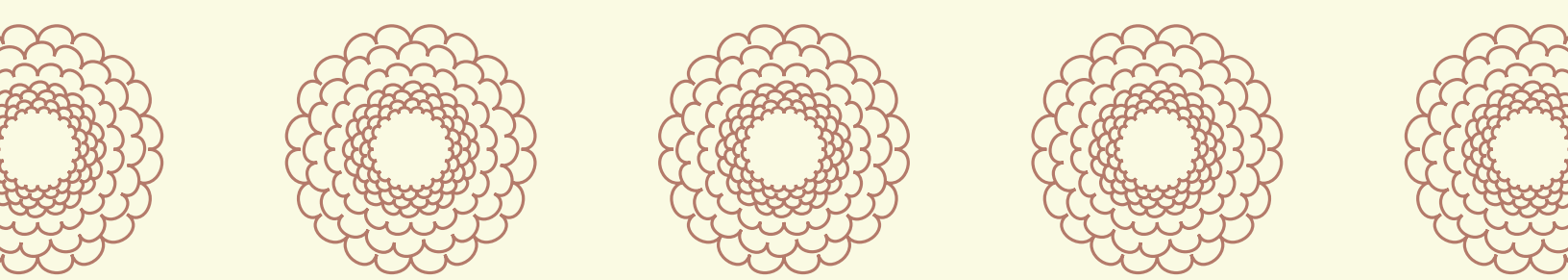


POLICY BRIEF

# From Exclusion to Inclusion: Enhancing Access to Inclusive Education Policies for Girls with Disabilities in Post-War Tigray

ECHIDNA GLOBAL SCHOLARS PROGRAM





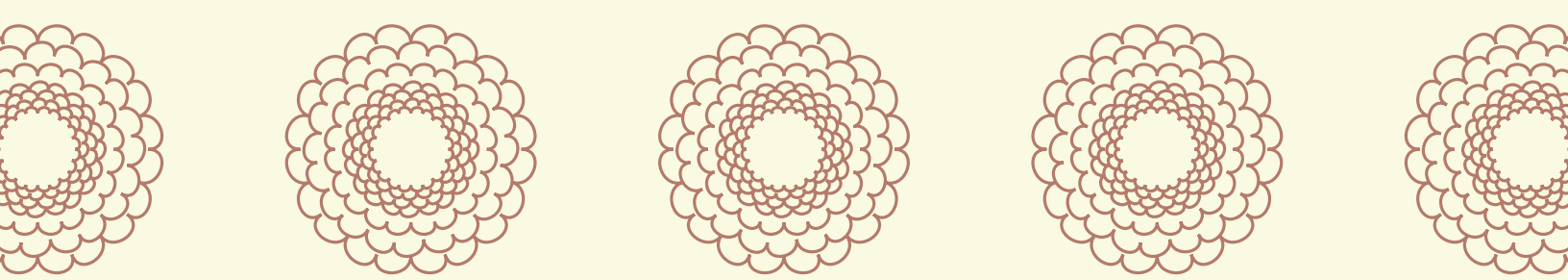
## Executive Summary

Inclusive education is key to achieving sustainable development goals of gender equality and quality education for all. Inclusion of people with disabilities also contributes to economic development (UNICEF, 2021). On top of that inclusive education is a human right that contributes to ensuring other human rights.

Girls with disabilities in Ethiopia, and in the Tigray region in particular, are excluded from education in many ways, which vary from limited participation and learning in schools to complete denial of any type of education. Yet there is a dearth of research on the lived experiences of education of girls with disabilities and the ways that current policies and practices promote or inhibit inclusive education for these girls in the high poverty and post-conflict setting of Tigray.

This policy brief presents qualitative research that sheds light on how policy and practice can more effectively ensure inclusive education by investigating the policy and legal frameworks for inclusive education, lived situations of girls with disabilities, barriers to education inclusion, and the factors that support the inclusion of girls with disabilities living at the intersection of war, poverty, and sexual and gender based violence.

The findings highlight infrastructural barriers, resource limitations, discriminatory mindsets and attitudes, and a lack of binding policy enforcement mechanisms. All of these are exacerbated in the context of war, sexual violence, and poverty. While there is evidence that teachers, families, and local organizations have tried to improve inclusive education for girls with disabilities, these efforts are neither adequate nor systemic enough to address the continuum of structural challenges girls with disabilities face.



To improve inclusive education for girls with disabilities in Tigray, local actors and international organizations must work together in coordinated ways. Local actors are key to organically identifying the barriers on the ground and developing adaptable solutions to those problems. International actors can then collaborate with local actors by providing technical, technological, financial, and human resource support. Doing this will improve awareness, strengthen the capacity of stakeholders, alleviate resource limitations, and encourage the enforcement of existing policies and strategies related to inclusive education for girls with disabilities.

