1. introduction and background

THE ISSUE

Gender disparity in education is an old phenomenon. Traditionally, girls have been at a disadvantage in most parts of the globe, and they continue to be so even today. This is especially the case in the Commonwealth, where gender disparity is apparent in schooling participation rates in many countries. Although a number of Commonwealth countries in the Caribbean, Europe, East Asia and the Pacific have achieved gender parity in primary and even secondary enrolment rates, most Commonwealth countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia still have significant gaps, with the proportion of girls not attending schools being much higher than that of boys. In fact, the Commonwealth is home to more than two thirds of the world's out-of-school children: nearly 75 million of about 115 million primary-school-age children in the world estimated to be not attending school. Girls have a disproportionate share, as about 35 to 40 million of the nearly 65 million girls out of primary school globally are in the Commonwealth.

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However, a number of countries, many of them in the Commonwealth, have also made tremendous progress in girls' education in the last one to three decades. As a result, gender disparities are narrowing in many parts of the globe. At the same time, a new phenomenon has emerged in certain countries where gender disparities in education are turning in favour of girls, and therefore against boys, both in terms of participation and performance. This is particularly evident in countries that have achieved universal access and have

high participation rates for both girls and boys, at least at the primary stage of schooling (including a number of Commonwealth countries in the Caribbean, Europe, East Asia and the Pacific, and some in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

A commitment to achieving gender parity and equality in education in the Commonwealth makes it important to take note of this trend and to understand it better. This is the background leading to the present study, which was initiated as a response to this issue being raised by member countries at the 15th Commonwealth Conference of Education Ministers (CCEM) in Edinburgh in December 2003.

The fact that the entire debate on boys' underachievement views this in relation to the achievement of girls makes it look like a question of rivalry between boys and girls. Although it is unavoidable to compare the achievement of boys with that of girls in such a discussion, the framework used for the present analysis is not that of gender rivalry. On the contrary, this discussion views the issue as another manifestation of gendered social processes and uses the frame of gender equality to understand it.

The two aspects of boys' underachievement in education that will be considered are participation and performance, underachievement being used here as a relative term. This section initially focuses on participation followed by an analysis of trends in performance or learning outcomes at a later stage.

Participation

Table 1 shows school life expectancy (SLE), representing the average number of years of schooling that individuals can expect to receive in different regions.

It is clear from the table that while SLE is higher for boys in sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia and the Pacific, and South and West Asia, it is higher for girls in Latin America and the Caribbean, North America and Western Europe. Both boys and girls experienced an improvement in SLE during 1998–2002 in all regions except for North America and Western Europe, which actually witnessed a decline in boys' SLE. However, the regions where SLE is higher for girls than boys are also the regions where SLE is higher for both boys and girls as compared to those where SLE is lower for both. Hence, though regional analysis has its limitations, as what is true for the region might not be true for all the countries therein, it can still be safely inferred that there is no uniform

TABLE 1: SCHOOL LIFE EXPECTANCY (SLE) BY REGION: A GLOBAL PICTURE (2002 AND CHANGE SINCE 1998)

	SLE IN YEARS, 2002			CHANGE (1998-2002)		
REGIONS	**TOTAL**	**FEMALE**	**MALE**	**TOTAL**	**FEMALE**	**MALE**
SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA	7.8	7.0	8.5	+1.1	+1.0	+1.1
ARAB STATES	10.2	9.6	10.7	+0.4	+0.5	+0.2
CENTRAL ASIA	11.5	11.4	11.6	+0.7	+0.7	+0.6
EAST ASIA AND THE PACIFIC	11.2	11.0	11.3	+1.0	+1.1	+0.9
SOUTH AND WEST ASIA	9.1	8.4	9.7	+0.6	+1.0	+0.3
LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN	13.1	13.3	12.8	+1.0	+1.1	+0.7
NORTH AMERICA AND WESTERN EUROPE	16.4	17.0	15.3	+0.2	+0.4	- 0.5
CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE	12.8	12.8	12.8	+1.0	+1.0	+0.9

Source: UNESCO, 2005.

pattern and that this trend of boys' under-participation is largely confined to areas that have experienced higher growth in educational attainment rates.

