Intersectional Identities and Education for Learners with Disabilities

Approximately 15% of the world's population has a disability, and 80% of people with disabilities live in low- and middle-income countries.[i] People with disabilities are not a homogenous group: they include women and girls, indigenous people, and sexual and gender minorities. Learners with disabilities who belong to at least one other marginalized identity experience multiple forms of discrimination. For instance, females with disabilities often experience misogyny in addition to disability-related discrimination.[ii] These different identities can significantly influence access to education and community participation. Ways in which disability and other areas of discrimination intersect are described more below.

Girls with Disabilities

Primary-age girls with disabilities are twice as likely to be out of school than girls without disabilities.[iii] Furthermore, females with disabilities above the age of 15 are less likely to have completed primary school[iv] and have lower literacy rates than both females *without* disabilities and males *with* disabilities.[v]

Some barriers that girls with disabilities face in education include:
- Cultural biases on the value of education for girls and people with disabilities[vi]
- Families keeping girls with disabilities at home due to shame[vii]
- School-based sexual violence, including from teachers and peers[viii]
- Unsafe routes to school, as girls may be more vulnerable to violence[ix]
- Increased likelihood of being forced to leave school to get married so a husband and future children can serve as potential caregivers[x]

Girls with disabilities also may have limited aspirations for their own futures due to lower societal expectations. For instance, one study found that girls with disabilities in sub-Saharan Africa were less likely to discuss potential career goals than boys with disabilities.[xi]

Indigenous People with Disabilities

The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues estimates that 54 million indigenous people worldwide have disabilities.[xii] Although statistical data is limited, it is believed that indigenous communities have higher disability incidence rates than non-indigenous communities due to poverty, malnutrition, inadequate healthcare, violence, and trauma.[xiii]

Like their peers without disabilities, formal education for indigenous learners with disabilities often marginalizes their culture and language.[xiv] However, indigenous learners with disabilities may also experience:
- Lack of access to physically accessible schools in the community, as many indigenous people live in rural areas[xv]
- Instruction by non-indigenous special education teachers who lack appropriate linguistic knowledge or indigenous teachers who have not been trained in disability inclusion[xvi]
- Lack of adapted materials or sign language interpretation services in indigenous languages[xvii]

- An increased risk of experiencing physical and sexual violence, especially among indigenous girls with disabilities[xviii]

Sexual and Gender Minorities with Disabilities

Little is known about sexual and gender minorities with disabilities, especially those from low- and middle-income countries.[xix] This lack of research can partially be attributed to the fact that many cultures stereotype people with disabilities as lacking sexual or gender identities.[xx]

Despite the limited research, information available suggests that sexual and gender minority learners with disabilities experience significant disadvantages in school, including:
- Discrimination from peers and teachers, including those with disabilities, based on sexual orientation or gender identity[xxi]
- Inability to express sexual orientation or gender identity due to pressure from family members and caregivers[xxii]
- The risk of being expelled from school, including a special school,[xxiii] if they reveal their sexual orientation or gender identity
- Exclusion from sex education, preventing access to information about sexual and gender identities apart from cis-gender heterosexuality[xxiv]

Recommendations

Various stakeholders can take steps to improve educational outcomes for learners with disabilities who have intersecting risk of marginalization. These steps may include the following:
- Collect data on learners with disabilities and disaggregate, where possible, by intersectional identities
- Raise awareness of and promote policies that protect the rights of people with disabilities who are female, indigenous, and sexual and gender minorities
- Include people with disabilities from multiple marginalized identities in disability-related programming, research, and policy
- Implement a twin-track approach to inclusion that includes:
  - Projects and programs which provide targeted support, education, and resources to children and adults with intersectional identities
  - Make indigenous language and cultural education accessible to learners with disabilities, including the use of indigenous sign languages
  - Make sexual and reproductive health education accessible to learners with disabilities, with an emphasis on girls and sexual/gender minorities
  - Include disability as a component in gender, indigenous, and sexual/gender minority organizations

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