

Advocacy Brief

# Mother Tongue-based Teaching and Education for Girls

August 2005

United Nations Educational, Scientific  
and Cultural Organization  
UNESCO Bangkok



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**Mother tongue-based teaching and education for girls: advocacy brief.**  
Bangkok: UNESCO Bangkok, 2005.

10 p.

Running title: Advocacy brief on Mother Tongue-based  
Teaching and Education for Girls

1. Girls education. 2. Mother tongue instruction. 3. Bilingual education.  
4. Basic education. 5. Educationally disadvantaged.  
6. Educational opportunities. I. Title.

ISBN 92-9223-058-1

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Published by the  
UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education  
920 Sukhumvit Road., Prakanong  
Bangkok 10110, Thailand

Printed in Thailand

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# Mother Tongue-based Teaching and Education for Girls

## Language and girls' schooling

Basic education is seen as the best means for improving conditions for poor and rural populations, disadvantaged social groups, and females, in general. One of the agreed goals of the Dakar Framework for Action is to ensure that *by 2015 all children, especially girls, children in difficult circumstances, and children from ethnic minorities, have access to complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality*. Another goal calls for *higher literacy rates, particularly among women*. All countries have been given a clear mandate to remove barriers to progress for girls and women. Meanwhile, one of the biggest obstacles to Education for All remains in place: the use of foreign languages for teaching and learning.

The Asia-Pacific region is characterized by rich ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity. Papua New Guinea, for example, has about 800 languages, Indonesia has 650 and India has 380. In this context, children who have an opportunity to learn through their mother tongue or home language have the best chance of understanding what is taught, making the connection between the spoken and written word and participating in their own learning. Yet, many others must struggle to learn through a foreign language or language variety that is not their own. Forcing children to learn a new language before they can learn anything else creates an educational handicap that should not exist. The handicap may

be overcome in middle-class or elite conditions, but it grows exponentially when it intersects with poverty, hunger, disability, remote rural conditions, social marginality -- or simply being born female.

Understanding the conditions under which marginalized populations live is a crucial first step towards designing a school system that works on their behalf. There are strong connections between ethno-linguistic background, girls' school participation, and educational opportunities in Asia and throughout the world. An exploration of these connections reveals strategies that policy makers, education advocates and practitioners may follow to improve the situation for girls and women. The guiding principle is to adopt an appropriate school language, which makes a difference for girls even more than it does for all disadvantaged learners.

## Language and marginality

The linguistic boundaries between rich and poor are usually quite clear. The elite speak the language of education, governance and other official domains, while marginalized groups speak languages or dialects that are not valued or even recognized outside their communities. These groups are often called "linguistic minorities," but the term may be deceiving. For example, such groups outnumber speakers of the dominant language in countries like Lao

PDR, where mother tongue speakers of Lao comprise between 35 and 45 percent of the population. Further, ethnic minorities in China may represent only 8 percent of the population, but they number close to 100 million people. Economic activities and language are interrelated in these contexts. Over 50 percent of citizens of low-income countries work in the informal sector, doing small trading or bartering locally. These activities do not usually expose either children or adults to the dominant official language that would help them in school. The younger and more disadvantaged people are, the more likely it is that the home language will provide the most viable means of access to education and to a more productive future. This does not mean that people do not want to learn official languages; on the contrary, they are acutely aware of their economic importance. They are also aware that schools are not doing a good job of teaching these languages.

A linguistic mismatch between school and community creates problems in both *access* to school services and in the *quality* of those services. First, it is difficult for families to send children to school if that school does not adequately communicate regarding enrolment procedures, dates and times, and what is to be taught. Second, only some of those who attend school will be able to learn the new language well enough to understand instruction and pass to higher levels. Finally, constant and well-founded fear of failure may cause learners to have low aspirations for their own educational achievement and, thus, participate unwittingly in a vicious circle of dropout and failure. The observable symptoms of using a foreign language of instruction are high repetition, failure and dropout rates - all of which disproportionately affect marginalized populations in rural areas and, particularly, girls.

## Girls, marginality and language

In 1993, linguistic researcher Corson found that the three groups most affected by unjust language policies and planning in education are women and girls, the poor, and groups with languages not represented in formal structures. The injustice is clearly greatest for those who experience all three conditions simultaneously. Gender research has demonstrated that unless girls and women are working in markets or factories, they are much less likely than boys and men to be exposed to an official language because their lives are more often restricted to the home and family where the local language is spoken. This means that girls are less likely than boys to understand school instruction. Unfortunately, this difference goes unnoticed because girls are given fewer opportunities to speak and are expected to perform less well than boys.

Indeed, researchers in bilingual education in Africa and Latin America have found that girls who learn in familiar languages stay in school longer, are more likely to be identified as good students, do better on achievement tests, and repeat grades less often than girls who do not get home language instruction. This indicates that a change in the language of teaching and learning can greatly improve opportunities for educational access and attainment for female students.

