability and gender-inclusive education.
- To improve the accessibility of schools and pedagogical materials, including when distance-learning modalities are in place, for all children to benefit equally from education opportunities.

- To improve school environments and connected infrastructure so that all children feel safe and welcomed. For example, gender-separated and appropriate toilets and the provision of accessible and safe transportation services to and from school can make a difference for children with disabilities, particularly girls.

All stakeholders

- To foster the provision of psychosocial support and opportunities that encourage economic stability and independence for parents/ guardians of children with disabilities, especially mothers who often are the primary caregivers.
- To generate and disseminate data and evidence that critically analyze the intersection of gender, disability, and age with access to education for girls and boys with disabilities;
- To move to extensively target vulnerable and marginalized communities at high humanitarian needs with protection programming to prevent the exposure of girls to further violence and/or abuse such as early marriage or child labor