

Bringing Education to the Most Marginalized Girls in Nepal: Evidence from the Girls' Access to Education (GATE) programme

Let Us Learn: Nepal research brief

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KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Expand the Girls' Access to Education (GATE) non-formal education programme, which targets the most marginalized girls, to other provinces in Nepal.** Once enrolled, 95 per cent of GATE girls in participating provinces complete the programme, and 89 per cent of participants make the transition to formal school. GATE graduates enrolled in Grades 3 to 5 in formal schools outperform non-GATE girls enrolled in the same grades.
- **Explore the feasibility of expanding GATE, as a cost-effective programme, to target out-of-school children in other countries.** Cost per GATE participant is estimated at \$76, lower than the estimated annual cost per student in public primary school in Nepal (\$245).¹
- **Provide financial support to girls who successfully make the transition from the GATE programme to formal school.** GATE graduates revealed struggles in making the transition to formal school, with a few girls mentioning that their families had found it difficult to pay for school fees, uniforms and supplies.
- **Address the stigmatization of GATE learners in formal schools.** Girls from certain ethnic groups face discrimination by other students, and even by teachers, in formal school classrooms.

ABOUT THE GATE PROGRAMME

In Nepal, 640,329 children and adolescents of primary and secondary school age were out-of-school in 2019, equivalent to 9 per cent of the primary and secondary school-aged population, according to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics (UIS) UIS.Stat website (<http://data.uis.unesco.org>).² The majority of out-of-school children are concentrated in the districts of the Terai region, where the GATE programme operates.³

GATE is a non-formal education programme that aims to get the most marginalized adolescent girls in Nepal back to school. The nine-month programme provides out-of-school adolescent girls with the basic literacy, numeracy and life skills they need to (re)enter formal schooling. Participating girls learn foundational skills and also study topics relevant to the context, including child marriage, gender-based violence and reproductive health. This research brief provides a snapshot of GATE efforts. The findings below draw on GATE monitoring data for 2018/19, for a sample of 7,394 GATE beneficiaries in five districts of Nepal: Dhanusha, Mahottari, Parsa, Rautahat and Saptari. Insights from these quantitative data are combined with qualitative evidence drawn from case studies of participating girls and from focus group discussions conducted in 2019 with 12 former GATE participants.

This research brief is one of a series of country research briefs presenting evidence on the achievements of the Let Us Learn programme, which supports quality learning opportunities for disadvantaged children in five countries (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Liberia, Madagascar and Nepal). The programmes supported by

1 Unless otherwise stated, all amounts shown are in US dollars.

2 These figures show some progress, as the UIS.Stat website shows that in 2017 the number of children and adolescents of primary and secondary school age who were out of school was 835,401, equivalent to 11.3 per cent of the primary and secondary school-aged population (<http://data.uis.unesco.org>).

3 The Terai region is home to 65.1 per cent of primary and 78.6 per cent of lower secondary school-aged out-of-school children in Nepal (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, UNICEF & UNESCO, 2016).

Let Us Learn vary according to the challenges facing each individual country context, but all initiatives align with four equity pillars: (1) access and retention; (2) quality education; (3) systems strengthening; and (4) disaster risk reduction.

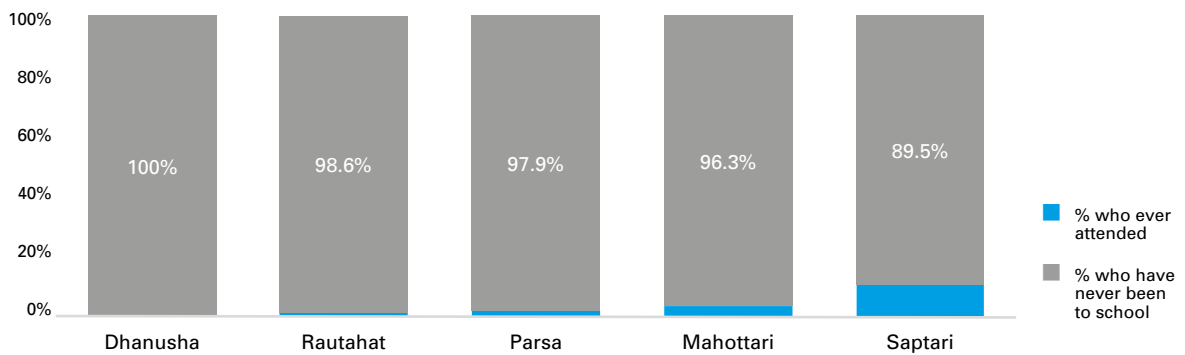
FINDINGS

Most GATE participants had never been to school.