# I. Introduction

Achieving gender equality (SDG 5) and inclusive, equitable quality education for all (SDG 4) remain critical global priorities. However, girls with disabilities<sup>1</sup> are disproportionately excluded from the benefits of these goals. Globally, more than 50% of children with disabilities are excluded from school, and in some contexts, an estimated 90% are denied access to education (Humanity & Inclusion U.S. 2020). Alarming, the literacy rate for women with disabilities remains below 1% (UN, n.d.), highlighting the severe barriers they face in accessing education. When examined through the lens of human rights, this data suggests that the great majority of girls with disabilities are denied their fundamental rights to education. This has far-reaching implications for other human rights, such as the rights to work, participate in public life, and live with dignity. In addition to human rights concerns, the exclusion of girls with disabilities in education imposes significant economic costs. The International Labor Organization estimates that global GDP losses due to the exclusion of persons with disabilities from the workforce range from 1% to 7%, not accounting for the economic burden on families who provide care (UNICEF 2021).

Inclusive education throughout Ethiopia is characterized by low enrollment, particularly for girls with disabilities, due to institutional, socio-economic and cultural barriers impeding girls' access to education (Federal Ministry of Education 2021). This exclusion has resulted in an estimated economic loss of \$667 million, or 5% of the country's GDP (Buckup 2009). The actual impact is likely much higher, as these estimates often overlook the wide range of disabilities and lack comprehensive data (Buckup 2009).

In Tigray, the situation is even more dire. While data and research on inclusion specific to Tigray are limited, it is likely that national trends for girls with disabilities are compounded by the effects of war, widespread sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and extreme poverty in the region.

The intersection of disability, poverty, remote living conditions, and conflict creates a cycle of disadvantage that is difficult to break (Yorke et al. 2022). As such, a deeper understanding is needed of the lived educational experiences of girls with disabilities in Tigray. This policy brief seeks to address this critical gap by exploring the factors that both facilitate and hinder disabled girls' access to education in Tigray. To that end, this brief examines their educational experiences at the intersection of disability, gender, poverty, and the unique challenges posed by conflict. Finally, this brief aims to inform policy and programmatic efforts to ensure the inclusion of one of Tigray's most marginalized groups.



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<sup>1</sup> Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities states that "Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others."

## II. Context

### THE POLICY AND LEGAL FRAMEWORKS FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN TIGRAY

In 1999, the United Nations Human Rights Council developed the human rights model, which states that education should be available, accessible, acceptable, and adaptable (UNHRC 1999). This model is the foundational framework for policy and legal frameworks for inclusive education, internationally and domestically.

Availability refers to the need for a sufficient number of functioning educational institutions, and accessibility refers to the ability for all to access them without facing discrimination. These guidelines are consonant with the access element of inclusive education (UNHRC 1999). Acceptability speaks to the relevance, appropriateness and quality of the education itself, and adaptability refers to how flexible and responsive that education is. These two criteria go beyond access to encompass learning and participation as key elements of inclusive education (UNHRC 1999).

The effectiveness of the human rights framework for inclusive education depends on the existence of adequate subsidiary laws, policies, and enforcement mechanisms. In Tigray, policy and legal frameworks for inclusive education stem from laws, policies, and strategies at the national, international, and regional levels. At the national level, the first inclusive education document was the Special Needs Education Program

(SNE), a strategy instated in 2006 based on Ethiopian Transformation Plan (ETP). In 2012, it was replaced by the comprehensive SNE/Inclusive Education (SNE/IE) strategy, which aimed to ensure that all students—including those with disabilities—have access to quality education (Federal Ministry of Education 2012). However, its impact on the ground has been limited due to a lack of inclusive pedagogy, effective pedagogy, and accessible learning environments. Other limiting factors include a shortage of teachers trained in inclusive practices, a lack of awareness and commitment among educational leaders, and an inability to identify problems that exclude both boys and girls with disabilities (Federal Ministry of Education September 2022).

This strategy was followed and replaced by the National Plan of Action for Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities (2012–2021), which did not mention inclusive education for girls with disabilities. In 2022, the Special Need/Inclusive Strategy was developed based on the ten-year Development Plan of Ethiopia (2021–2030) (Federal Ministry of Education September 2022). While the ten-year development plan diagnosed limited accessibility and wide equity gaps in education (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Planning and Development Commission 2021–2030), it did not address the issue of inclusive education for elementary school girls with disabilities. The sixth education sector development program (ESDP VI) also lacks reliable data

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about students with disabilities, thus limiting its ability to develop a workable program (Ministry of Education September 2022) and contribute to inclusive education for girls with disabilities.

The 2022 Special Need/Inclusive Strategy does have detailed provisions aimed at improving school infrastructure through different means. These include curricula, reasonable accommodations, information identification management systems, inclusion-sensitive budget allocations, capacity-building for teachers, and instating monitoring and support systems (Federal Ministry of Education September 2022).

Still, the current strategy is limited in scope. It is not applicable to private schools except in cases where a memorandum of understanding has been signed (Federal Ministry of Education September 2022), significantly restricting its role in ensuring inclusive education for girls with disabilities in private schools. Moreover, it fails to consider the unique needs and challenges of girls with disabilities in specific, local contexts (Yorke et al. 2022), such as Tigray, making it insufficient to ensure inclusive education for all girls with disabilities. Finally, the inclusive education policies and strategies have no binding implementation mechanisms or legal redress options for girls with disabilities. This creates a huge policy and legal lacuna that could leave girls with disabilities behind, making it all the more necessary to look at girls' lived experiences to see the on-ground practical implications of this policy gap.

