

Policy Brief

Educational Inequality within Countries

Who are the out of school children?*

In recent decades great strides have been taken towards achieving universal education for all. Primary net enrolment rates have continually risen around the world and many countries have notably improved primary completion and secondary enrolment. Still, UNESCO estimates that at least 77 million children remain out of school.ⁱ This number underlines the need for a well-developed education agenda.

How can the development community and national planners target education programs so that they will be most effective in reducing the number of out of school children? Efforts to increase school attendance have proven successful when they are tailored to serve *defined groups of marginalized children*. It is important to develop a strong understanding of both who the out-of-school children are and why they lack opportunities. This insight should be used not only in the design of national education plans, but more importantly to inform continuous research.

The EPDC has conducted initial analysis in this area. The center studied the relationship between certain background demographics of primary-aged children in developing countries and the probability of their attending school. The results show that four factors strongly affect the likelihood of primary school attendance among children – poverty, rural residence, region of residence, and genderⁱⁱ. The analysis

indicates that each factor has an *independent* effect on school attendance, meaning that a child's likelihood of enrolling in primary school is significantly affected by any single one of these characteristics. Undoubtedly these background demographics are related and if a child belongs to more than one of these groups his or her chance of attendance will be affected to an even greater extent. The outcomes of the analysis, displayed in Figure 1 on page 2, are consistent with the conclusions of other researchersⁱⁱⁱ.

The graph illustrates the differences in the likelihood that a child is attending school in various demographic groups. Countries are listed in ascending order by attendance rates (those with the lowest attendance rates are at the top of each section).

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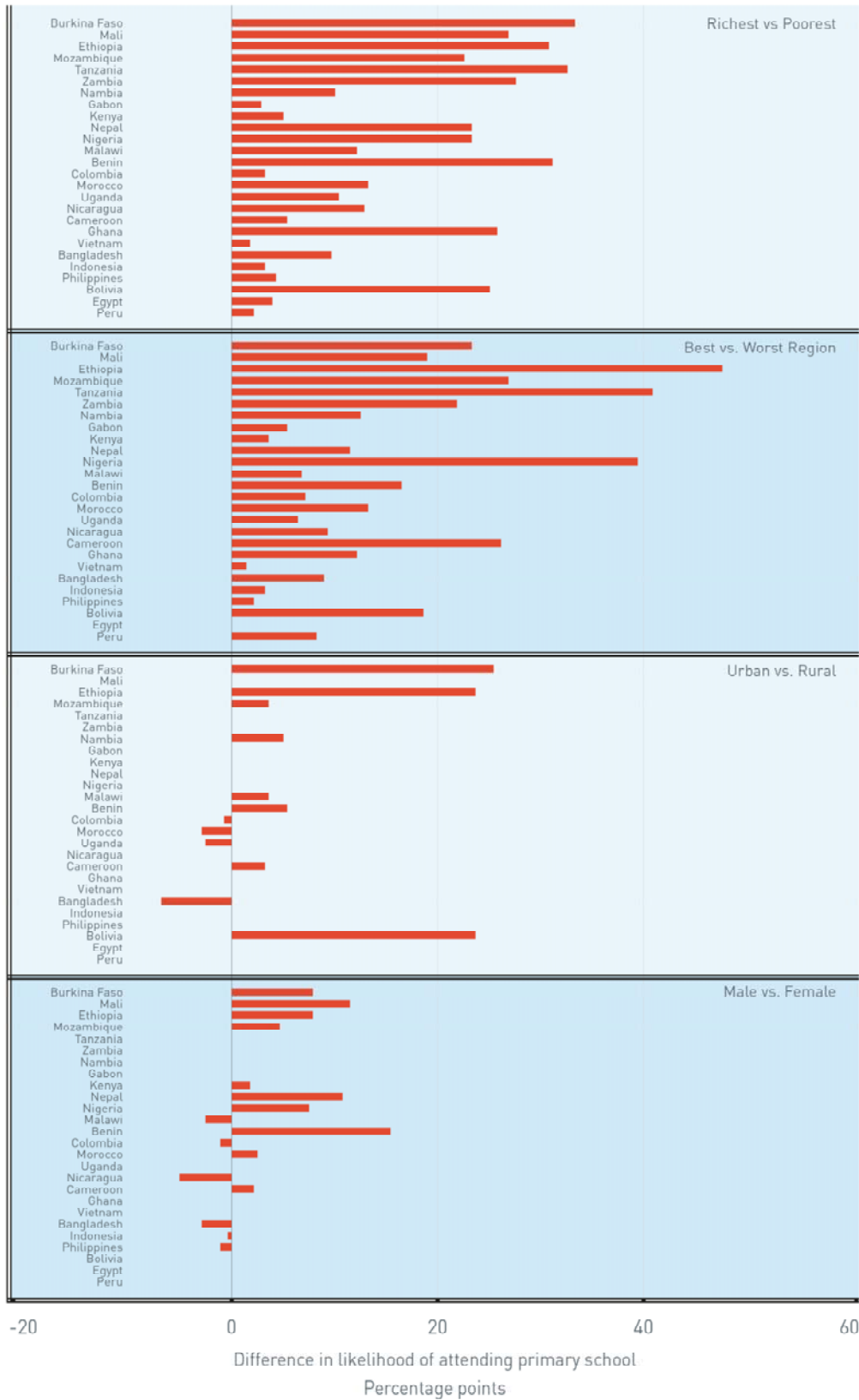