Only a very small proportion of GATE girls had ever attended school (2.9 per cent), although there was some variation across the five districts. Saptari

district had the highest share of girls who had ever attended school (10.5 per cent). In contrast, in Dhanusha, none of the girls in the sample had ever attended school (*see Figure 1*). Sita Sada, a 14-year-old GATE beneficiary from the Dhanusha district, came from a family in which no one had ever learned to read and write.⁴ In fact, according to a case study on GATE beneficiaries, not a single person in the Dhanusha district’s Musahar community, to which Sita belongs, had passed Grade 10. The situation in this district is particularly challenging: in 2011, 66,527 girls in Dhanusha were out of school (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

Figure 1. Schooling history of GATE participants by district



Source: GATE monitoring data.

The GATE cohort included girls from five ethnic groups typically representing the population of girls more likely to be out of school. For example, only 1.9 per cent of girls from the Dalit ethnic group had ever attended school; the figure is also low among Brahmin/Chhetri girls, though comparatively higher at 6.6 per cent. None of the girls with disabilities in the sample – 29 girls out of the total 7,394 GATE beneficiaries – had ever attended school, suggesting that this is an acutely marginalized group within a cohort of girls who already suffer from multiple deprivations.

Poverty, caring for family members at home and traditional social norms help to explain why GATE participants had never attended or had previously dropped out of school.

The qualitative data from case studies suggest that poverty, caring responsibilities and parents’ traditional views may be important factors in explaining why GATE girls had never attended school. At least six case studies of GATE beneficiaries, documented from 2016 to 2019, found that girls were confined to household work prior to their GATE experience. For example, Sita and Gita from Dhanusha district had both engaged fully in household responsibilities prior to enrolment in

GATE, as a result of having each lost at least one parent when younger. Sajroon, a 15-year-old girl from Saptari district, was responsible for household chores because her mother went to work outside the home, while her sick father was confined to the home.

Other case studies document parents convinced that, if a girl is educated, her parents will have to find an educated groom for her, raising the value of the dowry that the boy’s family will demand from the girl’s parents. This occurs even though the dowry system has been outlawed in Nepal since 1976 and despite the heavier penalties imposed in 2017 for those who continue the practice. Parents often face social pressure to follow traditions and norms discouraging the education of girls. As one parent from Mahottari district explained, “living in this community, we are just under so much pressure and burden of responsibility that we feel compelled to do what everyone else does.” Other reasons cited by local *palika* leaders in the Birgunj municipality (Parsa district) to explain why girls do not attend school include child marriage, age differences within the classroom (older girls are embarrassed to attend the same classes as younger girls) and menstruation.⁵ The leaders explained that the stigma of menstruation caused girls to miss three to five days of

4 All of the names used in this brief are pseudonyms.

5 *Palikas* are the tertiary-level, and smallest, administrative units of Nepal.

school per month on average, often leading them to eventually drop out of school altogether.

GATE represents an opportunity for girls who have never been to school, or previously dropped out, to obtain the foundational skills that will allow them to make the transition to formal school. Not all parents or family members are convinced, however, that enrolment in GATE is the best avenue for their daughters or sisters. Sajroon’s parents, for example, were ambivalent to letting her enroll in the programme as attending school was a rare occurrence for girls in their village and because they felt their family was too poor to pay for the costs associated with schooling. Asha’s parents believed that enrolling in GATE would be a “waste of time”. In at least four documented cases, GATE facilitators played a key role in convincing parents and other family members of the need to send girls to school.

