# Iraqi girl's education: challeneges and opportunities

**Safaa Bahjat**

**Correspondence:**
Dr Safaa Bahjat
Allergologist,
Kirkuk
Iraq
**Email:** docbahjatsafaa2000@googlemail.com

The girls in the photo say; 'I want to become an attorney and be an important person';' I want to become a teacher'; 'I keep coming to school because I am a top performer and I want to finish my education'; ' I like to go to school and learn';' I want to learn how to read and write.'

**To Whom Is Concerned!**

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War has been described as 'development in reverse'. Even short episodes of armed conflict can halt progress or reverse gains built up over generations, undermining economic growth and advances in health, nutrition and employment. The impact is most severe and protracted in countries and among people whose resilience and capacity for recovery are weakened by mass poverty .Education seldom figures in assessments of the damage inflicted by conflict. International attention and media reporting invariably focus on the most immediate images of humanitarian suffering, not on the hidden costs and lasting legacies of violence. Yet nowhere are those costs and legacies more evident than in education. Across many of the world's poorest countries, armed conflict is destroying not just school infrastructure, but also the hopes and ambitions of a whole generation of children. Education is seldom a primary cause of conflict. Intra-state armed conflict is often associated with grievances and perceived injustices linked to identity, faith, ethnicity and region. Education can make a difference in all these areas, tipping the balance in favour of peace -or conflict. When the political leaders do acknowledge the need to tackle literacy,(allow Iraqis to extend their knowledge through free fellowships in the developed countries) only then they will guarantee winning the war.

## History

All the available data and available published information make it clear that Iraq's women, once a highly educated group, have lost ground in the last 15 -20 years as girls' participation in education has declined. A good quality educational system, which includes and encourages the full participation of girls, is vital for any country's development. The full participation of girls is needed not only because of the value of the contribution that women are then able to make in social, economic and political spheres, but because of the well documented benefit that the educational level of the wife and mother in a family makes to the health, well-being and success in life of all family members. The value of providing good education for all children is even greater in the case of Iraq because of the immense development tasks facing the country. However the available information suggests that educational disadvantage is increasing for Iraqi girls as they are disproportionally less likely to participate and succeed in education at every age and every level. Half the future of the country is being wasted. Educational disadvantage for girls in Iraq has complex causes. It is inextricably linked with the status of women in Iraqi society and with the opportunities available to women in the workplace and in public life, as well as with social conditions such as poverty, security and the quality of educational provision.

Although historically Iraqi women and girls had relatively more rights than many of their counterparts in the Middle East, major discrepancies have always existed between rich and poor, urban and rural, traditional and liberal families with regard to the education of girls. The Iraqi Provisional Constitution (drafted in 1970) formally guaranteed equal rights to women and other laws specifically ensured their right to vote, attend school, run for political office, and own property. Since the 1991 Gulf War, the position of women within Iraqi society has deteriorated rapidly, with the predictable impact on girls' education. Women and girls were disproportionately affected by the economic consequences of the U.N. sanctions, and lacked access to food, health care, as well as education. These effects were compounded by changes in the law that restricted women's mobility and access to the formal sector in an effort to ensure jobs to men and appease conservative religious and tribal groups.

After seizing power in 1968, the secular Ba'ath party embarked on a programme to consolidate its authority and to achieve rapid economic growth despite labour shortages. Women's participation was integral to the attainment of both of these goals, and the government passed laws specifically aimed at improving the status of women. The status of Iraqi women was directly linked to the government's over-arching political and economic policies. Until the 1990s, Iraqi women played an active role in the political and economic development of Iraq. A robust civil society had existed prior to the coup d'état in 1968, including a number of women's organizations. The Ba'ath Party dismantled most of these civil society groups after its seizure of power. Shortly thereafter it established the General Federation of Iraqi Women. The General Federation of Iraqi Women played a significant role in implementing state policy, primarily through its role in running more than 250 rural and urban community centers offering job-training, educational, and other social programmes for women and acting as a channel for communication of state propaganda. Female officers within the General Federation of Iraqi Women also played a role in the implementation of legal reforms advancing women's status under the law and in lobbying for changes to the personal status code.

The primary legal underpinning of women's equality was set out in the Iraqi Provisional Constitution, which was drafted by the Ba'ath party in 1970. Article 19 declares all citizens equal before the law regardless of sex, blood, language, social origin, or religion. In January 1971, Iraq also ratified the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which provide equal protection under international law to all.

In order to further its programme of economic development, the government passed a compulsory education law mandating that both sexes attend school at the primary level. The Compulsory Education Law 118/1976 stated that education is compulsory and free of charge for children of both sexes from six to ten years of age. Girls were free to leave school thereafter with the approval of their parents or guardians. Although middle and upper class Iraqi women had been attending university since the 1920s, rural women and girls were largely uneducated until this time. In December 1979, the government passed further legislation requiring the eradication of illiteracy. All illiterate persons between ages fifteen and forty-five were required to attend classes at local "literacy centers," many of which were run by the General Federation of Iraqi Women(GFIW). Although many conservative sectors of Iraqi society refused to allow women in their communities to go to such centers (despite potential prosecution), the literacy gap between males and females narrowed. The Iraqi government also passed labour and employment laws to ensure that women were granted equal opportunities in the civil service sector, maternity benefits, and freedom from harassment in the workplace. Such laws had a direct impact on the number of women in the workforce. The fact that the government was hiring women contributed to the breakdown of the traditional reluctance to allow women to work outside the home. The Iraqi Bureau of Statistics reported that in 1976, women constituted approximately 38.5 percent of those in the education profession, 31 percent of the medical profession, 25 percent of lab technicians, 15 percent of accountants and 15 percent of civil servants.

During the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), women assumed greater roles in the workforce in general and the civil service in particular, reflecting the shortage of working age men. Until the 1990s, the number of women working outside the home continued to grow.

Legislative reforms in this period reflected the Ba'ath Party's attempt to modernize Iraqi society and supplant loyalty to extended families and tribal society with loyalty to the government and ruling party. In the years following the 1991 Gulf War, many of the positive steps that had been taken to advance women's and girls' status in Iraqi society were reversed because of a combination of legal, economic, and political factors. The most significant political factor was Saddam Hussein's decision to embrace Islamic and tribal traditions as a political tool in order to consolidate power. In addition, the U.N. sanctions imposed after the war have had a disproportionate impact on women and children, especially girls. The gender gap in school enrolment (and subsequently female illiteracy) increased dramatically due to families' financial inability to send their children to school. When faced with limited resources, many families chose to keep their girl children at home. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), as a result of the national literacy campaign, as of 1987 approximately 75 percent of Iraqi women were literate; however, by year-end 2000, Iraq had the lowest regional adult literacy levels, with the percentage of literate women at less than 25 percent.

Women and girls have also suffered from increasing restrictions on their freedom of mobility and protections under the law, which again predictably impact on the access of girls to education. In collusion with conservative religious groups and tribal leaders, the government issued numerous decrees and introduced legislation which had a negative impact on women's legal status in the labour code, criminal justice system, and personal status laws. In 2001, the U.N. Special Rapporteur for Violence against Women reported that since the passage of the reforms in 1991, an estimated 4,000 women and girls had been victims of so called "honour killings."

