UNESCO INSTITUTE for STATISTICS
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

EARLY ADOLESCENT GIRLS: A GLOBAL VIEW OF PARTICIPATION IN LOWER SECONDARY EDUCATION

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Global efforts to address the learning needs of early adolescents are receiving greater policy attention, partly due to the considerable efforts invested in ensuring universal primary education. In countries with rising enrolment in primary education, the focus has shifted towards improving completion rates in primary education and ensuring that pupils make the transition to lower secondary education.

Entry into lower secondary education marks an important transition in the learning experience of a child. Its curriculum goes beyond the provision of basic literacy and numeracy skills to deliver in-depth subject matter knowledge and to impart relevant skills and knowledge as the foundation for further schooling or for immediate entry into the labour force. Thus, these benefits are key to the further development of both individuals and societies.

There are more than 385 million children of official lower secondary school age in the world, of which 48% are girls[1]. This group, referred to here as "early adolescents", typically range in age from 11/12 to 14/15 years old, depending on the structure of the national education system. This fact sheet examines trends on how early adolescent girls around the world have fared in accessing lower secondary education, based on the most recent UIS data gathered from household surveys.[2]

Early adolescent girls and participation in education since 1999

Table 1 shows the total net enrolment rates for early adolescents in lower secondary education. This rate shows the percentage of the population of lower secondary age that is enrolled in secondary (lower or upper) or still in primary education. Globally, 74% of girls of this target age group are enrolled in school, compared to 83% of boys in 2008. In other words, 39 million girls of lower secondary age are currently not enrolled in either primary or secondary education, or 26% of the age group. At the regional level, the difference in total net enrolment rates exceeds 10 percentage points in South and West Asia (61% of girls attend school, compared to 74% for boys) and sub-Saharan Africa (60% and 70% for girls and boys respectively).

Yet early adolescent girls' participation has improved in almost all regions compared to 1999, and the growth in enrolment has surpassed that of boys. For example, in South and West Asia, enrolment rates for girls increased by almost 10 percentage points between 1999 and 2008, reducing the gender difference in enrolment rates by about one-half. In sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia and the Pacific, girls caught up with respect to total net enrolment rates, as improvements were stronger for girls than for boys. The North America and Western European region, on the other hand, has remained stable over time: early adolescents are participating in education in 2008 just as much as they were in 1999.

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1 The concept of early adolescence describes the population of official lower secondary school age, as defined in individual national education systems and standardised as Level 2 of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). See UNESCO-UIS (2010a) and UNESCO-UIS (2006).

2 Please refer to UNESCO-UIS (2010b) and UIS online Data Centre, January 2011 release.

Table 1. Total net enrolment rate for early adolescents by sex and region, 1999 and 2008

	1999		2008	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
Arab States	77.6	64.9	84.1	72.1
Central and Eastern Europe	89.2	84.8	92.2	87.3
Central Asia	91.9	89.8	96.6	91.5
East Asia and the Pacific	82.7	73.2	86.5	79.8
Latin America and the Caribbean	89.4	86.8	94.0	91.5
North America and Western Europe	97.5	93.9	97.7	94.4
South and West Asia	71.5	51.3	74.2	61.0
Sub-Saharan Africa	64.0	50.9	70.5	59.6
WORLD	79.8	68.6	82.8	74.1

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics database.

Table 1 reflects data on early adolescents enrolled in primary, lower or upper secondary education. Many children start schooling late or progress slowly through primary education. When reaching the lower secondary education age, they have still not completed primary education. Thus, in addition to those early adolescents excluded from school, many more are in school but at risk of not completing basic or even primary education, because they are over-age and enrolled in a level which is low for their age. In order to address the issues of these excluded or "at risk" early adolescents, it is important to gain a better understanding of their exposure to schooling.