The absolute number of children adds another dimension to this phenomenon. The number of out-of-primary-school children, especially girls, is much higher in regions where SLE is lower for girls. Sub-Saharan African and South Asian Commonwealth countries fall in this category. It is interesting to note that the number of out-of-primary-school girls is higher than for boys even in Latin America and the Caribbean, where the SLE is estimated to be higher for girls. This means that the phenomenon of boys' under-participation concerns relatively smaller numbers and is not a major concern at the primary stage of education in any region (Table 2).

TABLE 2: NUMBER OF OUT-OF-PRIMARY-SCHOOL CHILDREN: A GLOBAL PICTURE (1998 AND 2002)

	1998 (IN THOUSANDS)			2002 (IN THOUSANDS)		
REGIONS	**TOTAL**	**FEMALE**	**MALE**	**TOTAL**	**FEMALE**	**MALE**
SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA	44,581	23,933	20,648	40,370	22,003	18,367
ARAB STATES	8,491	4,991	3,501	6,906	4,025	2,882
CENTRAL ASIA	775	400	375	635	341	294
EAST ASIA AND THE PACIFIC	8,309	4,151	4,158	14,782	7,372	7,410
SOUTH AND WEST ASIA	35,722	23,189	12,534	30,109	17,411	12,698
LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN	3,620	1,997	1,623	2,084	1,226	858
NORTH AMERICA AND WESTERN EUROPE	1,885	918	967	2,421	1,101	1,320
CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE	3,340	1,830	1,510	2,569	1,366	1,203

Source: UNESCO, 2005.

The issue of boys' underachievement, however, assumes importance for later stages as evidenced in terms of lower transition and participation rates for boys in secondary and higher levels of education in many Commonwealth countries – not only in the Caribbean and the Pacific, but also in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. Nevertheless, the analysis makes it apparent that lower transition rates from the primary to the secondary stage for boys in some countries might be a reflection of girls' low participation at the primary stage, and hence cannot be labelled as boys' underachievement. A lower net enrolment ratio (NER) for boys at the secondary stage, on the other hand, is a clearer indicator of gender disparity against boys for that level.

Table 3 selectively presents the picture from those Commonwealth countries that have reported either a higher transition rate from the basic to the secondary education stage or higher NER or both. The table does not include those Commonwealth countries, nearly 40 per cent of all, where both transition and NERs at the secondary stage are lower for girls. A perusal of the table indicates that the situation is quite varied even for these countries that show lower transition or enrolment ratios for boys. The diversity in the trend makes careful analysis and interpretation important.

A higher transition rate for girls in countries with a large disparity at primary level in favour of boys simply reflects a situation where a smaller percentage of girls reaches the final grade of primary, and hence a larger proportion continues to secondary, whereas a larger proportion of boys reaches the last grade and therefore a smaller proportion continues thereafter. In such situations, despite a higher transition rate, NER for girls remains lower than for boys at secondary level. Countries like India, The Gambia, Uganda and Zambia fall in this category. Boys' underachievement is therefore not an issue in such cases.

There is another set of countries where the transition rates are higher for boys but this still does not translate into higher participation rates at the secondary stage. This implies that a high level of drop out occurs for boys within the secondary stage. Then there are those countries where both transition rates and NER are higher for girls. Boys' under-participation is a concern in both of these circumstances. The countries in these two categories are also differentiated by the fact that the rates for boys' participation are lower than girls' in a situation of overall low enrolment rates in some countries (for example, a number of African and Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Lesotho, Namibia and Swaziland).

TABLE 3: TRANSITION TO SECONDARY EDUCATION AND NET ENROLMENT RATIOS AT SECONDARY LEVEL IN SELECTED COMMONWEALTH COUNTRIES