Additionally, as the economy constricted, in an effort to ensure employment for men the government pushed women out of the labour force and into more traditional roles in the home, so that the education of girls became less significant as they were unlikely to work outside the home. In 1998, the government reportedly dismissed all women working as secretaries in governmental agencies. In June 2000, it also reportedly enacted a law requiring all state ministries to put restrictions on women working outside the home. Women's freedom to travel abroad was also legally restricted and formerly co-educational high schools were required by law to provide single-sex education only, further reflecting the reversion to religious and tribal traditions. As a result of these combined forces, by the last years of Saddam Hussein's government the majority of women and girls had been relegated to traditional roles within the home and the education of girls had, predictably declined still further. By 2000, budget constraints were also seriously limiting the provision of textbooks and other teaching and learning materials. Less money was available to rehabilitate dilapidated school so children were increasingly unable to study in properly functioning school buildings. The war begun in 2003 further contributed to the decline in the quality of education with the greatest impact on the education of girls with an increase in both real and perceived levels of danger outside the home, declining quality teaching and an increase of religious conservatism in some parts of the country.

Currently, despite some positive achievements in northern and southern Iraq, ongoing violence is posing new challenges in the country's central zone. In an insecure atmosphere where schools have been targeted, many parents have to choose between education and safety for their children, with girls once again the most affected.

When wars break out, international attention and media reporting invariably focus on the most immediate images of human suffering. Yet behind these images is a hidden crisis. Across many of the world's poorest countries, armed conflict is destroying not just school infrastructure, but the hopes and ambitions of generations of children.

Half of them are girls. The hidden crisis in education in conflict-affected states is a global challenge that demands an international response. As well as undermining prospects for boosting economic growth, reducing poverty and achieving the Millennium Development Goals, armed conflict is reinforcing the inequalities, desperation and grievances that trap countries in cycles of violence.

**Displaced populations are among the least visible**
Mass displacement is often a strategic goal for armed groups seeking to separate populations or undermine the livelihoods of specific groups. At least 500 000 people in Mosul have been displaced, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). 100 000 of these people are being hosted in Kirkuk, Erbil, Duhauk and Sulaimanya, while 200 000 people who were not able to pass through border checkpoints remain located in disputed areas adjacent to the Kurdish border. A further 200 000 people have been displaced from the west to the east side of Mosul. An additional 470 000 people were displaced earlier by fighting between the Iraqi army and armed opposition groups who have controlled the cities of Ramadi and Fallujah since January. The new flood of displaced people from Mosul almost doubled Iraq's internally displaced persons caseload in less than 1 week and "created an alarming environment in Iraq", though the real number is almost certainly higher. Recent estimates suggest that almost half of refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) are under 18. Many do not have the documents. Gender parity in education is a fundamental human right, a foundation for equal opportunity and a source of economic growth, employment and innovation. Gender disparities originate at different points in the education system. Tackling gender disparities in secondary school poses many challenges. Some of the barriers to gender parity at the primary level are even higher at the secondary level. Secondary schooling is far more costly, often forcing households to ration resources among children. Where girls' education is less valued, or perceived as generating lower returns, parents may favour sons over daughters. Early marriage can act as another barrier to secondary school progression. Parents may also worry more about the security of adolescent girls because secondary schools are often further from home than primary schools. The case for gender fairness in education is based on human rights, not economic calculus. Schooling can equip girls with the capabilities they need to expand their choices, influence decisions in their households and participate in wider social and economic processes. By the same token, there is clear evidence that economic returns to female education are very high - and, at the secondary level, higher than for boys. The implication is that countries tolerating high levels of gender inequality in education are sacrificing gains in economic growth, productivity and poverty reduction, as well as the basic rights of half the population. When girls enter school they bring the disadvantages associated with wider gender inequality, which are often transmitted through households, communities and established social practices. Education systems can weaken the transmission lines, but building schools and classrooms and supplying teachers is not enough. Getting girls into school and equipping them with the skills they need to flourish often require policies designed to counteract the deeper causes of gender disadvantage. Public policy can make a difference in three key areas: creating incentives for school entry, facilitating the development of a 'girl-friendly' learning environment and ensuring that schools provide relevant skills. In most cases, simultaneous interventions are required on all three fronts.

In Iraq young girls are less likely to enter the school system and more likely to drop out of primary school, and few make it through secondary school. Interlocking gender inequalities associated with poverty, labour demand, cultural practices and attitudes to girls' education create barriers to entry and progression through school and reduce expectations and ambition among many girls.

In Iraq the overall number of children receiving primary education has declined between 2004-05 and 2007-08 by 88,164, with no improvement in the percentage of girls enrolled. Gross enrolment figures provided for the academic year 2005 - 2005 show 5,163,440 children enrolled in primary education. Girls account for 44.74% of students. Figures for 2007-2008 show 5,065,276 children enrolled in primary education, with 44.8 % being girls. This means that for every 100 boys enrolled in primary schools in Iraq, there are just under 89 girls. This under representation of girls in primary school in Iraq has been known for many years. The fact that there are declining numbers of girls in each successive grade has also been identified by analyses of the data. Analysis of the 2007 -2008 data shows the same picture. In every governorate a smaller percentage of girls than boys start school. There are no governorates where the number of children completing primary education is acceptable, and it is even less acceptable for girls. The current data replicates previously available data in showing a generally declining percentage of girls in each successive primary school grade. Some 75% of girls who start school have dropped out during, or at the end of, primary school and so do not go on to intermediate education. Many of them will have dropped out after grade 1. When all governorates' figures are combined, there are 21.66% fewer girls in grade 2 than in grade 1. Similarly there is a 28.63% national drop in the number of girls between grades 5 and 6. By the first intermediate class, only 25% the number of girls in grade 1 are in school; by the third intermediate class the figure is 20%.The percentage of girls in primary school classes is highest in Erbil, Dohuk and Sulaimaniya. These three governorates also have the highest percentage of children in pre-school education. In Erbil 15.8% of children attend preschool provision, Dohuk 11.3% and Sulaimaniya 11.4% compared with, for example 5.7% in Baghdad, 8.6% in Kirkuk, or 3.3% in Diyala. There is also a major issue with the number of children in each grade who are over age. The difference between gross and net enrolment data for 2007-08

shows that 659,896 children are above the age for the grade that they are in. This represents 13% of all primary school children - more than one in every ten. Of those children, 228,829 children were still attending primary school when they were aged 13 - 15+.The net enrolment rate for girls is 45.8%, as against a gross enrolment rate of 44.8%. This shows a significantly greater number of overage boys than girls. For example, only one third of teenagers still in primary schools were girls.

