

# Education, girl, disability: an equation to solve

Ensuring the right to education for girls with disabilities in the Sahel

In Sahelian countries, most girls with disabilities do not have the opportunity to access education and to thrive in school. They are exposed to multiple discrimination owing to their identity as girls and as children with disabilities. Comprehensive measures are needed to ensure their right to inclusive and quality education.

## The exclusion of girls with disabilities from education: a question of intersectionality

Globally, 63 million children of primary-school age are out of school.<sup>(1)</sup> Of all the regions in the world, sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rate of children excluded from education, accounting for 34 million children, which amounts to more than half of the global number.<sup>(2)</sup>

Worldwide, an average of 15% of the population lives with a disability. In the majority of countries in sub-Saharan Africa, less than 5% of children with disabilities attend primary school.<sup>(3)</sup> For children with disabilities who do make it to school, schools and education itself are often not adapted to their needs and they do not achieve the desired educational outcomes. This means that millions of children are currently deprived of even the most basic education and do not have the chance to progress to secondary and higher levels of education and training owing to their disability.

Restrictions on access and achievement in education become even more severe when

multiple discrimination factors, such as disability and gender, intersect. The available data suggest that the gap is considerable: compared to men without disabilities, women with disabilities are three times more likely to be illiterate.<sup>(4)</sup>

Beyond education, in all spheres —public and private— girls with disabilities experience specific discrimination related to gender and disability, and they are therefore exposed to multiple inequalities.

In fact, educational policies and programmes take little account of the issue of **intersectionality**: while disability and gender are important factors of exclusion, they are often considered separately. The programmes and measures put in place do not take into account the specific relationship between disability and gender, and therefore fail to effectively address this specific situation of exclusion.


**Intersectionality** refers to understanding the situation of people simultaneously experiencing multiple forms of discrimination in a society. Born out of gender studies and black feminism in the 1990s, it shed light on the combined and cumulative effects of sexism and racism on the invisibility and exclusion of black women. It was then expanded to analyze how social constructs related to gender and other forms of discrimination such as disability interact, in order to understand the resulting power systems and to change discriminatory social norms. The intersections between gender and disability are plural and complex: socially constructed gender roles influence the lives of women and men, girls and boys with disabilities, their experiences, their needs, and their agency.

## Why more attention needs to be paid to the education of girls with disabilities in Africa and around the world

### The right to education is a fundamental right.


The right to inclusive and quality education is enshrined in several international frameworks, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women. States Parties to these Conventions have an obligation to guarantee the realisation of the right to education for all, and to ensure that boys and girls, with or without disabilities, are treated on an equal basis.

**Education is the best equaliser.** Providing access to inclusive and quality education for all has immense potential to reduce social inequalities, with a major impact on the groups most at risk of marginalisation. The key to realising the “leave no one behind” commitment, enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goals, is to invest in increasing opportunities and access to services for the most vulnerable, such as girls with disabilities.


 Equal educational opportunity for girls can help reduce gender-related income gaps. One additional year of study can increase a woman's income by 20%.<sup>(5)</sup>

**A positive impact on many development goals.** Ensuring education for girls with disabilities is essential to achieving Sustainable Development

Goal (SDG) 4 of inclusive and equitable quality education for all, and SDG 5 of gender equality and the empowerment of women. In addition, access to quality education contributes to the achievement of many other SDGs. In particular, it has the potential to improve employment prospects (SDG 8), break the cycle of poverty (SDG 1), reduce inequalities (SDG 10), and improve health (SDG 3) and nutrition (SDG 2).

 If all adults in the world completed secondary education, the world's poverty rate would be halved.<sup>(6)</sup>

**A good economic investment.** Limited access to education leads to low participation in the job market. In some low- and middle-income countries, the cost of excluding people with disabilities from employment is up to 7% of the Gross Domestic Product.<sup>(7)</sup> Conversely, investing in education for all, including girls with disabilities, has a positive economic impact on individuals, their families and communities, and on the economy of the country at large.