## Mother tongue-based bilingual education

Bilingual education starts with the learner's knowledge and experiences by developing reading, writing and thinking skills in the mother tongue or home language (L1), while teaching the second or foreign language (L2) as a subject. If time is taken to build second language skills based on a solid foundation in the first language, the results can be high-level bilingualism and biliteracy, as wide-

scale longitudinal research in the north has demonstrated. A strong bilingual model such as this provides long-term benefits like higher self-esteem, greater self-confidence, and higher aspirations for schooling and life.

Some countries in the Asia-Pacific region have taken steps to adapt to the language or languages of the learner. In Papua New Guinea, some community schools teach in the mother tongue for the first three years, while others use Tok Pisin, a regional lingua franca. Other programmes use the L2 for much of the instruction, but reserve a place for the L1 and local knowledge. This is the case in parts of Viet Nam, where the L1 is taught as a subject, or in Indonesia, where part of the day is set aside for local curriculum. Unfortunately, few programmes promote strong language and literacy skills in the home language, whether due to misunderstanding of the learning theory or failure to prioritize school language policy. Even some use of the L1 promotes learning and self-esteem, but at this time, the biggest benefits of schooling go to boys and girls who speak the language that dominates the society.

## Obstacles to girls' education and strategies to address them

A surprising number of obstacles to girls' school participation are reported worldwide by poor and even by some richer countries. While these are generalizations that can not apply to all contexts or countries, some of the most common are the following:

*Family decisions:* Families with limited resources tend to send their sons to school and use their daughters for household tasks or small trading to support the family. There may be cultural and/or religious biases against formal education for girls, and early marriage makes it difficult for girls to study.

*School-based conditions:* Girls are vulnerable to sexual exploitation by male teachers and students, especially where there are long distances between home and school. Schools that lack latrines do not meet privacy needs. Teachers tend to perceive girls as less academically able than boys, which may lead to derision in class. Furthermore, they often give girls domestic tasks such as cleaning classrooms and carrying water for the others.

*Girls' own attitudes and experiences:* Girls become exhausted from balancing household tasks with attending school and studying. They may drop out due to lack of female role models, inability to understand instruction, low self-esteem, or feeling that the curriculum is not relevant to their needs or interests.

In the Asia-Pacific region, there are some additional considerations:

- Greater vulnerability of girls from female-headed households
- Engagement of female children in wage labor, particularly in factories, as well as in the sex industry
- Relative irrelevance of formal education in preparing learners for productive work in the formal or informal sectors

All of these conditions work against basic education for girls, particularly those from poor and otherwise marginalized groups. There is a need for workable strategies in the Asia-Pacific region that respond appropriately to each context. Two types of strategies have achieved positive results thus far:

**1. Strategies that attempt to overcome traditional reluctance to send girls to school by addressing marriage practices, family values, female role models, and school conditions.** Incentive programmes in Bangladesh, for example, have increased female enrolment by giving food or monthly stipends in exchange for regular school

attendance and agreement not to marry before age 18. Schools in Bangladesh have experimented with shorter days, seasonal sessions and running in shifts to allow for girls to complete housework. The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) programme has increased female enrolment significantly by offering inexpensive basic schooling to poor children and by allocating 70 percent of their openings to girls.

**2. Strategies that attempt to bring about girl-friendly attitudes and practices, especially through teacher training and hiring practices.** One example is to train and employ more female teachers, requiring an improvement of physical conditions at teacher training institutions and schools, themselves. Another example is hiring female community members, a BRAC strategy. A UNICEF project in Viet Nam is attempting to target vulnerable populations by incorporating strategies for teaching multi-grade classrooms, mother tongue-based teaching and gender awareness into teacher training.

## How mother tongue-based learning breaks down barriers to girls

How can a change in school language policy break down barriers to girls and complement the strategies mentioned above?

The following are some claims regarding positive effects of mother tongue use on girls' school participation. Some claims are backed by solid evidence, while others are hypothesized on the basis of what is known, with examples from the Asia-Pacific region where they are available.

More girls enroll in school when they can learn in a language that is familiar to them. Girls and their families may be less apprehensive about attending a school that uses their language and, by

association, a familiar culture and set of values. Teachers in bilingual programmes speak to students and their families in the L1, increasing family access to information about enrolment and schooling processes.

Use of the home language in school increases parent participation and influence. Improved communication allows parents to participate in school activities and decision-making so that schools respond more to community needs and values. The resulting curriculum may better meet local needs so that schooling becomes more relevant for girls.

Teachers from the same linguistic and cultural communities as their students are less likely to exploit female students. Teachers who interact socially with students' families are potentially more trustworthy and/or more subject to social control, reducing the risk that they will abuse girls sexually or otherwise.