In order to increase girls' participation in education, it is vital to gain an insight into why they never attend school or drop out before completing their basic education. A small scale survey of 80 Iraqi girls was therefore included in the piece of work. While this is not a large or statistically valid sample, their responses provide a clear insight into many of the reasons why girls do not go to school. As would be expected, parents, particularly fathers, play a major role in whether the girls can attend school or not. The girls refer to a range of reasons why families do not support girls attending school. These include concerns about safety, family poverty, a reluctance to allow adolescent girls to continue to attend school, the distance from home to school, early marriage and the need to help at home. The journey to and from school presents problems caused by fast traffic, dogs or boys. Girls are frequently demotivated by the behaviour of teachers who beat them, distress them and are unwilling to explain subject matter that a student does not understand. Their answers make frequent references to being beaten or insulted by teachers, and to teachers being unwilling to give explanations in lessons or support students in their learning. The girls describe their schools as unwelcoming and unpleasant with too few facilities and resources. Schools are described as dirty, poorly maintained and uncomfortable, with dirty lavatories and no drinking water available. Safety is an issue, particularly in areas of major instability and insecurity. The concerns about safety relate to both military conflict and civil crime such as abduction and rape.
To address the issues identified, sets of recommendations are included in the report for the government and education services in Iraq, to address key policy issues and their implementation; Those for the government focus on policy development and implementation are, awareness-raising, school improvement and development, pre-service and in-service teacher training, curriculum development, alternative education strategies, and security for girls travelling to and from school.
The education system is facing a number of major difficulties. The system is chronically underfunded and is currently unable to respond to the demands despite efforts being made to improve the situation Even where conditions are improving, a significant number of older children and young adults have missed out on crucial phases of their education and there are few opportunities for them to make good the years they have lost. The factors that contribute to placing Iraqi girls at an educational disadvantage and which need to be addressed through educational policy and its implementation include:

- Lack of a school place;
- Shortage of teachers, particularly experienced teachers;
- The unacceptable behaviour of some teachers and principals;
- Dirty and dilapidated school buildings which lack basic facilities;
- Attitudes to girls' education;
- Lack of security;
- Lack of transport when distances are considerable or
- The journey is hazardous;
- Poverty; no money for clothing and school supplies and other indirect costs of going to school;
- Disability;
- Being needed in the home;
- Being needed to make a contribution to the family's business or income;
- Lack of official papers

## Issues related to school infrastructure

If girls are to attend school, there must be a school for them to attend and teachers to teach them. Currently, there is an insufficient number of schools in good repair, with basic facilities for all girls to receive their entitlement to schooling and it is often difficult for girls to travel to and from school and there are particular issues when intermediate schools are situated outside the communities in which girls live. The third most frequent response to the question as to why girls between 6 and 17 who are not in school are not attending was that no school was available nearby. The number and location of schools, and their capacity, must therefore become a key educational issue for each governorate. There are places where schools are not available locally and some schools are very overcrowded and some have too few pupils. If universal basic education is to be achieved, there must be a school place for every child. This cannot be achieved easily or quickly, but an analysis of the number of school places needed, and where they are needed, could lead to an effective and realistic action plan to provide them. An adequate number of school places would encourage more girls to enrol in school and decrease the need for the shift system, which many girls in the survey indicated that they disliked. The rehabilitation of dirty and dilapidated school buildings which lack basic facilities must also be a policy priority if girls are to be encouraged to participate in education. In many cases the quality of the physical environment does not encourage girls to go to school. Many schools are in poor repair, are being used for other purposes or have been destroyed. The lack of acceptable sanitation and hygiene facilities is particularly unacceptable to girls and to their parents. Even if a school place in a clean, modern building were available for every girl in Iraq, this would count for nothing unless well trained teachers, upholding the expected standards of their profession were available to teach them. There is currently a shortage of teachers, particularly experienced teachers. The number of teachers available, particularly well qualified and experienced teachers is an issue and currently it is

doubtful that there are sufficient skilled and experience teachers in Iraq to make it possible for all girls to go to school and receive good quality teaching. “The number of teachers leaving the country this year (2006) is huge and almost double those who left in 2005,” Professor Salah Aliwi, director-general of studies planning in the Ministry of Higher Education told reporters during an Aug. 24, 2006 interview in Baghdad. “Every day, we are losing more experienced people, which is causing a serious problem in the education system.”This has caused a decline in the quality of teaching as experienced teachers left the country or ceased teaching because of attacks and lack of security. As security is improving teachers may return to Iraq, or return to teaching, but it is unlikely that they will all do so. To address this issue, in-service training needs to be provided to existing teachers to upgrade their skills and the number of well trained new teachers entering the profession needs to be increased. High quality training programmes and packages need to be developed to achieve this. The biggest drop in the number of girls enrolled in primary school in Iraq takes place between grade 1 and grade 2. Measures need to be taken to address this. The practice of using subject teachers rather than one class teacher for all subjects in the early grades makes schooling unfriendly for younger children and consideration should be given to phasing this out by training primary school teachers to deliver the whole curriculum to their classes, with only a very few exceptions for specialist subjects. The unacceptable behaviour of some teachers and principals in terms of physical and psychological punishments must be stopped, through training, effective management and through the creation and implementation of an effective disciplinary system to deal with those who behave unacceptably. Buildings and teachers, however high quality both may be, are of no value if girls are prevented from attending school by families, or societal attitudes or by cultural norms and expectations which do not encourage the education of all children. There is considerable anecdotal evidence and some research evidence, such as Yasmin Husein Al-Jawaheri’s empirical research, published in Women in Iraq: The Gender Impact of International Sanctions, that attitudes towards girls and women have become, and are still becoming, more repressive and against the participation of girls in education and women in public life. Conservative beliefs are believed to be leading to violations of the rights of girls and women to life, physical integrity, education, health and freedom of movement. A lack of optimism about the future means that families see little point in making the investment in the future that education represents, particularly for girls who are seen to be unlikely to have careers -’Combined with the high rates of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorders suffered by a large part of the war-affected population, these factors could have serious consequences on the physical and psychological health of Iraqi women, requiring interventions to help families and communities cope.’ A major challenge to the development of an effective education system for girls in 21st century Iraq is the need to challenge and change attitudes to girls, their education and their future lives as women in society. Families and fathers in particular, need to be persuaded that their daughters must attend school. Religious and community leaders are key figures in promoting education for all children and for girls in particular and consideration should be given to involving them at all levels in campaigns to bring about universal basic education in Iraq and restoring the country to its previous position as a leader in region. Informal and non formal educational provision should be developed for girls who are not allowed to go to school and for older girls and young women who have missed the opportunity to benefit from basic education and are now too old to return to school.

**Issues related to security and the journey to and from school**

However much they may value education and however good it may be, parents are always unwilling to expose their children and particularly their daughters, to danger. The lack of security in some parts of Iraq makes parents reluctant to allow their daughters to go to schools and makes girls reluctant to attend. There is no doubt that the government of Iraq is making every possible effort to bring security to the country, but there are major issues in many areas which cannot be resolved quickly or easily. There are also issues concerning the lack of transport when distances are considerable or the journey is hazardous. The Ministry of Education should therefore consider home and distance learning options for girls for whom attendance at school is too difficult, dangerous or impossible in current circumstances. Home and distance learning options could also be useful for girls who cannot travel outside their home area to intermediate school, for example, or for girls whose families will not allow them to attend school.