Figure 1. Differences in the likelihood that a child of primary age is attending primary school, between wealth groups, provinces or regions within countries, rural/urban residence, and gender.

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WEALTH QUINTILES

The top portion shows differences between the richest and poorest wealth quintiles. In countries with lower overall attendance such as Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Mali, Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia, and Nigeria these inequalities are most profound. A child from the wealthiest quintile is 30-40 percentage points more likely to be in school than a child from the poorest quintile in these countries. In every country included children from the highest quintile are significantly more likely to attend primary than children from the lowest. Particular attention should be given to this determinant of educational inequality.

REGIONS

Large differences are also observed between sub-national regions. Again, it is countries with lower overall attendance rates that show the most noticeable disparities. A child from the best-off region is up to 40-50 percentage points more likely to be in primary school than a child from the worst-off region in Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Nigeria. For all but one country included in the study, Egypt, children are considerably less likely to attend primary school if they are from a disadvantaged region.

URBAN/RURAL

From the *Urban vs. Rural* section of Figure 1 it is apparent that educational inequalities along the urban-rural divide are substantial for some countries. Overall, the graph indicates that children living in urban areas are more likely to enroll in primary school than those from rural towns. Most of the children in these developing countries live in rural areas, making the situation particularly troubling. In Burkina Faso,

Ethiopia, and Bolivia children of primary age are over 20% more likely to enroll in a primary school if their families live in an urban area. In contrast, in Bangladesh, rural children actually have an advantage over urban children in terms of school attendance. In all there are nine countries where urban youth are more likely to attend, while there are only three countries for which rural children are more likely. Research points towards rural children as a group lagging behind in terms of educational opportunities.

GENDER

The bottom portion of the graph shows the degree of difference between genders. For several of the countries included boys have a much higher likelihood of attending primary school than do girls, especially in Mali, Nepal, and Benin. Yet in some of countries on the list there is either no significant difference between the two or females actually have a greater chance of enrolment. However, it is possible that within the other disadvantaged groups – neglected regions, rural areas, and poor families – gender differences may be particularly high, with girls losing out on the opportunity to attend school in high numbers. Other research also suggests that generally girls are less likely to complete primary and/or enter secondary. The educational inequality between genders remains a difficult problem that can be addressed through targeted programs.

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POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMENDATIONS

Inequities too often are the norm rather than the exception in education systems. This message is of particular relevance in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa where inequality is greatest and overall attendance is lowest. Normally children not in school or who drop out are from well-defined marginalized groups. This reality calls for the development of programs and activities that specifically target these groups within countries – most commonly, children from poor families living in neglected and rural regions, especially girls.

The greatest inequalities persist according to income levels and between sub-national regions. Programs that focus on these two determinants are of particular importance. Inequities between urban and rural areas and between males and females are less pronounced, however policies aimed at leveling them will remain highly relevant to the development agendas.

Thus far, the studies conducted that have isolated these children can only be considered preliminary work on global educational inequalities. There is major need for more in depth analysis. It is important that further research be done to discover the underlying reasons why these groups are not in school, on a country-by-country and province-by-province basis. Are there common root causes that can be applied across borders? Are the reasons cultural, financial, economic, political, geographical, or some combination? Can researchers define other groups that are missing out? What are developing countries that defy these norms doing differently that enables them to maintain higher levels of equality in terms of primary school access? As these questions are answered, policy decisions can be made accordingly. In the mean time, as many

countries have already begun to do, it is important to create programs that serve the well-defined marginalized groups that are not in school.

* This policy brief is adapted from Ingram, Wils, Carrol and Townsend *The Untapped Opportunity: How Public-Private Partnerships Can Advance Education for All* (Washington, DC: Education Policy and Data Center, 2006).

[<http://www.epdc.org/static/UntappedOpportunity.pdf>]

ⁱ UNESCO. *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2007 – Strong Foundations, Early Childhood Care and Education* (Paris, France: UNESCO 2007)

ⁱⁱ The EPDC conducted multiple regression tests of the four factors to determine statistically significant effects.

ⁱⁱⁱ UNESCO Institute for Statistics, and UNICEF. *Children Out of School: Measuring Exclusion from Primary School* (Montreal, Canada: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2005).