## BACKGROUND OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR GIRLS WITH DISABILITIES IN TIGRAY

One of the challenges to inclusive education for girls with disabilities in Tigray is the dearth of enrollment data on children with disabilities (Federal Ministry of Education 2021). Research shows that inclusive education in Ethiopia as a whole faces challenges ranging from large class sizes and inadequate educational materials to negative attitudes from teachers, lack of commitment from education officials, and a general lack

of skilled professionals (UNESCO 2025; Ludago 2020). Research conducted in Ethiopia before the conflict (Yorke et al. 2022) identified a cyclical and intersectional relationship between disability, lack of resources, and living in remote or rural areas that impedes girls with disabilities' access to education. This research is relevant to the situation in Tigray, but does not account for the impact of conflict or, specifically, how gender affects the inclusion of girls with disabilities.

Girls and young women with disabilities in Ethiopia face particular and serious challenges. This is because in Ethiopian society, gender inequality interacts with a general lack of awareness and traditional beliefs that disability is a curse and girls and women with disabilities should remain behind closed doors (Yorke et al. 2022). Girls with disabilities in Tigray are excluded in most research, statistical sources, and policy documents. The number of girls with disabilities excluded from school in Tigray is not known. However, in 2024, over 57% of its entire 2.5 million school-aged population was excluded from schooling (Nardos Abraham 2024). This exclusion is caused by multiple contextual factors in the Tigray region that predate and have been exacerbated by conflict.

- **Accessibility and Infrastructure:** Before the war, schools were in remote locations with rough pathways and challenging topography—far from accessible for children with disabilities (Yorke et al. 2022). The war had a devastating impact on education infrastructure, causing the destruction of 88% of classrooms (Tigray Education Bureau Dec, 2021) and 47% of girls' toilets (Tigray Education Bureau Dec, 2021, page 9). As a result, the walking distance to a working primary school has nearly tripled since before the war (2.5 kilometers to 7.3 kilometers) (Tigray Education Bureau Dec, 2021). An assessment by the bureau of education also concluded that the enrollment rate of students with and without disabilities in elementary schools in Tigray decreased from 85% to 21% since the conflict (Tigray Education Bureau, Dec, 2021).

- **Assistive Technologies:** Before the conflict, people with disabilities were left behind due to lack of resources, trained teachers, and limited access to assistive technologies (i.e., braille, crutches, and hearing aids) (Yorke et al. 2022). The war destroyed 83% of those previously available special needs assistive technologies (Tigray Education Bureau Dec, 2021).
- **Sexual and Gender-Based Violence:** Girls with disabilities faced high levels of sexual and gender-based violence before the war, but during the conflict, all women and girls were subjected to egregious acts including rape, mass displacement, siege, and starvation (Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) 2021). Still, the relationship between sexual and gender-based violence and inclusive education for girls with disabilities in Tigray must be better understood.
- **Mindsets and Attitudes:** The influence of mindsets (i.e., those of teachers, students, parents, and community members) on inclusive education in Tigray is not well-researched. Previous research has suggested that a wide range of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse throughout Ethiopia can be attributed to a general lack of awareness and traditional beliefs (UN Division for Social Policy Development 2017).

However, the research did not focus on the impact of attitudes and mindsets in the specific context of war-torn Tigray. One study conducted with parents and teachers in the capital city, Addis Ababa, for example, found that having children with disabilities is considered a sin (Tonegawa 2019).

- **Poverty:** Poverty presents a formidable challenge to inclusive education for girls with disabilities in Tigray. During and after international conflict organizations like UNICEF, Save the Children, Plan International, and World Vision, national and local organizations (e.g., SEN Ethiopia) and other community-based organizations worked to mobilize learning materials and food or cash contributions for teachers (Education Cluster 2022). However, the impact of these initiatives was constrained due to food insecurity, public school closure, and increasing poverty levels across the region (Education Cluster 2022).

The existing evidence gives an overview of the exclusion that girls with disabilities in post-war Tigray face. But to ensure effective policy responses to this situation, a deeper understanding of the girls' lived experiences is needed, as well an understanding of the contextual factors in Tigray and throughout Ethiopia, and the barriers to and opportunities for full access to the right to education they present.

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### III. Methodology

This policy brief is based on research that aimed to understand the current education experiences of girls with disabilities living at the intersection of conflict and poverty. A qualitative research approach was employed, utilizing in-depth interviews with 28 key informants including district (*woreda*) education bureau heads, regional special needs coordinators, civil society leaders, school directors, teachers, and students with disabilities. Additionally, six focus group discussions with a total of 36 participants were organized. Three of the groups had teachers, and three had students with disabilities. A survey was also administered to 38 respondents, and observations of physical accessibility of school facilities were conducted at four schools.