**Issues related to poverty**

Although education is free in Iraq, school attendance is not without costs, both direct and indirect. Some families have insufficient money for clothing and school supplies and others need their daughter’s contribution to the family’s business or income either by the girl working or by her providing domestic help so that others may work. In the northern Kurdish territory, mounting poverty is said to contribute to the use of child labour and prevents children from attending school.

Although Iraqi officials believed that the 2007-2008 school year would see a much larger number of new school enrolments, 76.2% of respondents to A Women for Women survey of 1,513 Iraqi women said that girls in their families are not allowed to attend school, and 56.7% of respondents said that girls’ ability to attend school has become worse over the last four years. According to Women for Women International Iraq staff, the primary reasons for this are poverty and insecurity. While 49.6% of respondents describe their opportunities for education as poor, and 16.6% say they have no opportunities at all, 65.1% of respondents say it is extremely important to the welfare and development of their communities that

women and girls in Iraq be able to access educational opportunities.

**Issues related to disability**

Every difficulty faced by Iraqi girls of school age in attending school will be at least doubled for girls with a disability. If the distance to school, the poor state of the buildings, the absence of basic facilities, unsympathetic teachers, and lack of help in understanding lessons, family protectiveness and the attitudes of society are barriers to many girls attending school, they are likely to be insurmountable blocks for girls with disabilities. Careful consideration needs to be given to preventing disability wherever possible and to providing different access routes to education, including distance and home learning opportunities, for girls who cannot attend schools with their non-disabled peers.

**Lack of official papers**

Many children come from internally displaced families and do not have the documents required to register for school and this needs to be addressed through the appropriate channels as quickly as possible so that children do not continue to miss out on education. Children who stop going to school become less and less likely to return as time goes by and so it is essential that any gaps in school attendance are remedied as soon as possible and that children who have had a period out of school are helped back into regular attendance through bridging programmes.

**Children who lack the skills for school**

Although girls have more limited access to education than boys, are less likely to complete their primary education and are much less likely to complete their secondary education, there is also an increase in the number of boys not attending school or succeeding in their education.

Participation would be improved by the provision of pre-school education, linked to feeding programmes in very poor areas, to increase children's language development and prevent the consequences of poor nutrition. Evidence is increasing that it is likely that a large number of children in Iraq suffer from preventable learning difficulties related to lack of early stimulation and learning. The Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey carried out in 2006 found that 18% of two year old Iraqi children could not name at least one object. In Salahuddin as many as 35% of two year olds were not able to do this. Two year olds with normal language development could be expected to have a vocabulary of some 150 -300 words. This degree of language delay may result from widespread psycho-social consequences of war, including increased poverty and fearfulness. In times of peace and optimism adults naturally talk to babies and young children without being taught about the benefits of early stimulation. However, psychosocial difficulties and poverty, including, preoccupation with day-to- day survival, amongst adults prevent them from being able to talk to or stimulate their children in the normal way. The children therefore do not develop adequate language skills. Children with such very limited language are very unlikely to be ready to succeed in education when they reach school age. They will be unable to understand or respond to the school curriculum and are at risk of dropping out of school. The same survey reports that 15% of Iraqi children between 2 and 14 years of age have at least one type of disability - a large number being impairment or of speech and language. An emphasis on the development of early language skills could therefore increase the number of children entering school with enough language to participate in learning and decrease the number of children who drop out of school in the early grades because they do not have sufficient language skills to benefit from the education provided. Such initiatives would benefit all young children, but girls would benefit most. Language delay and difficulties make school enrolment less likely as families will often keep children at home if they know that they will not be able to cope at school. For those who do enrol, difficulties in such a crucial area for learning create major barriers to achievement in school. Failure then causes children to drop out of education. In addition to the difficulties caused by lack of stimulation, children's cognitive development is also affected by poor nutrition. Brain development is most sensitive to a baby's nutrition between mid-pregnancy and two years of age. Children who are malnourished throughout this period do not adequately grow, either physically or mentally. Their brains are smaller than normal and they also lack a substance called Myelin. Myelin is a very dense, fatty substance that insulates the electrical pathways of the brain, rather like the plastic coating on a power cable. It increases the speed of electrical transmission and prevents adjacent nerve fibres from mixing their messages. Myelination (the coating or covering of axons with myelin) begins around birth and is most rapid in the first two years. Because of the rapid pace of myelination in early life, children need a high level of fat in their diets -some 50 percent of their total calories- until about two years of age. Inadequate brain growth and inadequate myelination are reasons why children who were malnourished as foetuses and infants suffer lasting behavioural and cognitive deficits, including slower language and fine motor development, lower intelligence (IQ), and poorer school performance. So decreasing stunting and wasting as a result of poor nutrition will also increase the chances of children attending school and achieving.

Figures suggest that in addition to the worryingly large numbers of children who never enroll in school, over 100,000 children who enroll in grade 1 each year do not enter grade 2 and another 100,000 drop out between grades 2 and 3. Many of these children will fail in these early grades because they have learning difficulties caused by lack of brain development in their early years as a result of under stimulation or poor nutrition which has impaired their ability to learn.

**Recommendations to the government of Iraq to improve the current situation**

As the 2007 Annual Report for UNICEF Iraq rightly notes ' Substantial impact on children's wellbeing will only emerge once major gaps in Iraq's weak legislative and social work systems for children are bridged - an effort likely to take some years.' The people who will be part of bridging those major gaps are the children of today. Half of them are girls. Unless efforts are made today to improve the education of children, especially girls who fare even worse than boys in the current situation, the nation's capacity to build a strong and effective legislative framework and a much needed, fully functioning social work system, will be severely compromised.

To improve the education system, it is recommended that the new Government of Iraq that will be in power following the 2010 elections:

• Makes education a key priority by publicly and wholeheartedly subscribing to a vision for compulsory primary education in which all children are able to attend school, learn well and achieve their potential. This should be based on the concept that, other than in rare health related cases, there are no valid reasons for a child of primary school age to be out of school. All policies, strategic plans and action plans must include a specific section on the education of girls and strong reassertion, at national level of the right of every girl to attend school and the benefits of education to the girls, their families and to the country in general
• develop an updated national policy framework based on the inclusion of every child of primary school age in school;
• implement the content of the policy through a clear 10 year national strategic plan for improving education for all Iraqi children, with a substantial separate section on the issues which have a particular impact on girls' education. The strategic plan would include, for example, the identification of areas of greatest deprivation and need; the building and refurbishment of schools so that they all have decent lavatories and access to drinking water, the phasing down of the shift system, national awareness and attitude changing campaigns; strategies to enable even the poorest children to attend school; improving the training, in-service support and improved management of teachers. The section on issues which relate to the issues which have a particular impact on girls' education would include, for example, an increased number of intermediate schools for girls, strategies for keeping girls safe, the development of teaching materials and teaching methodologies which include girls and their learning styles
• establish an annual action plan, linked to the national plan, in every governorate in Iraq, which is monitored and its implementation evaluated each year
• develop a major national initiative for the in-service retraining and management of teachers so that they develop skills for effective teaching to enable the range of children in their classes to learn effectively and do not physically or mentally abuse students and so that they can be taught effectively
• plan and implements a national campaign, supported by influential religious and civil leaders and linked to improved security, to encourage families to see it as their religious duty and duty as citizens to send their daughters to school.
• increase pre-school education for 3-5 year olds to ensure that they are developing the skills and concepts that they need to learn successfully in school.
• develop home and distance learning programmes, and informal and non-formal educational approaches for girls who cannot attend school for any reason, including lack of security, parental attitudes, and disability.
• develop programmes for older girls and young women who have not completed their basic education and are now too old to return to school.