“When we can hardly feed our daughter, how can we send her to school?”
 – Parents of a GATE beneficiary

Once enrolled, 95 per cent of GATE participants complete the programme.

Despite the challenging context, GATE has had tremendous success in terms of the proportion of girls who graduate from the programme: 95 per cent of the GATE participants sampled completed the programme. When disaggregating the data by ethnicity, the rates of programme completion do not vary significantly across ethnic groups. In addition, all 29 of the girls with disabilities completed the GATE programme. When disaggregating by district, however, there is some variation in the programme completion rates:

Dhanusha district had the lowest completion rate on average (90.3 per cent) while Parsa had the highest completion rate (97.4 per cent).

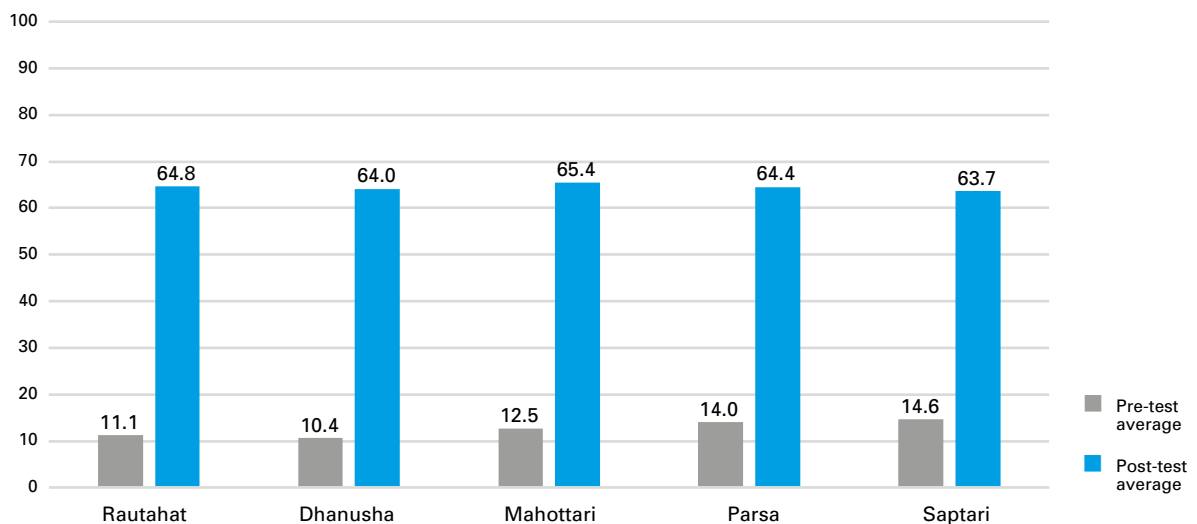


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 A GATE class in Dhanusha, Nepal (2019)

GATE participants and graduates show notable learning outcomes.

Participant learning in the GATE programme is assessed through the administration of pre- and post-tests covering basic-level to Grade 3-level competencies. The tests include Nepali literacy, mathematics, English literacy, picture identification, and basic knowledge. All *palikas* saw an increase in the average score from pre- to post-test, a positive result indicating that GATE girls’ learning increased considerably during the programme period. The increase in the average score in individual *palikas* ranged from 47 to 57 percentage points. None of the *palikas* represented saw the average score increase by less than 47 percentage points, suggesting that a considerable amount of learning took place over the duration of the programme (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Pre- and post-test average scores by district



Source: GATE monitoring data.

Of the girls who complete the GATE programme, 89 per cent make the transition to formal school.

Almost one third of GATE graduates (31 per cent) join at Grade 3 and just over a quarter (26 per cent) join at Grade 4. GATE graduates' rate of transition to mainstream school varies by location, but is not strongly related to ethnic group or disability status. Dalit girls exhibited the lowest rate of transition to school (87.4 per cent), while Brahmin/Chhetri girls had the highest such rate (90.8 per cent), a difference of just a few percentage points. More substantial differences are seen across districts: Dhanusha district had the lowest rate of GATE graduates making the transition to formal school (78.7 per cent), while Parsa had the highest such rate (93.5 per cent). Over 96 per cent (28 out of 29) of the graduates with disabilities made the transition to formal school.