 Reducing inequalities in access to education between girls and boys could bring in \$ 112 billion - \$ 152 billion annually in low- and middle-income countries.<sup>(8)</sup>

## Barriers to education for girls with disabilities: results from research in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger

### The Study "Being a girl with disabilities"

With the support of the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) and the French Development Agency (AFD), Humanity & Inclusion (also known as Handicap International) conducted research in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger to better understand the educational situation of girls with disabilities.

The researchers wanted to learn how gender, disability, and age shape the experiences of girls with disabilities in terms of school access, staying in school, and educational achievement. They likewise hoped to examine the existence of other aggravating factors, specificities linked to the type and degree of disability, and issues relating to the protection of girls with disabilities.

This study was carried out using a qualitative and participatory approach, through interviews with girls and boys with disabilities, observation of students in special and in mainstream schools, interviews with institutional actors, and focus groups with parents, educational stakeholders, and religious, community, and associative leaders.

The results of the study were published in 2020. They are available on the dedicated website <https://genderdisabilitieswa.hubside.fr> from which you can download the summary booklet and country reports.

Despite improvements in recent years, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger continue to face significant educational challenges. Gender equality is far from a reality, and the quality of learning remains weak. In addition, the intensification of armed conflicts in these countries places girls in a particularly vulnerable situation. School closures following attacks and threats of violence have further reduced learning opportunities for girls,<sup>(9)</sup> even more so for girls with disabilities.

Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) have long played a pioneering role in the education of children with disabilities through the development of a specialised offer and often initiate innovative

inclusive education projects.

Over the past ten years, supported by an international context evolving towards more inclusion in education, the governments of the three countries have developed inclusive education strategies aimed at providing an education that takes into account the learning needs of all children, including children with disabilities. However, much work remains to be done to make education systems truly inclusive. Even when children with disabilities have access to school, they are often excluded from learning because the curricula are not adapted to their needs

and/or because teachers are neither sensitised nor trained to support them.

### Investing in data: a necessary step

The lack of statistical data on disability limits the development of effective strategies to promote the rights of children with disabilities. Mali and Niger do not have robust data on the prevalence of disability, nor do they have data disaggregated by gender. As for Burkina Faso, despite the completion of a first census on children

with disabilities in 2013, the data are still unreliable. In Niger, as in Burkina Faso, the school yearbook publishes a limited number of partial statistics each year that present the educational situation of children with disabilities.

■ In Mali, 17.6% of women with disabilities can read and write, compared to 21.4% of women without disabilities and 39.2% of men without disabilities.<sup>(10)</sup>

## Popular beliefs perpetuate stigma and exclusion

Negative perceptions and attitudes of families and the community in general, conditioned by popular beliefs still firmly rooted in society, constitute one of the most significant barriers to the education of children with disabilities, and of girls in particular.

Disability is most often seen as a "tragedy" or "punishment" inflicted on the family and leads to discrimination against children with disabilities. Girls with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to stigma and more likely to be abandoned or abused.

Public awareness campaigns and community engagement are still insufficient to counteract these beliefs and prevent the damaging consequences they entail. According to some popular beliefs, the bodies of persons with disabilities have magical properties. Girls with intellectual disabilities are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse and violence because some people believe that having sex with these girls will bring them wealth or power, or cure them of AIDS.



Children with disabilities are treated less well within the family. They are less well fed and cared for, and they are sidelined. We hide them; we lock them up because we are ashamed of them. Some people say you have to kill them or their father will die.

Others think that disability is contagious. (Focus Group with Organisations of Persons with Disabilities, Burkina Faso)

## Education for girls with disabilities is seen as a cost, not as an investment

The traditional conception of the social roles of men and women influences the investment families and communities make in the education of children. Boys, who are seen as the family's future income earners, will have a greater chance of being sent to school, which will put them on a better path to obtaining paid employment. This is not the case for girls, who are likely to be confined to domestic activities.