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**Figure 1: Percentage of girls in primary education by governate**

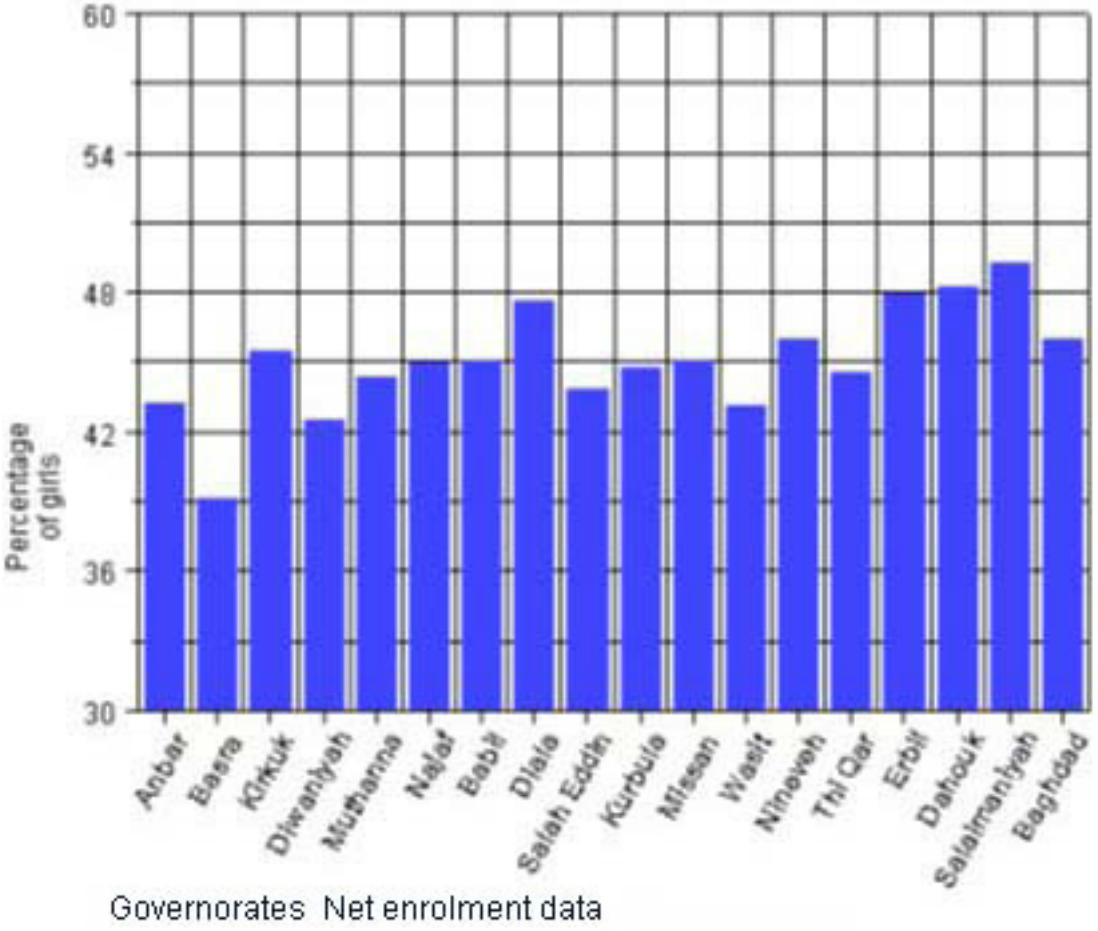