School exposure among early adolescent girls who are out of school

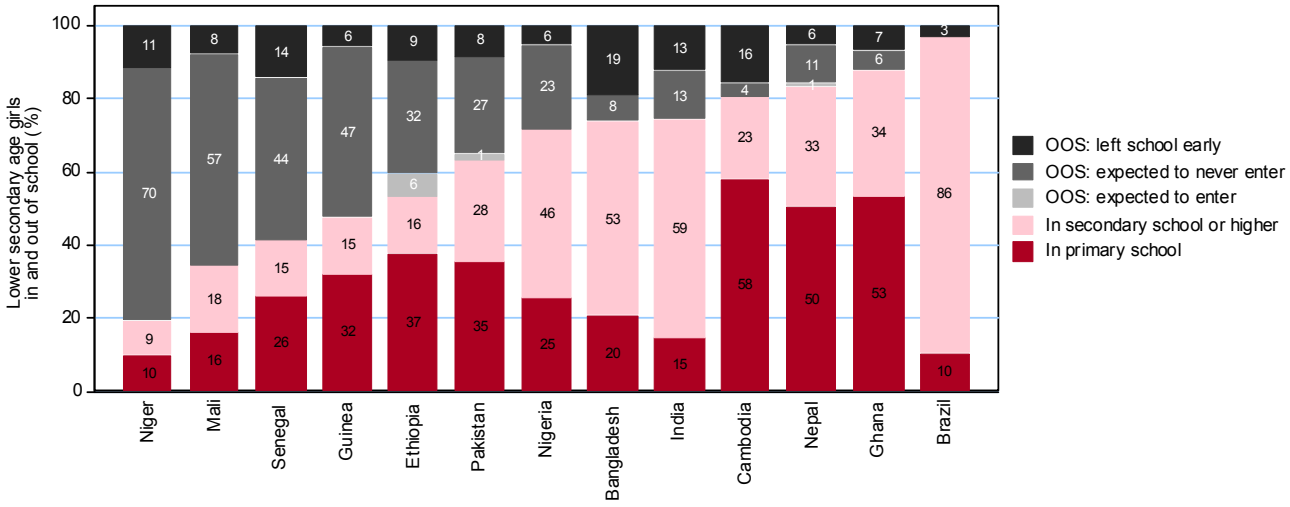
The UIS has developed an approach which divides the out-of-school population into three categories based on the exposure to schooling: a) those who have entered school and dropped out; b) those who will never enter; and c) those who are currently out of school but are expected to enter at a later age.[3] By understanding the specific characteristics of these children, policymakers can better target their attempts to ensure that children start school and complete their education. For example, many over-aged children face a greater risk of leaving school early.

The school exposure of out-of-school adolescent girls for 13 selected countries is shown in **Figure 1.** The share of adolescent girls who are out of school ranges from 81% in Niger to 3% in Brazil. Adolescents who fall behind, due to late entry into primary school or grade repetition (or a combination of the two), are at a significant risk of dropping out of school.

Figure 1 shows that for most of these countries a high share of girls of official lower secondary education age are in fact in primary education. Brazil and India have a relatively smaller share of girls in primary education, which partly reflects the relatively short duration of primary school. Almost all adolescent girls who are out of school in Ethiopia, Guinea, Mali, Pakistan, Nepal, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal will probably never enter school. In other countries, such as Bangladesh, Brazil, Cambodia and Ghana, most of the out-of-school population has left school early. A small share of the out-of-school adolescent girl population in Ethiopia and Pakistan is still expected to enter primary school in the future.

[3] See UNESCO-UIS and UNICEF (2005).

Figure 1. Percentage of lower secondary school-age girls who are in and out of school, for selected countries, most recent year available



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics based on household survey data: Bangladesh Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2006, Brazil *Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios* (PNAD) 2009, Cambodia Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) 2005-2006, Ethiopia DHS 2005, Ghana DHS 2008, Guinea DHS 2005, India DHS 2005-2006, Mali DHS 2006, Nepal DHS 2006, Niger DHS 2006, Nigeria DHS 2008, Pakistan DHS 2006-2007, and Senegal DHS 2005.