Children with disabilities are very often seen as an additional burden on the family, and girls with disabilities more so. The costs of educating girls with disabilities are considered too high, not least because of the economic loss this represents. In fact, girls with disabilities often contribute to the economic survival of the household through begging or performing domestic chores. Families perceive education for girls as an economic loss rather than as a gain.



The education of children with disabilities is above all a matter of poverty. If a girl with disabilities comes from a wealthy family, she won't have a problem going to school.

A poor relative once told me: "Before, my child brought me 2,500 francs a day (begging). She hasn't brought anything to me since she has been in school!" (Secretary General of the Town Hall of Maradi 1 and Social Affairs Officer, Niger).

## The "age" variable worsens discrimination against girls with disabilities

When girls with disabilities do get access to schooling, they often start late. Therefore, they reach puberty when they are finishing primary school.

Puberty increases the risk of dropping out of school. Many girls with disabilities are taken out of

school as they approach puberty to protect them from possible sexual violence and early pregnancy. The lack of adequate toilets for girls, including girls with disabilities, especially during periods of menstruation, is also a cause of repeated absences and drop-out.



Fata is an 11-year-old blind Malian girl who does well in school. When asked what she would do if one day someone suggested that she drop-out of school for marriage, she replied: "I would prefer to study, but if my parents force me to marry, I will do what they tell me to do".



## Socio-cultural and socio-economic factors have a major impact on schooling

The probability of a girl with disabilities going to school is also influenced by her socio-economic background and by her place of residence. A girl with disabilities from a poor family, living in a rural area, will see her chances of schooling significantly reduced. In rural areas, the distance between home and school

is a major obstacle to the education of girls with disabilities. For students who walk to school, long distances pose a safety risk, especially for girls with disabilities. And the cost of transportation is often too high for families. Housing solutions near schools and the opening of school canteens are too rare.



Amatou, a 12-year-old girl, lives in the Mali district in Bamako. She has a physical impairment in her lower limbs. She was taking courses and rehabilitation sessions at a specialised centre. But when the centre bus broke down, Amatou had to give up her studies. Amatou's mother cannot afford to pay for transportation or to enrol her daughter in a private school near home. Amatou enjoys studying, but right now she has no prospect of going back to school.

## The type and level of disability determine educational opportunities

When school is accessible and educators' awareness raised, children with physical disabilities often have less difficulty in attending school than children with moderate or severe intellectual or sensory disabilities.

For children with moderate or severe intellectual or sensory (hearing or visual) impairments, their educational support requires skilled human resources and suitable equipment to allow them to access school and to succeed. Education in special schools is often the only offer available for these children. However, it

presents a considerable cost for families and is often present only in large urban centres.

In Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, inclusive education pilot initiatives for children with sensory impairments are being carried out successfully. The conditions for success are based mainly on a good assessment of the child's needs, the availability of specialised staff who master sign language or Braille, teachers supported and trained in inclusive education, and engaged parents.



I remember that the 1st year, including learning Braille, was not easy at all. I didn't feel comfortable. But now it's okay. Over time, I managed to make friends and we learned to understand each other. After the Fundamental Studies Diploma, I would like to go to high school in Senegal and become a great lawyer in my country. (Daouda, 16 years old, Mali).

## Gender-based violence strongly affects girls with disabilities

Girls with disabilities are more exposed to mistreatment, abuse, and sexual violence than girls without disabilities and boys with disabilities.<sup>(13)</sup> This is even more prevalent in girls with intellectual disabilities.

Protection programs, training in sexual and reproductive health and rights, and gender-based violence awareness programmes remain very limited. Government structures and policies are insufficient to prevent violence and to

support girls with disabilities who are victims of rape and unwanted pregnancy. In addition, legal proceedings are rare due to socio-cultural constraints and costs.