**Figure 2: Girls decline in numbers. Grade 6 compared to Grade 1**

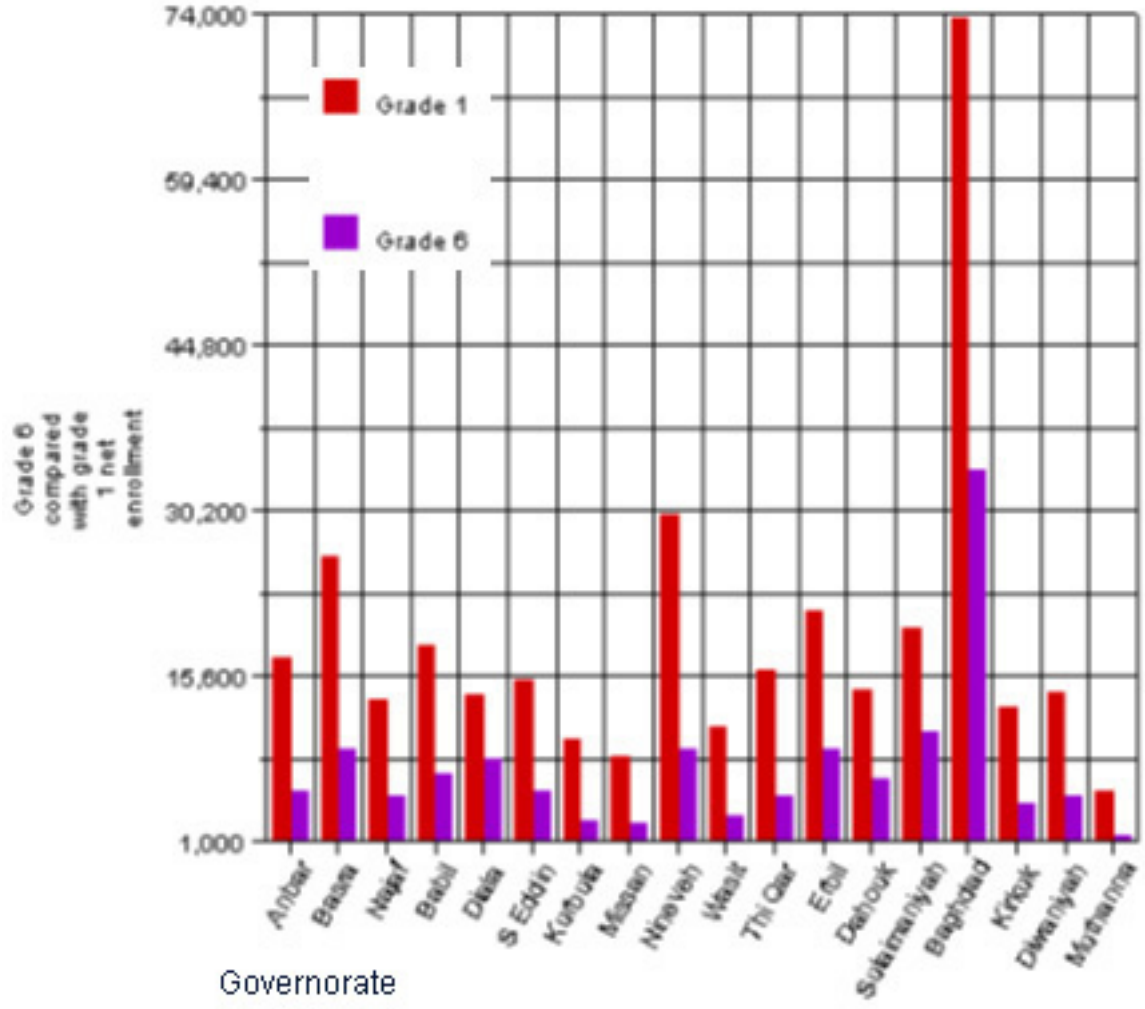
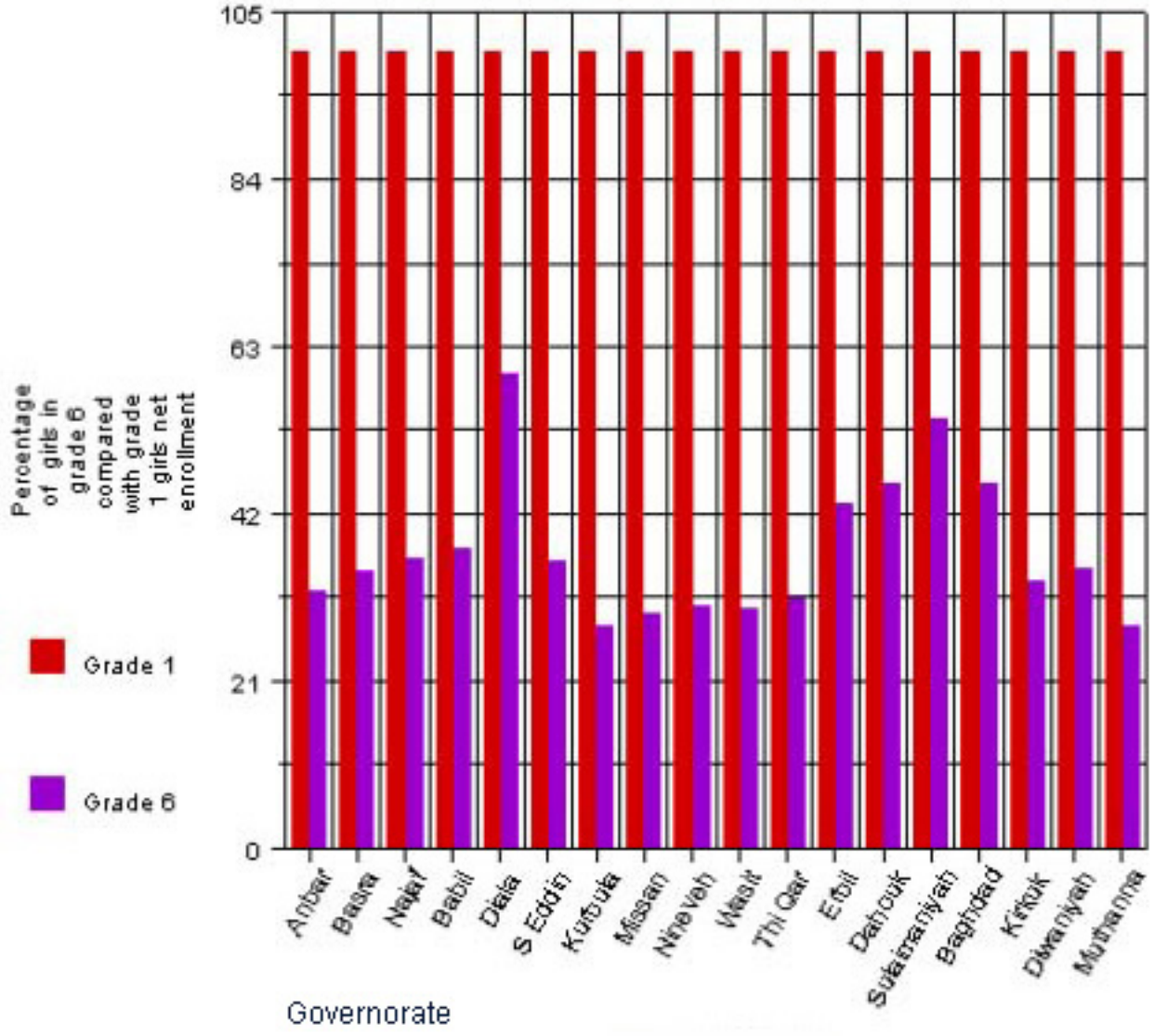