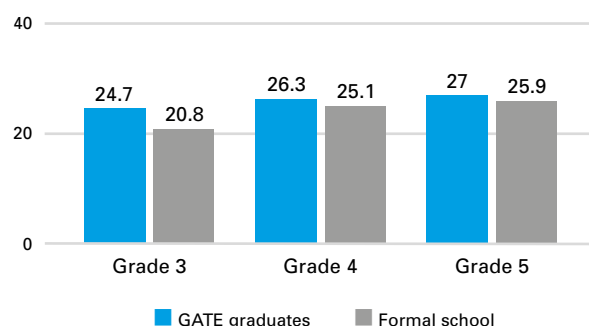
Despite these high rates of transition to formal school, GATE graduates face significant challenges in making this move – including the requirement to pay school fees.

Focus group discussions with a small sample of GATE graduates revealed that those who had subsequently made the transition to the formal school system had faced struggles with this change, with a few girls mentioning that their families had found it difficult to pay for school fees, uniforms and supplies.⁶ One girl, whose family could not afford to pay for shoes, said that she would be frequently scolded by her teacher for not having appropriate footwear for school. Gita, mentioned above, made a successful transition to Grade 5, but her school does not offer education beyond this grade; as of next year, she will have to travel 3 kilometres each day to and from her nearest secondary school to continue her education. Additional challenges faced once enrolled in formal school may include challenges related to the age of the girls. Because GATE girls are older than the age ascribed to their grade, they may feel discouraged to share a classroom with younger peers in the formal school setting (see, for example, Save the Children, 2019).

Discussions with World Education, a GATE partner, highlighted another factor that may make the transition to formal school difficult – the discrimination that girls from certain ethnic groups face from other students, and even from teachers, in the classroom. Some schools believe that the inclusion of GATE graduates may lower the level of achievement among students, even though a recent assessment by World Education shows that, in formal schools, GATE girls outperform their peers (World Education, 2020). The study compared a sample of GATE graduates enrolled in

Grades 3 to 5 (n=1,025) with a sample of non-GATE girls enrolled in local community public schools in the same grades (n=1,431), using learning assessments adapted from the Early Grade Reading Assessment and Early Grade Math Assessment.⁷ Some 16.6 per cent of the GATE graduates could read at a speed of 45 correct words per minute (CWPM) or faster – the target set by the Nepalese government – while 13.5 per cent of the non-GATE girls in Grades 3 to 5 met this target. Assessment of the average reading speed by grade also shows a higher proficiency among GATE girls compared with non-GATE girls (see Figure 3). For example, GATE girls placed in Grade 3 read at an average speed of 24.7 CWPM, while the corresponding figure for non-GATE girls in Grade 3 was 20.8 CWPM. GATE girls also ever so slightly outperform non-GATE girls in numeracy. On average, 69 per cent of GATE girls provided only correct answers to all questions across 11 mathematics areas, compared with 68 per cent of non-GATE girls (see Table 1 and Appendix B).⁸

Figure 3. Average reading speed (correct words per minute) for GATE graduates and non-GATE girls



Source: Adapted from World Education (2020).

Table 1. Comparison of girls' performance in formal schools (Grades 3–5) between GATE graduates and non-GATE graduates

Area	GATE	Non-GATE	Criterion
Literacy	17%	14%	Read at a speed of 45 correct words per minute
Reading	55%	44%	Achieved 80 to 100% comprehension in Nepali
Numeracy tests	69%	68%	% of girls with only correct answers

6 Participants in the focus group discussions raised this issue even though the government has outlawed school fees and made education free and compulsory.

7 Schools did not always enrol girls into the most appropriate grades, so comparison by grade is not entirely reliable. The grade is the current grade of students and reflects learning at the end of the previous grade, e.g., 'Grade 4' is interpreted as learning achieved upon completion of Grade 3. Sample size for mathematics is slightly larger (n=1,040).