The research area is the Regional State of Tigray, located in the northern part of Ethiopia and among the nine regional states of Ethiopia. The region was devastated by wars throughout the 1970s and 1980s in the fight against the military Junta (BBC News 29 June 2021), in the 1998 Ethio-Eritrean war (Joireman et al. 2021), and in the 2020–2022 conflict between the Tigray Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) plus its allied process. Accordingly, the research is focused on Mekelle, Eastern, Central, and Western zones of Tigray. Data were collected from schools in each of six education districts, or *woredas*—two schools in Mekelle, and one each in Adigrat, Adwa, Wukro Maray (Tahtay Machew), and Shire (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Tigray Region of Ethiopia**





## IV. Findings

The research that underpins this policy briefly revealed that girls with disabilities in Tigray are excluded from education. This exclusion takes different forms, each intensifying the challenges girls with disabilities face in accessing and fully participating in education. Exclusion from education is not a singular experience, but a continuum that affects girls with disabilities in varied ways. At one end of the continuum are girls who are in school but excluded from full participation—engaged, attending but disconnected from meaningful learning. At the other end are girls who are denied access to any kind of schooling or education completely.

Girls with disabilities face multiple barriers that lead to these exclusions. However, there have been efforts—particularly prior to the war—to support inclusive education.

### THE CONTINUUM OF EXCLUSION FOR GIRLS WITH DISABILITIES IN TIGRAY

In Tigray many girls face a **complete denial of access to education, referring to the total exclusion of girls with disabilities from schooling**. Sometimes this exclusion stems from attitudes and practices at the family and community levels. Some girls are locked in their homes and kept from going to school. Girls with intellectual disabilities may be kept physically restrained because their parents fear they will get lost. Others are hidden from the community and neighborhood. As one blind girl from Mekelle explained:

*“There are so many of our sisters with disabilities who could not come to Mekelle because most parents consider blindness a religious curse. In Mekelle is okay as they saw us and learn that blindness is not a curse, but in the remote areas.”*

Some girls with disabilities are also excluded from education because their time is taken up with household work.

School-level decisions can also deny girls with disabilities access to education. As an official from the *woreda* educational office reported:

*“There is one girl with deafness and blindness just like Helen Keller<sup>2</sup>, but she is still excluded from our school because we do not know how to include her and there is no professional who can support us in such cases... When girls with disabilities come to school at the age of 14, for example, we do not accept them in the boarding school as there is age limitation.”*

These are among many examples of girls with disabilities being completely excluded from schooling.

**Some girls with disabilities are in school but excluded from full participation in educational spaces and activities.** Despite being physically present in school, girls with disabilities in Tigray often do not fully participate in educational spaces and activities, which limits their ability to engage in meaningful learning and participation. Girls with disabilities are excluded at times from schools and from school spaces such as classrooms,

2 Helen Keller was a blind and deaf woman who has been influential for deaf and blind people.

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libraries, toilets, administrative buildings, and other spaces which are not made accessible for girls with disabilities. In a focus group discussion, one portrayed the exclusion of girls with disabilities from educational spaces and activities by saying “The building in this elementary school is not, for example, accessible... for people with disabilities.” This depicts the situation of girls with disabilities who are excluded from school spaces while they are in school.

Finally, the few girls with disabilities who get the chance to be in school are excluded from meaningful learning. This form of exclusion refers to a situation where girls with disabilities in Tigray are **physically present in school and actively participating in activities but are not necessarily learning or acquiring skills and knowledge**. Focus group discussions and interviews with girls with disabilities and with teachers confirmed that girls with visual disabilities, for example, are completely excluded from taking natural science courses except for Biology. They are also excluded from taking notes when teachers refuse to read the notes they write on a blackboard out loud. With regard to this, one blind girl said,

*“Teachers simply write, and if they do not read for us, how can we write what they are writing? We are blind after all! If the teachers are asked to read, they refer us to search for the support of other students.”*

The few girls with disabilities who get the chance to be in school are excluded from meaningful learning. This form of exclusion refers to a situation where girls with disabilities in Tigray are physically present in school and actively participating in activities but are not necessarily learning or acquiring skills and knowledge.

## BARRIERS TO EDUCATION FOR GIRLS WITH DISABILITIES IN TIGRAY

The research found several barriers that hinder girls’ access to education in Tigray. These include attitudes of parents, teachers, peers, and community members, as well as infrastructure challenges, resource-related constraints, and the intersection of war, sexual violence, and poverty.

### A. Mindsets and Attitudes

Girls with disabilities in Tigray face significant barriers to education and inclusion driven by the perception of disability as a religious curse, neglect and exclusion by parents and teachers, and bullying and discrimination from peers and parents.

#### » Stigma forces girls with disabilities into isolation

Girls with disabilities in Tigray are forced to live in isolation due to cultural stigma, where disabilities are seen as religious curses that bring shame to the family. This harmful belief is particularly prevalent in remote areas. Participants in interviews and focus group discussions expressed that the main barrier is that some parents hide their children with disabilities, fearing they will be seen as sinners or cursed by their communities. Other families even lock their daughters away because they fear that their disability will bring them shame or dishonor, leaving the girls with no access to education or social interaction.

Additionally, teachers, students with disabilities, and CSO leaders affirmed that there are parents who believe that educating girls with disabilities in particular holds no value, as girls are not seen as economically useful. Participants explained that this belief often leads parents to prioritize household tasks over schooling for girls with disabilities, assuming that such work is more economically beneficial. Interview respondents and focus group discussion participants noted that these prejudicial views are particularly pronounced for girls with intellectual disabilities.