**Figure 3: Girls decline in numbers. Grade 6 compared to Grade 1**



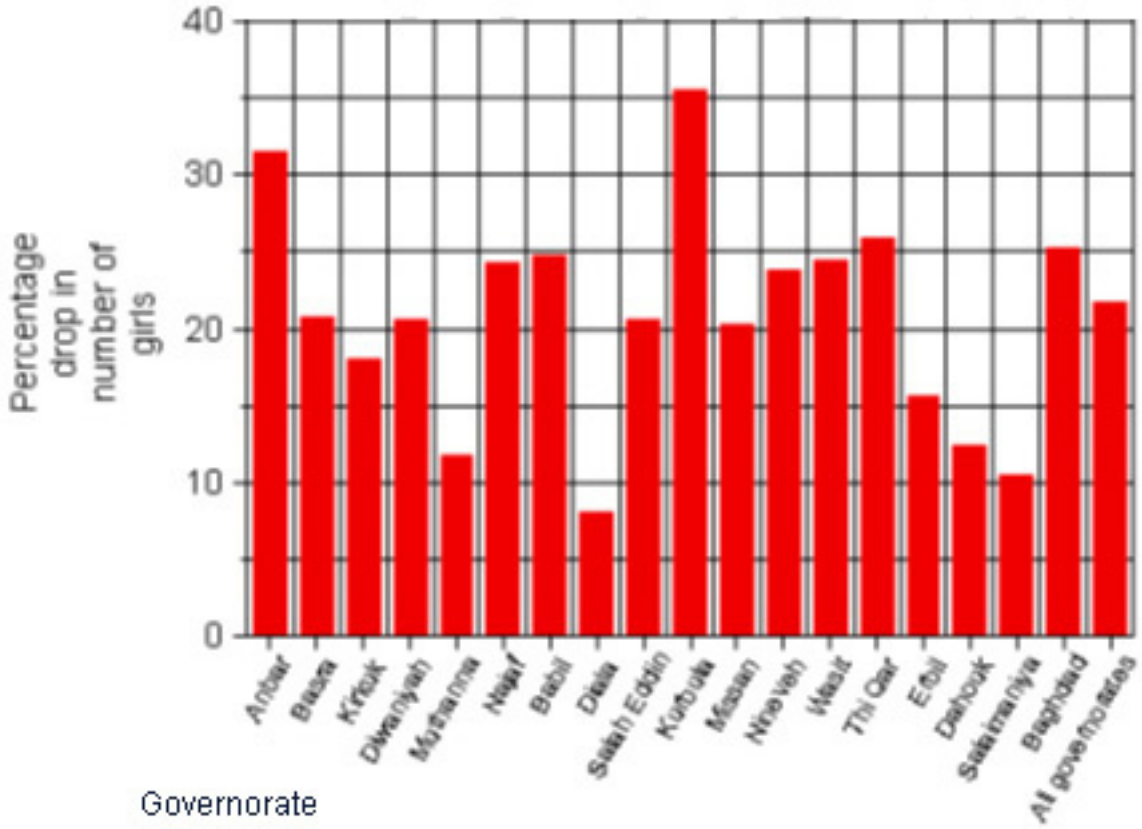




**Figure 4: Percentage drop in the number of girls between Grades 1 and 2**

**Figure 5: Percentage drop of number of girls between Grade 6 and 1st intermediate**

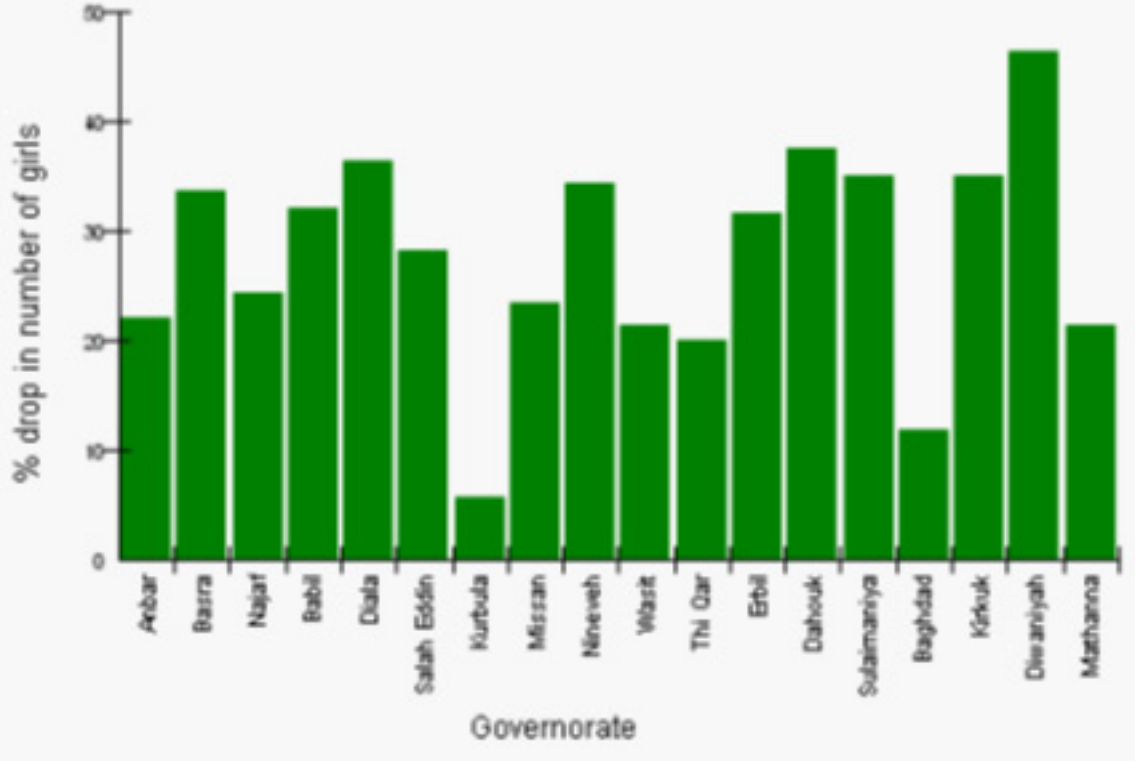



**Figure 6: Percentage of girls in 1st Intermediate class as compared with Grade 1**

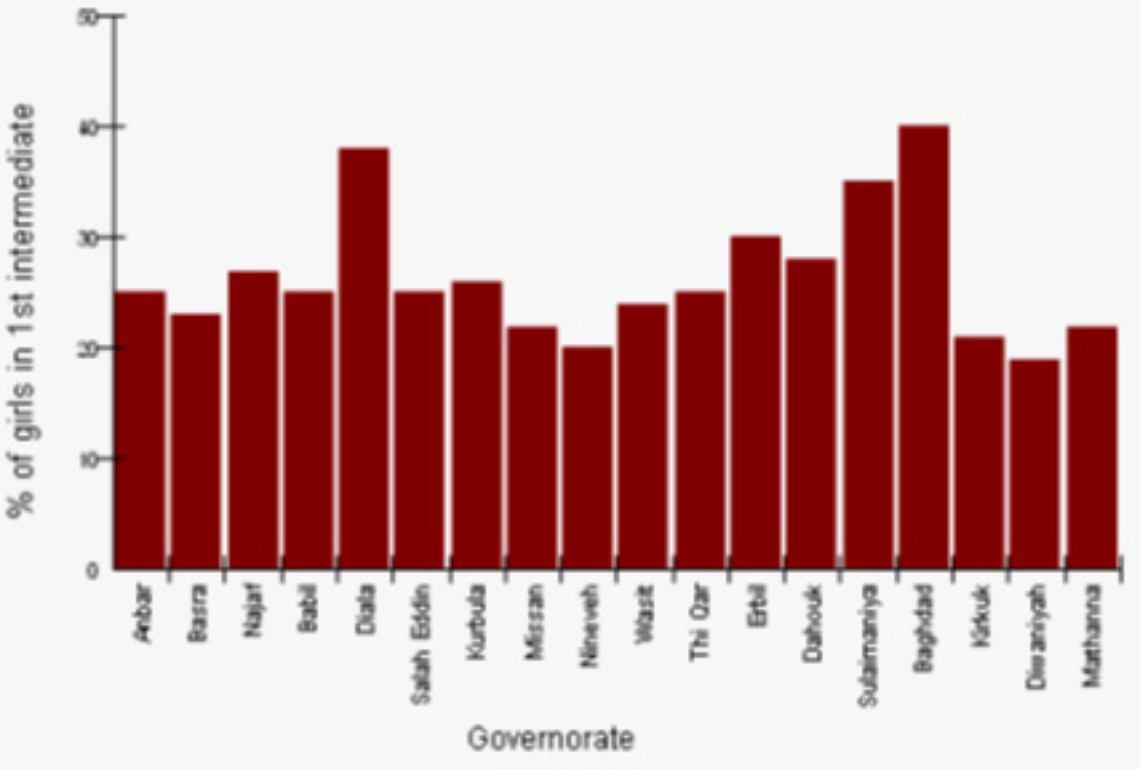



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**Figure 7: Decline in numbers in net enrolment of girls - Grade 1 to 3rd intermediate**