The above claims are substantiated by worldwide studies documenting parent support for bilingual primary programmes, as well as by parent confidence in bilingual teachers. In the Asia-Pacific region, mother tongue-based programmes promoted by NGOs are made possible by high levels of community participation in L1 materials production and in school decision-making. In Davao del Norte, Philippines, for example, women in a mother tongue-based literacy project asked that their children be taught instead, resulting in a joint pre-school/adult class. Although they did not mention girls specifically, parents in PNG were reportedly pleased that their children came out of Tok Ples schools with an ability to function in their own language and an appreciation of their own culture, both of which were undermined by the national school system.

Girls in bilingual classes stay in school longer. Mother tongue-based schooling makes the home-school transition easier

and, since girls have less exposure to the second language, they feel more comfortable speaking and learning in the L1. They are more likely to enjoy school, experience success, and perceive that schooling is relevant, which will give them the skills and confidence to continue their school careers.

Girls learn better and can demonstrate their learning in the mother tongue. Being able to use a familiar language in class allows girls to express the range of their thoughts and experiences, as well as demonstrate what they have learned. In this way, teachers can make more realistic assessments of their capabilities and teach by building on what they know, instead of requiring them to communicate in a language they do not understand.

Bilingual teachers treat girls more fairly in the learning process. Because girls can communicate as freely as boys in the home language, teachers see that girls are more capable than they may have thought previously. Their expectations become more optimistic, and they are more likely to assist girls in their learning, reducing repetition and failure rates.

These claims are related to pedagogical and affective factors that influence school success and retention. There is evidence from African experiences that girls in bilingual programmes repeat grades less often and stay in school longer than girls and boys in dominant language schools. Similarly, bilingual schools in PNG have reported higher enrolment, lower dropout, and a higher proportion of girls than in other schools. The key seems to be replacing recitation and rote learning with greater communication and participation, a process which is not guaranteed, but is facilitated by using the L1.

More women may become teachers and, thus, role models for girls. If women are most comfortable and skillful at speaking local languages due to their home experiences, they are more likely to enroll in teacher education for mother tongue-

based programmes, especially if they are able to return to their home communities to work. If bilingual schools attract women from rural and previously marginalized groups, girls will have women like themselves as role models.

The idea of recruiting female bilingual teachers was taken up by an NGO in Bolivia, which has developed an innovative “pedagogical secondary school” programme for indigenous girls. This programme prepares them to teach in the mother tongue in their home communities, and partially solves the problem of filling posts in remote areas. A similar project for marginalized girls in Rajasthan, India has been successful in increasing the proportion of trained female teachers from the students’ communities by creating special residential training schools for women, though it did not specifically target language of instruction. Neither project has provided teacher training through official structures, but both have allowed women from marginalized groups unprecedented access to training and higher profile positions.

## Promoting change

There are already powerful pedagogical and social justifications for using the mother tongue in school, but the fact that mother tongue use is linked to improvements in girls’ participation should call attention to its potential for meeting Education for All goals. To make these links more solid, researchers need to collect data on school enrolment, repetition, dropout, and graduation that clearly differentiates between girls and boys. There should also be more descriptive studies of peoples’ values, attitudes and opinions in terms of gender and language.

How can the home language be brought into schools that have been dominated by another language for so long?



Schooling systems must change along with attitudes to improve educational opportunities for female learners. The following are some “foot in the door” strategies that are likely to promote awareness and encourage participants to re-evaluate unfair schooling practices. When these measures lead to more active participation of all disadvantaged children and especially girls, space may be made for more far-reaching reform:

**Authorize oral use of the mother tongue in the classroom, especially where it has traditionally been prohibited.** This will take away some of the stigma associated with the mother tongue and lead the way for more systematic use of both first and second languages.

**Organize teacher placement so that teachers are placed in communities whose languages they share.** This is likely to improve the opportunities for classroom communication, along with increasing the number of female teachers because they can stay in or near their home communities.

**Use the mother tongue for preschool teaching, adult literacy, and other non-formal education.** It may be easier to change the language of teaching in less formal arenas, after which it is a logical extension to change formal primary and secondary levels.

**Provide in-service training for teachers in first and second language development.** These are themes that should be taught wherever there is linguistic diversity, and teachers need to understand the theories and methods underlying bilingual programmes before they can effectively implement such teaching.

**Add the study of mother tongue as a discipline to the curriculum.** This involves no official change in the medium of instruction, but gives learners literacy support in their first language.

### **Work with teachers and communities to operationalize local curriculum components of school programmes.**

In school systems that have already set aside time for local curriculum, teachers need strategies for involving community members and including local language, culture and knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

Using the mother tongue for teaching and learning does not in itself equalize opportunities for female learners, but there are clear indications that it improves conditions for all learners, and especially girls. Designing a school system that recognizes the language, culture and competence of the learner is an important step towards providing “Education for All.” Bringing the home language into schools means that formal learning is no longer just for the dominant groups, but for all children. Such a change promises to dramatically improve education for rural, marginalized, ethnic and linguistic minority children and, particularly, for girls.

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