» **Teachers' attitudes create unfair learning environments**

Girls with disabilities are sometimes prevented from participating in school activities, like class assignments, due to their disabilities. Students with disabilities explained that they are often excluded from school activities because of the belief that they are inferior to non-disabled students. As such, they report feeling disempowered and marginalized, leading to feelings of alienation and rejection in the educational setting. Alternatively, participants reported that some teachers also treat girls with disabilities as objects of sympathy, which results in unequal treatment, lower academic expectations, and fewer opportunities for meaningful participation. In an interview with a CSO leader, he mentioned that teachers generalize that girls with disabilities lack the necessary skills and abilities, suggesting segregation instead of inclusion.

Students with disabilities who participated in focus group discussions also reported that teachers often refuse to make simple adjustments for girls with disabilities, like giving extra time for note-taking, offering tutorials, moving them to the front of the classroom, or relocating classrooms to more accessible areas. Key informants from CSOs reported that teachers often justify their refusal to provide reasonable accommodation by claiming that girls with disabilities cannot learn at the same pace as their peers, attributing educational barriers to the abilities of the girls rather than the school's limitations. Students, including girls with disabilities, echoed this, describing how, in some cases, teachers exclude girls with disabilities from certain activities, citing their perceived incapacity, when the true barrier lies within the school system itself. With reference to this, a CSO leader stated,

*"Some teachers do not know how to treat or adaptively teach students with disabilities and try to support them not by making reasonable adjustment but by excluding them from learning processes such as class work, homework, and other assignments."*

It is important to note that teachers report a lack of training and support that would increase their awareness and knowledge of how to apply adaptive teaching methods.

» **Bullying and abuse from peers and parents demoralize and discourage disabled girls**

Once in school, girls with disabilities encounter a learning environment rife with prejudice and discrimination, especially from their peers. As reported by participants in this study, this mistreatment frequently includes physical abuse, bullying, insults, exclusion, confiscation of educational materials, and discouragement. A mother of a girl with an intellectual disability said,

*"Students in her school bully and take educational materials of my girl with disabilities although they also sometimes support her. When they bully her, she ends up not wanting to go to school and when they support her, she becomes interested to go to school."*

Key informant interviews have also shown that these acts of bias and discrimination come from fellow students, some even from other girls with disabilities, leaving them feeling discouraged and demoralized.

Discriminatory and demoralizing attitudes toward students with disabilities persist among some parents of students without disabilities as well. Some parents refuse to allow their children to study alongside students with disabilities. As one participant explained,

*“One elementary school in Mekelle, which had a relatively higher number of students with disabilities and a more inclusive environment, saw a significant number of students without disabilities leave. Parents of students without disabilities petitioned the school administration to segregate students with disabilities. When the administration rejected this request, these parents began transferring their children to other schools.”*

This evidence reveals that peers and parents in school also create barriers to inclusive education.

## **B. Infrastructure barriers**

Physical barriers, such as inaccessible school facilities, hazardous routes, and inadequate transportation, deny girls with disabilities access to education by compromising their safety, mobility, dignity, and independence.

### **» Physical barriers deny access to education**

Girls with disabilities are often denied access to education due to inaccessible school facilities and the physical challenges they face in commuting to and from school. For students living far from schools, the journey is fraught with obstacles like gorges, cliffs, valleys, ditches, and rocky terrain—particularly when walking, due to the lack of transportation services. As one focus group participant said,

*“Most girls with disabilities are in their homes, especially in the remote areas, because of distance, ups, and downs of ways.”*

Construction work along school routes—a common sight given the post-conflict rebuilding—creates additional hazards, like ditches, holes, uneven ground due to accumulated debris (e.g., sand, soil, and cement). These changes in the landscape can cause girls to fall, collide with obstacles, or sustain injuries, increasing the risk of additional disabilities or even life-threatening harm. For example, in towns like Mekelle, girls with blindness have to navigate dangerous landscapes just to attend school, which poses further risks to their physical wellbeing. One blind girl from Mekelle pointed out, “Sometimes stones are put in the middle of our way and [it] hurts us.” Another girl from Adwa also stated that while traveling to school with her friend who is blind, her friend fell into an open sewer and suffered injuries that kept her out of school for over a week. Study participants also spoke of inaccessible school facilities. Classrooms, libraries, walkways, and administrative buildings are often not designed to accommodate students with disabilities—particularly in multi-story buildings without elevators. A teacher in one focus group explained,

*“There is serious challenge in accessibility of buildings—no ramps, offices toilets, shower, and classrooms are not accessible for girls with physical disabilities and blind students. The only accessible school facility for physical with disabilities is library.”*

A key informant from the CSO sector also stated that while peers may offer to carry or assist them in accessing these spaces, many girls feel uncomfortable being carried or guided (especially by male students), but are often left with no other options. He added that these barriers not only hinder their physical mobility but also impact their sense of dignity and independence, which ends up denying them access to education.

### C. Resource-related barriers

Inadequate learning materials, insufficient funding, and a shortage of trained educators create significant barriers to inclusive education for girls with disabilities, limiting access to essential resources like Braille, sign language interpreters, and assistive technology.