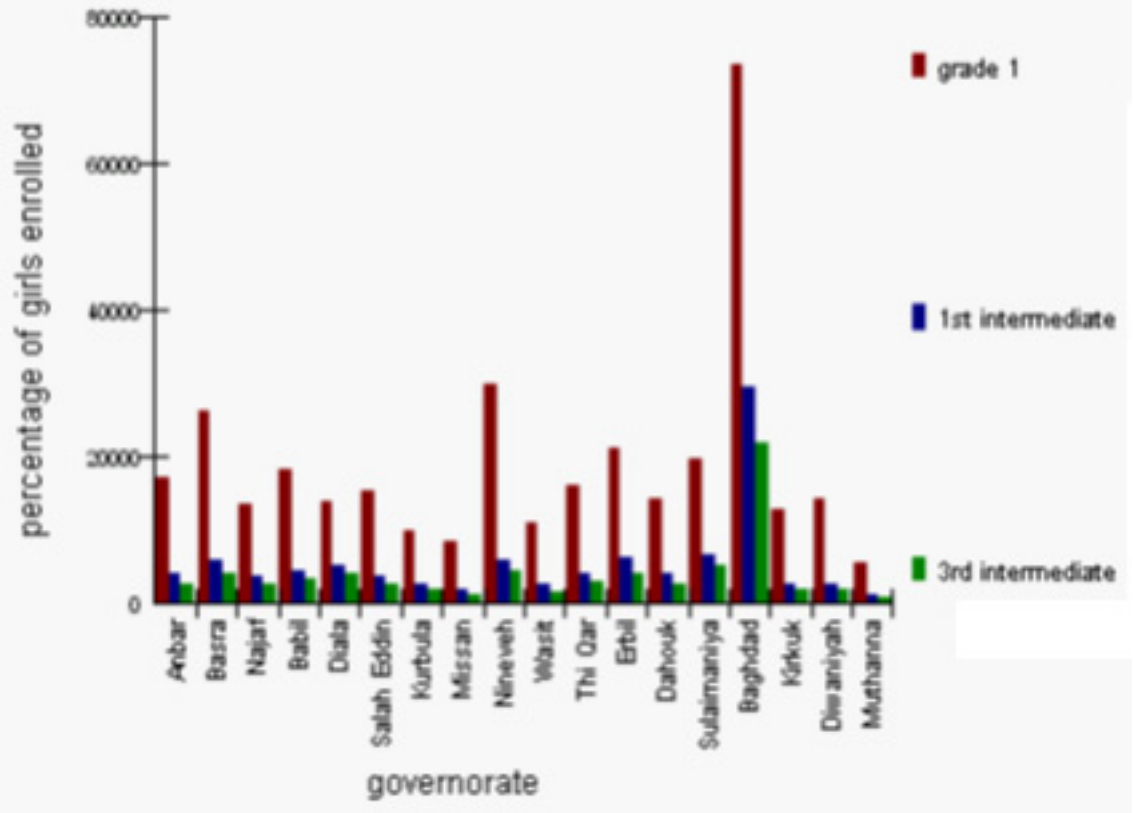


**Figure 8: Girls decline in numbers - Grade 1 to 3rd intermediate class**

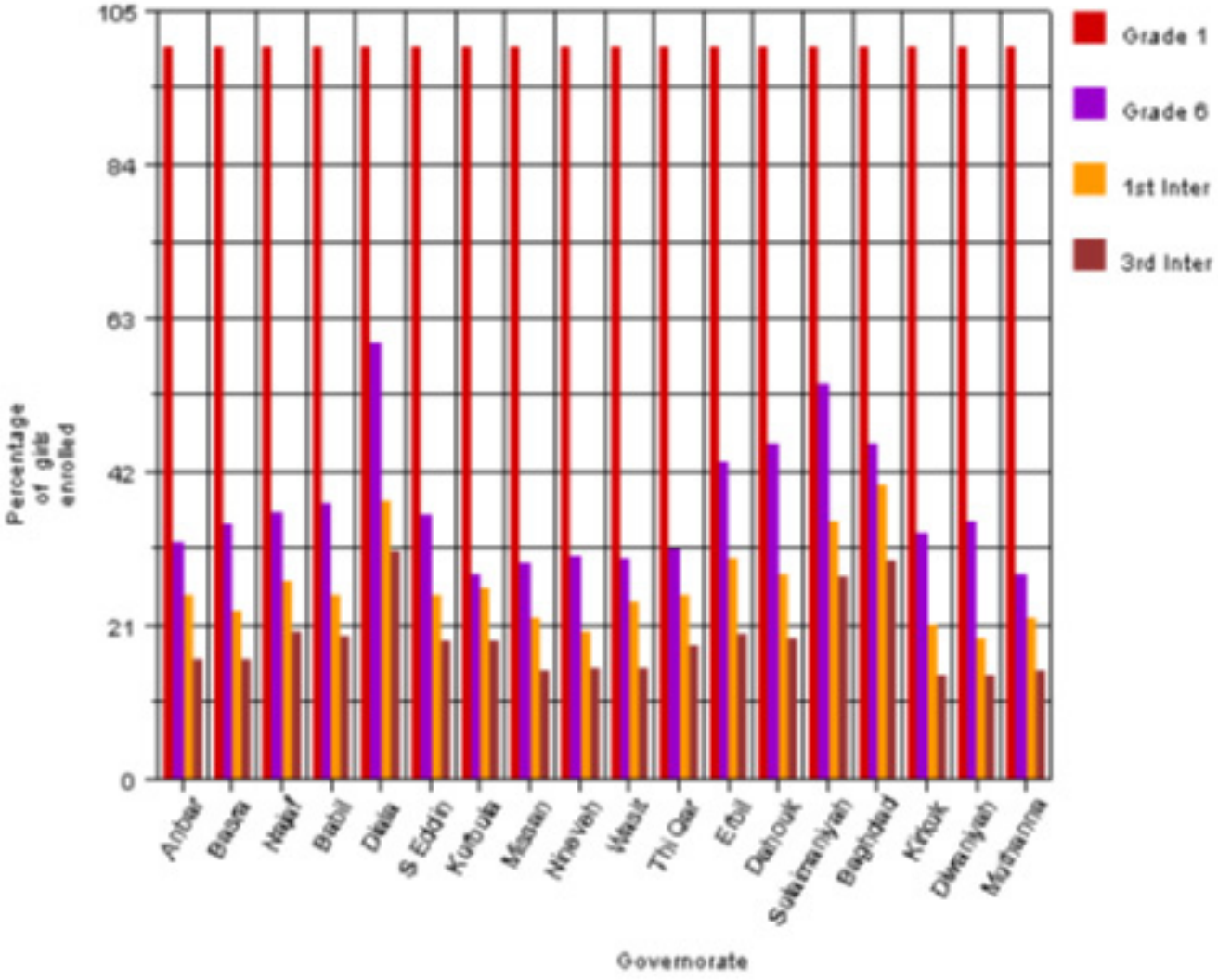

**Figure 9: Difficulties in school access**