	2001-2002 TRANSITION RATE TO SECONDARY STAGE (%)			2002-2003 NET ENROLMENT RATIO (NER) AT SECONDARY STAGE (%)		
REGION AND COUNTRY	**TOTAL**	**FEMALE**	**MALE**	**TOTAL**	**FEMALE**	**MALE**
AFRICA						
BOTSWANA	93.9	94.3	93.6	53.6	57.4	49.9
GAMBIA, THE	78.5	79.8	77.5	27.9	23.9	32.0
LESOTHO	66.9	66.7	67.0	22.5	27.2	17.8
MAURITIUS	62.7	68.4	57.4	74.4	74.5	74.3
NAMIBIA	83.3	85.2	81.2	44.2	49.7	38.7
SEYCHELLES	99.0	98.9	99.1	99.9	99.7	100.0
SOUTH AFRICA	91.9	93.0	90.7	65.5	68.4	62.7
SWAZILAND	78.1	79.6	76.6	32.4	35.6	29.3
UGANDA	42.2	44.1	40.7	16.5	15.6	17.4
ZAMBIA	54.5	55.6	53.5	22.2	20.6	24.9
CARIBBEAN						
BAHAMAS	79.4	77.9	81.0	75.8	77.3	74.4
DOMINICA	96.5	97.4	95.8	91.8	97.8	86.0
GUYANA	67.6A	70.7	64.7	76.4	77.9	75.0
JAMAICA	95.2B	90.7	100.0	75.4	77.0	73.9
ST LUCIA	65.7	74.6	56.6	76.1	84.7	67.6
ST VINCENT/GRENADINES	51.1	57.8	44.2	58.4	60.8	55.9
TRINIDAD & TOBAGO	97.4B	100.8	94.8	72.0	74.7	69.4
EAST ASIA AND PACIFIC						
AUSTRALIA	NA			88.0	89.1	87.0
FIJI	98.4	96.6	100.0	76.0	78.7	73.4
SAMOA	97.5	99.4	95.7	62.1	65.4	59.1
MALAYSIA	99.7	99.5	100.0	70.0	73.8	66.4
NEW ZEALAND	NA			92.7	94.1	91.3
TONGA	78.9	77.6	80.1	71.1	76.7	67.5
EUROPE AND N. AMERICA						
MALTA	90.7	92.0	89.6	86.8	87.8	85.8
CANADA	NA			97.6	97.9	97.4
CYPRUS	99.4	98.9	99.8	92.8	94.3	91.4
UK	NA			95.2	96.6	93.8
SOUTH ASIA						
BANGLADESH	89.3	95.7	83.0	44.5	46.9	42.1
INDIA	86.7	89.0	84.9	NA		
SRI LANKA	97.0	97.7	96.4	NA		

A REFERS TO 1998-1999
B REFERS TO 2000 (UNESCO, 2004)

Source: UNESCO, 2005.

On the other hand, in some of the Caribbean and Pacific countries in the Commonwealth, the relative under-participation occurs in the context of overall high enrolment ratios.

Performance

Underperformance of boys is another dimension of underachievement. It is not easy to assess performance and information is not readily available, especially such as would facilitate cross-country comparisons. Different learning outcome tests conducted in some countries are the major source of information. These include the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the survey of the Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) being conducted in different groups of countries. Using these tests as the indicator for performance has limitations as learning outcome is only one aspect of performance. Moreover, the coverage of such tests has been limited to specific geographical areas. Nevertheless, they help to explicate certain significant aspects of educational outcome in those areas, and the available evidence shows the following important trends[1] :

- Girls tend to perform better than boys in countries where they have equal access to the school system, irrespective of the income level. In countries where girls are disadvantaged in terms of access, gender differences in achievement are generally small or insignificant, implying that girls do not usually underperform even when they are under-participating.
- Girls are usually more confident and perform better in reading as compared to boys. The gender differences are usually not high in performance in mathematics but girls feel less confident of performing well against boys.

Understanding and addressing the issue

The above analysis establishes that though girls continue to be more disadvantaged in education and face inequalities in many ways, the emerging trend of boys' underachievement also needs attention, especially in terms of underperformance and in some cases even of under-participation. It is important to understand the nature and causes of the problem and look at the possible ways in which it could be addressed.

1 Based largely on trends as reported in UNESCO, 2005.

This study is based on the analysis of secondary data from various sources and case studies of specific examples conducted in four Commonwealth countries: Australia, Jamaica, Lesotho and Samoa. The conceptual framework used for the analysis is derived from the notion of gender equality in education as elaborated in the following section.