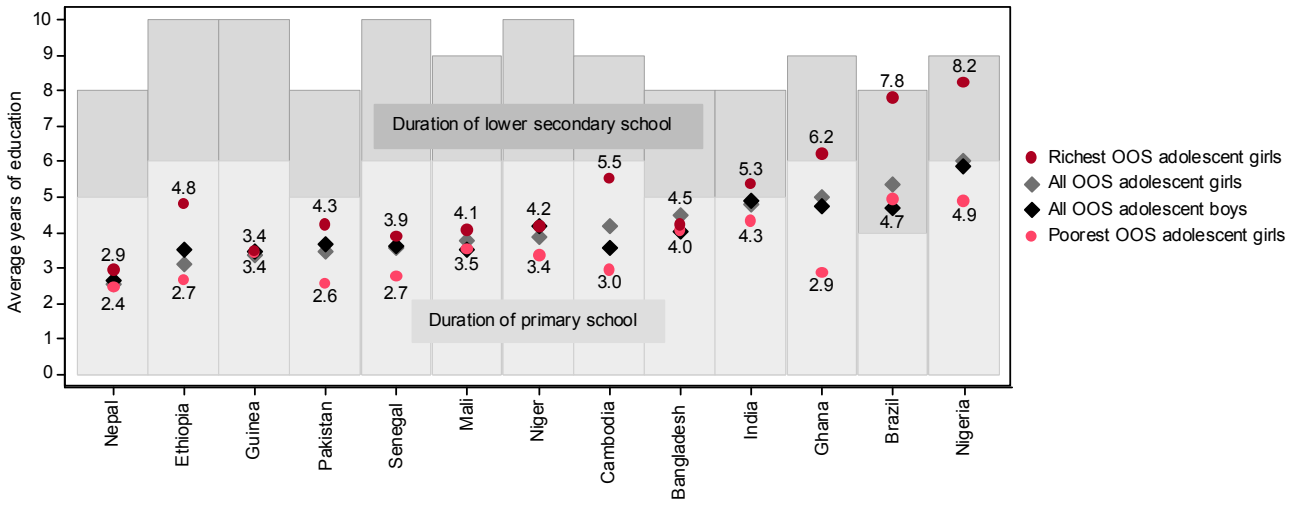
Adolescent girls who left school: How far along the education path did they make it?

When do most early adolescents leave school? **Figure 2** assesses whether, on average, adolescents make the transition to lower secondary education before dropping out. It contrasts the average years of education achieved by adolescents who drop out with the duration of primary and lower secondary education in their respective countries. The figure shows that Brazil is the only country where adolescent girls and boys usually leave school at the lower secondary level. In two countries, India and Nigeria, it generally occurs after the completion of primary education. For the remaining countries, the average educational attainment of early school-leavers shows these adolescents make it about halfway through primary education before leaving school.

Figure 2 also reveals disparities in education attainment linked to sex and household wealth. Adolescent boys complete more years of education than girls before dropping out in Ethiopia, Guinea, Nepal and Pakistan. These four countries also have the lowest average total educational attainment. The reverse is true in Bangladesh, Brazil, Cambodia, Ghana and Nigeria, where adolescent girls finish more years of schooling than boys before they leave school.

The educational attainment gap between early adolescent girls from the richest and poorest wealth quintiles also varies among countries. The disparity between rich and poor is less than one year of school in Guinea, Mali, Nepal, Niger and Senegal. However, the gap is greater than one year in Brazil, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Nigeria and Pakistan. In fact, the education gap is greater than 3 years in Brazil and Nigeria, representing a striking disadvantage for the poorest girls. While the gender disparity in educational attainment may favour boys or girls, depending on the country, the richest adolescent girls always complete more education on average than the poorest girls before leaving school.

Figure 2. Educational attainment of lower secondary school-age, out-of-school adolescents who have ever attended school, by wealth quintile and gender, most recent year available



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics based on household survey data: Bangladesh Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2006, Brazil *Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios* (PNAD) 2009, Cambodia Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) 2005-2006, Ethiopia DHS 2005, Ghana DHS 2008, Guinea DHS 2005, India DHS 2005-2006, Mali DHS 2006, Nepal DHS 2006, Niger DHS 2006, Nigeria DHS 2008, Pakistan DHS 2006-2007, and Senegal DHS 2005.