#### » Inadequate learning materials and support

Interviews with educational leaders from the regional bureau to school directors all stated that insufficient budget hindered the purchase of assistive technology and educational materials. The lack of inclusive materials—such as Braille and sign language interpreters, or extra support in the form of exam readers—severely demoralizes girls and limits their ability to engage in class activities. Interview respondents and focus group discussion participants affirmed that most schools do not provide Braille notes or exam readers, leaving girls with disabilities at a severe disadvantage compared to their peers. One student with a disability spoke of the shortage of educational materials, adding that “the quality of little brailles that some girls with disabilities might get are of less quality with limited durability that they cannot read the braille after some time as it fades.”

Additionally, one girl with a disability said that schools rarely provide important information, including notices and social events, in formats that are accessible to all girls with disabilities. Those with blindness and hearing impairments are particularly excluded from vital information. Study participants indicated that when notices about makeup classes, tutorials, exam dates, and other important events are shared in class, girls with hearing

impairments typically miss them, while girls with blindness often fail to receive notices. Triangulated data from a focus group discussion with teachers in Mekelle and an interview with a school director revealed that at an elementary school in Mekelle, during the grade eight general examinations, when a student with hearing impairment required a sign language interpreter, the school failed to provide one. This lack of preparedness on school's part prevented the student from taking the exam.

#### » The shortage of trained teachers in inclusive education creates a significant pedagogical barrier.

Across all the interviews and discussions, including those with school directors, parents, students and teachers, it was reported that there are very few teachers with special education training in Tigray, and most schools lack such trained professionals altogether. School directors admitted that even when trained teachers are available, they are often assigned to teach non-disabled students, leaving them with limited time and resources to support girls with disabilities. One key informant from the CSO sector reported that whether trained in special education or not, most teachers lack the time and skills to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of students with disabilities. He added that this includes providing alternative assessments (e.g., oral, Braille, or tape-recorded tests for blind students), using sign language in education and assessments, or applying continuous assessment methods (e.g., portfolios, project work, self-assessment, and observation)—all of which he described as essential components of inclusive education strategies.



» **The government's budget does not support inclusive education for girls with disabilities.**

Interviews with school and education leaders and focus groups with teachers established that the current budget allocated for both boys and girls with disabilities is only 14 Birr (approximately 0.11 USD) monthly per student. This insufficient funding is a significant barrier to inclusive education and exacerbates other challenges. Research respondents, including key informants from the educational bureau, confirmed that the budgets allocated by the federal, regional, and *woreda* governments are inadequate to make education truly inclusive for girls with disabilities. In fact, this amount is far too small to cover even basic supplies, let alone provide assistive technology or improve the overall inclusiveness of education.

Additionally, the budget is inadequate for providing necessary accommodations such as accessible exam formats or assistive technologies. For example, blind students interviewed explained that they often receive inadequate exam support, with teachers unable or unwilling to repeat questions. According to responses from education leaders, lack of funds prevents the assignment of sign language interpreters for students with hearing impairments, sometimes excluding them from exams. They also state that the shortage of resources also limits the availability of assistive technologies like Braille materials, wheelchairs, and specialized computer software, making inclusive education nearly impossible for many students with disabilities.

**D. Intersection of war, sexual violence, and poverty**

The war in Tigray, compounded by poverty and fear of violence, has severely disrupted access to education for girls with disabilities, destroying resource centers, repurposing schools, and increasing vulnerability to gender-based violence—all while economic hardship forces many girls to abandon education for survival.

» **The war on Tigray denied access to education for girls with disabilities**

War has seriously affected inclusive education. In an interview, one educational bureau official explained,

*"We had 72 resource centers relatively equipped with assistive technologies and trained professionals. Each of the resource centers used to support 5 schools before the war and they are completely destroyed and looted after the war."*

This destruction will inevitably hinder education for girls with disabilities. Teachers also revealed that many remaining schools have been repurposed as military or internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. As a result, numerous schools are contaminated by landmines and unexploded ordnance. This poses a significant risk to girls with disabilities, whose limited access to information makes them particularly vulnerable. The director of a school which was used as an IDP camp in Mekelle stated that as IDPs have not been able to return to their homes, many schools continue to serve as shelters,

**Inadequate learning materials, insufficient funding, and a shortage of trained educators create significant barriers to inclusive education for girls with disabilities, limiting access to essential resources like Braille, sign language interpreters, and assistive technology.**



further blocking access to education for a substantial number of girls with disabilities. This was confirmed by observations conducted as part of this study. The destruction of schools and educational materials—such as Braille, slate and stylus, computers, crutches, and wheelchairs—has made educational resources even more inaccessible, exacerbating existing pedagogical barriers and worsening the educational situation for girls with disabilities.

» **Fear of violence and exploitation blocks access to education for disabled girls during conflict**

Study participants reported that girls are isolated for protective reasons, such as fear of sexual violence, rape, or forced marriage due to poverty and conflict. This fear further contributes to the complete denial of access to education. Parents stated that they keep their daughters behind closed doors out of fear that they might be sexually assaulted, forced into marriage, or simply disappear. The situation has worsened significantly during the conflict, as incidents of gender-based violence (GBV) perpetrated on girls with disabilities intensified. Teachers explained that girls with disabilities were subjected to sexual gender-based violence (SGBV), including rape, which often led to pregnancy. This further hampered their inclusion in education.