Violence and abuse suffered both inside and outside schools remain largely invisible because they are rarely documented. They have a devastating impact on the development and the well-being of girls and are a major obstacle to their education.



When a girl with disabilities is raped or has an unwanted pregnancy, she cannot stay with the family and ends up in the streets. She has to do the best she can if the family can't afford to take care of her. (Focus group with Organisations of Persons with Disabilities, Burkina Faso)

## Recommendations

### For governments in the Sahel, as well as other low- and middle-income countries.

- Accelerate the transformation towards inclusive education systems that are capable of meeting the needs of all learners, including girls with disabilities, at all levels: preschool, primary, secondary, and higher or professional education. This entails, among other things, accessible infrastructure and flexible curricula, as well as gender- and disability-sensitive educational materials.
- Provide the necessary budget for the effective implementation of educational policies that support girls and children with disabilities. Apply an equity-based gender approach to budgeting and resource allocation that will better take into account the needs of girls with disabilities. Provide solutions for reducing the costs of education for the most vulnerable families (school grants, cash transfers, canteens, transport).
- Raise awareness among all educational stakeholders and train teachers to meet the specific needs of girls with disabilities. Specific modules on inclusive education, disability, and gender must be integrated during initial and in-



Burkina Faso. © Erwan Rogard / HI.

- service teacher training. Support female teachers with disabilities in being role models in schools.
- Set-up mechanisms for consultation and collaboration between the educational sector and other interconnected sectors. In order to offer a holistic response to the challenges faced by girls with disabilities, it is essential to implement joint actions aimed at combating stigma and beliefs, promoting the socio-economic inclusion of persons with disabilities, and ensuring equitable access to legal services.

- Develop a system for collecting disaggregated data (in particular by age, disability, and gender) and identifying barriers, needs, and experiences in education, in order to develop relevant response strategies.

### For aid donors

- Use an intersectionality perspective in the development of strategies and programmes, paying particular attention to the specific situation of girls with disabilities and emphasising the importance of equal participation in education and in society.
- Adopt a twin-track approach to financing by providing resources to strengthen inclusive education systems in general and, at the same time, dedicating a specific funding stream to meet the specific needs of girls with disabilities. These targeted allocations should be traceable in order to ensure accountability and to better assess progress and gaps.

### For civil society organisations

- Create partnerships, as well as spaces for discussion and capitalising on experiences among actors involved in gender, disability, and inclusive education—at the local, national, and international levels—in order to strengthen the intersectional approach.
- Advocate with all relevant stakeholders so that the right to the education of girls with disabilities is better recognised and taken into

### For all stakeholders

- Design public awareness strategies—involving religious, traditional, and community leaders, women's organisations, and local authorities—in order to change attitudes toward girls

- Ensure meaningful participation of persons with disabilities, parents, learners, and education professionals, as well as their representative organisations, at all stages of the decision-making processes on inclusive education.

- Increase financial commitments both through bilateral development assistance and through multilateral initiatives that pool resources for greater impact on education, such as the Global Partnership for Education, Education Cannot Wait, and the Inclusive Education Initiative.
- Support civil society organisations—such as organisations of persons with disabilities, gender-equality organisations, and international NGOs—in their advocacy and service delivery activities, paying particular attention to initiatives that create partnerships between sectors, in order to tackle the problem of intersectionality.

account in public policies and programmes, as well as in international cooperation.

- Hold decision-makers accountable for their commitments and obligations, in accordance with international Conventions and with commitments enshrined in the 2030 Agenda. Independently assess progress and gaps in the achievement of inclusive and quality education for all.

with disabilities and to promote their right to education. Support girls with disabilities in becoming role models in their community.

**Humanity & Inclusion (also known as Handicap International) is an independent and impartial aid organisation working alongside persons with disabilities and vulnerable populations, in situations of poverty, exclusion, conflict, and disaster. Humanity & Inclusion currently implements inclusive education projects in 27 countries.**

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