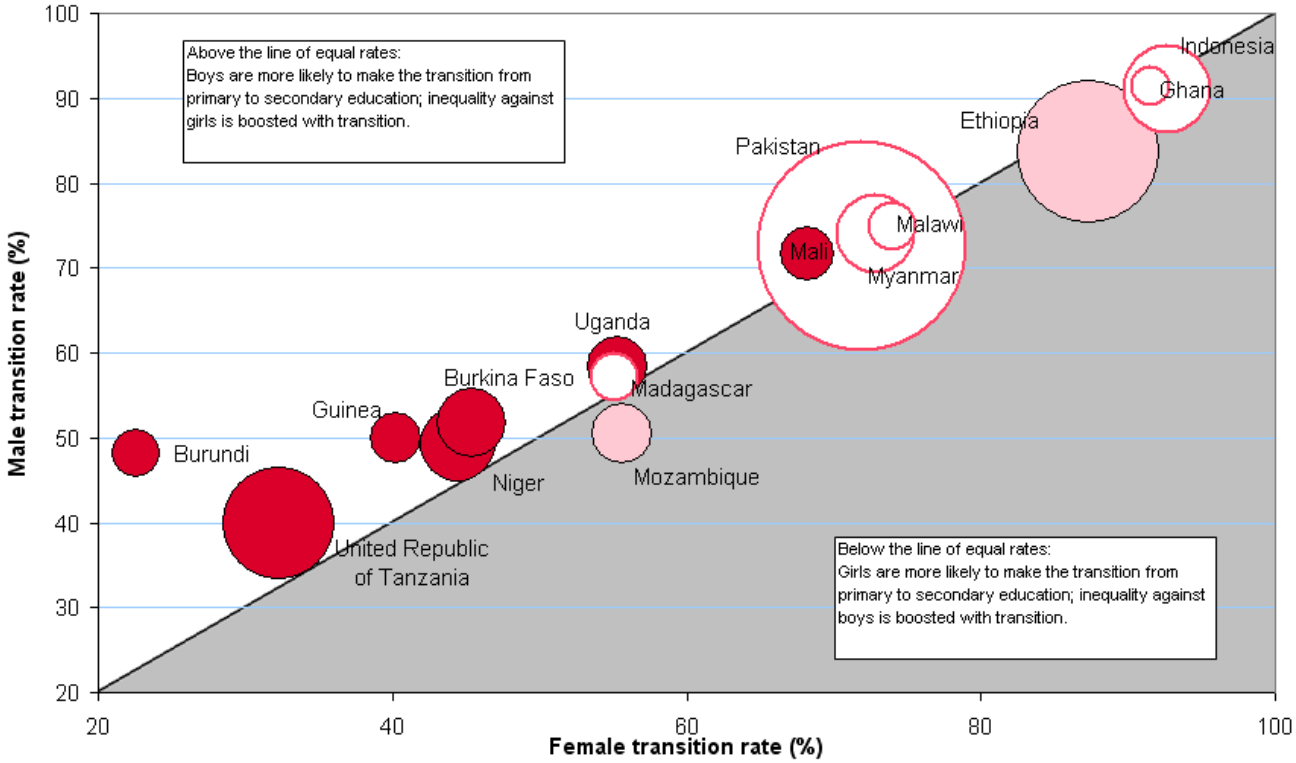
Making the transition from primary to lower secondary education

Gender disparities in lower secondary education are a result of the cumulative effect of disparities in primary education along with those disparities associated with the transition from primary to lower secondary education. As shown in Figure 2, many adolescent girls out of school actually are excluded from education because they never had a chance to enter primary education. As well, in countries with high numbers of early adolescent girls out of school, disparities are also found in the transition to lower secondary education.

Figure 3 compares transition rates from primary to lower secondary education in the countries with the highest numbers of early adolescent girls out of school. With limited access to secondary education, girls who complete primary education in Burkina Faso, Burundi, Guinea, Niger and Tanzania are more likely to face obstacles in entering secondary education than boys. Thus, the disparities found in primary education are further reinforced.

In Burundi, every second boy completing primary school moves onto secondary education, but not even one in four girls do so. In Guinea and Tanzania, girls have one-fifth the chance of boys of moving to secondary education. However, in Ghana, Indonesia, Malawi, Myanmar and Pakistan which have higher overall transition rates, girls and boys have similar chances to enter secondary education. The situation is exceptional in Ethiopia and Mozambique, where girls are more likely to make the transition to secondary education than boys.

Figure 3. Comparison of girl's and boy's transition rates from primary education to general lower secondary education, 2008 or most recent year available



Note: The size of the bubbles indicates the number of lower secondary education-aged, out-of-school girls.
Source: UIS Data Centre, January 2011.

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