An already-fragile justice system, which remains unable to provide adequate protection, further exacerbated the situation, allowing sexual and gender-based violence to persist even after the war. The head of one *woreda* education office said the “dismantled justice system subjected girls with disabilities to rape, robbery, and other crimes.” He added that one girl with a hearing impairment was kidnapped. These examples depict the compounding effect of war and SGBV on the education of girls with disabilities.

» **Poverty denies girls with disabilities access to education**

Poverty is a significant barrier for girls with disabilities in Tigray, especially in hard-to-reach areas where they live in extreme poverty and are excluded from education. Teachers reported that poverty prevents families from affording necessities such as uniforms, educational materials, and, in some instances, even food for their daughters with disabilities. This situation often leads to girls discontinuing their education, instead engaging in income-generating activities or being confined to household chores. The research has found that some of these girls with disabilities are often cared for by single mothers who bear the full responsibility of raising them.

One such example is Riwyet (a pseudonym), a 22-year-old with an intellectual disability, who lives with her single mother near Adwa. Her father abandoned them after Riwyet was born with an intellectual disability. Since then, her mother has been solely responsible for her care, surviving by begging for food from neighbors, unable to provide her daughter with an education.

The situation has worsened significantly during the conflict, as incidents of gender-based violence perpetrated on girls with disabilities intensified. Teachers explained that girls with disabilities were subjected to sexual gender-based violence, including rape, which often led to pregnancy. This further hampered their inclusion in education.

The impact of poverty on the inclusive education of girls with disabilities worsened significantly during and after the war. The war has deepened poverty for many Tigrayans, including parents of girls with disabilities. A survey of 38 participants shows that girls with disabilities from wealthier families are significantly better positioned to access education and participate in school activities compared to those from poorer families. Girls with disabilities from poorer families, as well as those in conflict-affected areas, are less likely to be in school or actively engage in class compared to boys with disabilities or girls from more affluent backgrounds. Girls with disabilities from poorer families are less likely to be enrolled in school than their peers from wealthier families.

Poverty and war have created compounding effects on education for girls with disabilities. Triangulated data from focus group discussion with students with disabilities and teachers revealed that an economically marginalized girl with a disability interrupted her education as she was raped while selling roasted corn at night to support her educational and livelihood expenses. She is just one of the many girls with disabilities barred from education due to the compounding effects of war and poverty.

### **EFFORTS SUPPORTING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR GIRLS WITH DISABILITIES IN TIGRAY**

While the current state of inclusive education for girls with disabilities is challenging, the research highlights several efforts that have supported inclusive education, particularly prior to the war. These efforts include school

and community support. Reports from study participants along with observations identified the crucial role that institutions such as Mekelle Blind Boarding School and Adigrat Special School for Students with Disabilities (along with cluster schools and resource centers) have played in promoting inclusive education. According to one school director, the purpose of cluster schools was to support nearby schools in becoming more inclusive, while resource centers provided assistive technologies and educational materials for students with disabilities. Unfortunately, these efforts were limited to only certain areas of Tigray and have largely been disrupted due to the conflict.

Focus group participants and key informants revealed that in some schools, management-led efforts such as training for the school community and the construction of ramps have helped support inclusivity. However, these efforts have been sporadic and uncoordinated, according to the participants. Teachers and students have also contributed to fostering inclusive education. Focus group discussion with teachers and interviews with parents of girls with disabilities affirmed that some teachers have made reasonable accommodations, offered financial support, conducted training for the school community, and encouraged girls with disabilities.

Support from the community, including from religious leaders and customary practices, has also been a factor in promoting inclusive education. An official from a regional educational bureau stated that Tigray Orthodox Christianity, for instance, teaches the divine obligation to care for and support individuals with disabilities, which has influenced positive attitudes toward inclusion. Students with disabilities in Mekelle

also shared that various local and international CSOs worked to improve inclusive education for girls with disabilities, especially before the war. They pointed to organizations like SEN Ethiopia that have provided essential assistive technology and educational materials—including Braille, slate styluses, wheelchairs, and talking textbooks—to support students with disabilities.

Nonetheless, students with disabilities, CSOs, and education leaders agree that despite these efforts,

the factors that support inclusive education remain insufficient, and the barriers to inclusion have thus far outweighed positive contribution. For example, while some religious and customary practices support inclusive education, the barriers created by these same factors can undermine these efforts. As such, there is a clear need for more effective interventions that strengthen both policies and practices to truly enhance inclusive education for girls with disabilities.



Photo credit: Shutterstock/Stewart Innes

Girls with disabilities from poorer families, as well as those in conflict-affected areas, are less likely to be in school or actively engage in class compared to boys with disabilities or girls from more affluent backgrounds. Girls with disabilities from poorer families are less likely to be enrolled in school than their peers from wealthier families.



## V. Recommendations

This research identified lack of awareness, capacity, commitment, and accountability as systemic challenges to inclusive education for girls with disabilities in Tigray, Ethiopia. Improving inclusive education for girls with disabilities living in high poverty and post-war Tigray demands systemic intervention with sustainable impact. It is essential that we 1) increase awareness, combat stigma, and strengthen capacity around inclusive education in key actors across the education ecosystem; 2) address poverty and other

economic barriers; 3) address sexual violence and provide safe learning environments for girls with disabilities; 4) strengthen teacher training programs and community engagement; and 5) enhance the legal and policy framework for disability and inclusion (see Table 1).