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GENDER EQUALITY IN EDUCATION AND BOYS' UNDERACHIEVEMENT

Gender equality in education can be defined in several ways. Taking a cue from the capability approach, it can be defined as ensuring equality of entitlement, equality of opportunities and equality in the capacity to exercise the entitlements and use the opportunities for both girls and boys belonging to diverse social, ethnic, linguistic or economic groups. The notion of equality also refers to relational aspects and is linked to the issues of justice and freedom. Any practice or trend that prevents either boys or girls, or both, from realising their full potential to grow into responsible and aware individuals needs to be perceived as a hindrance.

Gender is a social construct, referring to the ways in which societies distinguish women and men and assign them social roles. Often mistakenly equated with the biological category of 'women', gender is actually a conceptual category referring to masculine and feminine qualities, behaviour patterns, roles and responsibilities. Femininity does not exist in isolation from masculinity as the construction and power of the one determines the construction and power of the other. This also leads to various forms of inequality and disparity between women and men that affect their capacities and lives in significant ways. It often works to the disadvantage of both: girls have to face restrictions and confinements in various forms; boys have to face the pressure of being breadwinners and protectors. It is in the interest of both men and women to move away from existing unequal relations of gender. Education can be and often is perceived as a process of expanding human capacities to contribute to the making of a just, equal and compassionate society. However, it is

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not necessarily always a process of empowerment and transformation. It has equal potential or danger of being a process of socialising learners into existing norms, values and power structures and reinforcing unequal relations.

In this context, it is important to note that gender equality cannot be viewed in isolation from other forms of inequalities that exist in different societies. Societies are stratified in most parts of the world, and gendered differences often get sharpened by other dimensions such as race, ethnicity, location, class and other social or economic groupings that divide societies. Gender equality in education should encompass the issue of disparities and inequalities existing between different social and economic groups even within the same sex. Similarly, it should also encompass the diverse nature and extent of gender inequalities that exist within different groups.

The issue of boys' underachievement needs to be understood in light of the notion of gender equality as defined above. The questions that need to be addressed in this context are:

- What are the finer aspects of this phenomenon as they are seen in different countries?
- What are the variations in the nature of the trend as seen in different countries?
- What are the trends when it comes to specific social/ geographical/ ethnic groups in a particular country or region?
- Do socio-economic practices play any role in this and if so, what are these and how do they operate?
- How are these related to the socialisation process of boys and girls and to the expected gender roles in particular societies?
- How is this connected to curriculum and teaching-learning practices adopted in schools?
- Does this have any link with teachers' expectations, and if yes, what are these?
- Is there any difference in the level of motivation between girls and boys and, if so, what are the reasons?
- Do school and schooling processes question or reinforce the existing

societal norms of masculine and feminine behaviours, images and practices?

- How do these various factors, socio-economic backgrounds, socialisation, expected gender roles and schooling processes act on and interact with each other and get manifested in boys' underachievement?
- Does the trend of boys' underachievement mean a situation of gender privilege for girls?

Answers to these questions should help in understanding the trend, appreciating the underlying causes and developing various ways to address the issue.

HOW THE REPORT IS STRUCTURED

The report is organised into two parts and seven chapters. In Part I, this introductory chapter is followed by a review of literature on the issue of boys' underachievement. The review helps in classifying the available literature on the basis of the arguments that have been used to explain the trend and therefore sets a context. The third chapter summarises the country case studies – from Australia, Jamaica, Lesotho and Samoa – and attempts to find answers to the questions posed above using both the available literature as well as the understanding emanating from the case studies. The discussion on the background of the identified countries also brings out their specific economic and social contexts. In addition, Chapter 3 points out to the limitations of this work and provides pointers for further research.

A specific advantage that this study offers is that it is one of the first to provide a cross-regional analysis, as most existing studies have so far looked at the phenomenon in one specific context only.

Part II contains the four country studies. The choice of countries from three different continents was determined by the desire to have regional representation of countries where the trend has been evident and that offer the potential to provide insights into the diverse nature of the issue. The case studies have largely focused on an in-depth understanding of one example of a school/ educational institution/ programme that has been perceived as a solution to the issue in the particular country. The interventions chosen include both formal and outside-formal[2] schooling initiatives, providing an insight into

2 The term 'non-formal' is being avoided deliberately as it has different connotations in education and is identified with particular programmes in various countries.

both kinds of strategies. The objective was to identify the commonalities as well as differences in the causes and the potential solutions to the issue of boys' underachievement.

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