Access to education for girls with disabilities should be ensured by eliminating the physical, societal, and economic barriers to schooling.

**Table 1. Recommendations to strengthen inclusive education for girls with disabilities in Tigray**

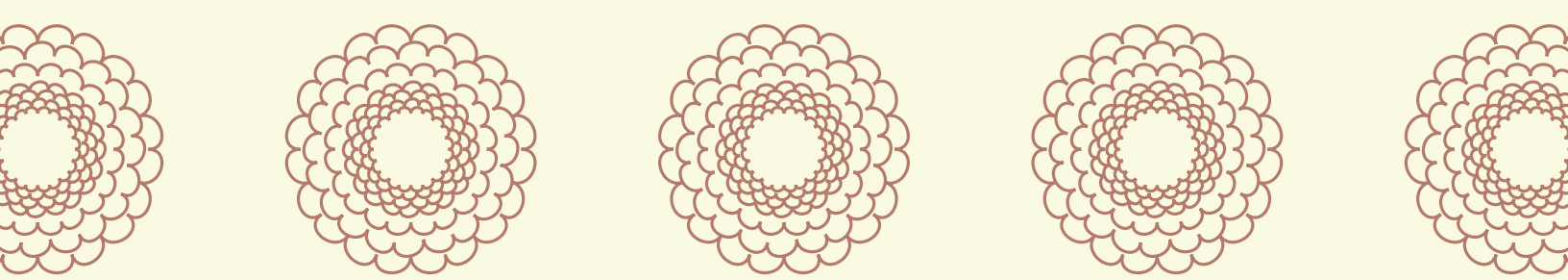
ACTION	DETAILS	RESPONSIBLE PARTY
<b>Increase public awareness, combat stigma, and strengthen capacity</b>		
<b>Parents and rural community</b>	Massive awareness-building activities should be undertaken to support ensuring girls with disabilities are in school, especially those who are kept behind closed doors, located in hard-to-reach parts of Tigray, or are survivors of sexual violence.	Government, non-profit organizations, religious leaders, community leaders, parent-teacher association, student clubs, and university centers
<b>School community</b>	Massive awareness-creating activities should be organized for teachers and students on the barriers to inclusive education.	CSOs, special education teachers, school clubs, and mini media
<b>Address poverty and economic barriers</b>		
Assistive technology provisions	A sufficient budget for assistive technology should be allocated and resource centers should be equipped with assistive technologies.	Regional educational bureau, <i>woreda</i> educational bureau, schools and CSOs
Educational materials	Girls with disabilities should be given educational materials to alleviate the impact of poverty on inclusive education.	Regional educational bureau, <i>woreda</i> educational bureau, schools, CSOs university centers
<b>Access</b>		
Transportation expenses	Transportation expenses from rural areas should be covered to include those who would otherwise not come to school due to transportation limitations.	Government, and non-profit organizations
House rent and maintenance	House rent and maintenance expenses should be covered for those who cannot go home every day due to distance and inaccessibility.	Government, and non-profit organizations

Address sexual violence and provide safe learning environments		
Strengthening justice system	Special attention should be given to the protection of girls with disabilities, including by making sexual- and gender-based violence among the top priorities of justice organs.	Justice bureau, police, judiciary, non-profit organizations, CSOs, university centers, and school administration
Reasonable adjustment	Inaccessible school spaces, including private schools and transportation services, should be adjusted and made accessible for all girls with disabilities. In addition, favorable educational environments must be ensured for survivors of sexual violence.	Federal, regional, and <i>woreda</i> educational bureaus, and schools
Strengthen teacher training and community engagement		
Training on adaptive teaching	Teachers should be trained on how to employ adaptive teaching methods for students with different impairments.	Federal, regional, <i>woreda</i> , and school educational units, and CSOs
On inclusive education	Teachers should be trained on the concept of inclusive education, segregation, special needs, the right to education, and such related concepts.	Federal, regional, and <i>woreda</i> school educational units, and CSOs
On sign language and braille	Training on sign language should be available for teachers and interested students.	Federal, regional, and <i>woreda</i> school educational units, CSOs, and clubs
Enhance legal and policy frameworks		
Advocacy	Advocacy for binding enforcement mechanisms that ensure accountability of educational leaders and accord redress mechanism for duty bearer should be done.	CSOs, University centers, and community and religious leaders
Draft enforcement laws	Draft enforcement legislation should be prepared benchmarking best practices, such as the Disability Education Act.	University centers and CSOs with such specializations, and international organizations
Awareness	Awareness-creating activities on the enforcement mechanisms should be organized for school community, CSOs, students with disabilities, and parents.	Educational bureau, university centers, CSO, and international organizations
Public interest litigation	If the enforcement mechanisms are not in place, and/or if the right to education is violated, precedent- setting public interest litigation (PIL) should be lodged against any violations against the human right to education.	Legal aid- providing organizations at the national and international levels

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