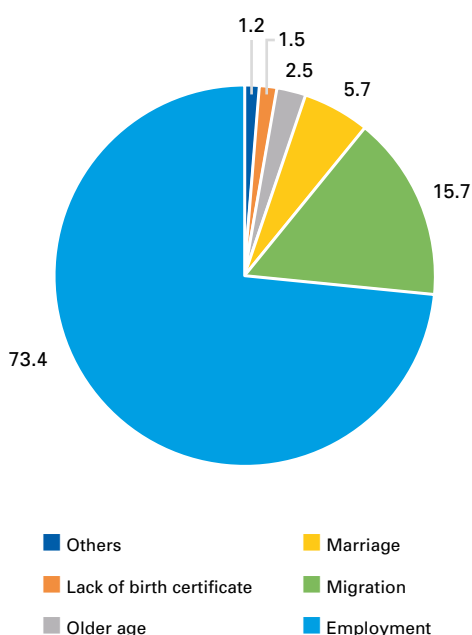
8 The 11 areas tested were: tally and counting, counting, understanding numbers, number word reading, counting and adding, understanding place value, addition, subtraction, simple multiplication, multiplication table and problem solving.

Several studies from the global literature comparing learning outcomes for participants of non-formal education programmes and students enrolled in formal schools have similarly found that non-formal education graduates perform on a par with or outperform their mainstream school peers (see, for example, Akyempong et al., 2018; Nath et al., 2007; Chabbott, 2005; Education Development Center, 2015), which lends further reliability to these findings.⁹

GATE graduates' main reason for not making the transition to formal school was employment.

For the overwhelming majority of GATE participants who graduated from the programme but did not make the transition to formal school (10.9 per cent of the cohort n=809), this was explained by a move to take up employment or earn wages (73.4 per cent) or to migrate (15.7 per cent). A small proportion of girls did not make the transition due to getting married (5.7 per cent) (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Reasons for not mainstreaming into formal school, %



Note: N=809 students who did not mainstream into formal school. Source: GATE monitoring data.

According to the president of LIFE Nepal, the non-governmental organization that formerly partnered with UNICEF to implement the GATE programme, “given the socio-economic condition [of participants], transition to school is not easy for everyone.” Other girls may not have parents who support the transition from GATE to formal school, as was the case for Surji, a 12-year-old from Dhanusha district who completed the programme but did not then make the move to formal school.

GATE girls have a positive outlook on the future.

In a focus group discussion with GATE graduates, most girls mentioned having career aspirations for the future and all wanted to continue studying. At least two focus group participants said that they wanted to become teachers; within the six case studies of GATE beneficiaries, three girls revealed this same career goal. Other target professions that girls cited were nurse, small business owner, railway engineer and police officer, the latter two of which defy prevailing gender and cultural stereotypes. Several GATE girls also mentioned facing financial difficulties at home and that they would like to study for careers that are well remunerated (e.g., medicine). The GATE programme has reportedly allowed participants to see themselves as capable of constructing a different future, with better opportunities. “I came out feeling like a completely different person [after GATE],” said Rima, from Parsa district.

“Money can and will come later, but the opportunity for education will not.”
 – Sajroon, GATE beneficiary, aged 14 years

GATE constitutes a cost-effective solution for targeting the most vulnerable children.

The estimated cost per GATE participant is \$76 for the nine-month programme (see Appendix A).¹⁰ In comparison, the annual cost per public primary school student in Nepal for the 2018/19 school year was \$245. Although GATE is more cost-effective than public school, neither it nor other non-formal education programmes have the resources to transform into viable alternatives to formal school. Instead, such programmes constitute *cost-effective solutions to prepare out-of-school vulnerable children for eventually making the transition to the formal school system.*

9 One possible explanation for the higher performance of non-formal education programme participants is that they are often older than formal school students.
 10 The cost of GATE considers: (1) technical support through non-governmental organization mobilization to all districts and *palikas*; (2) incentives for GATE facilitators and supervisors; (3) book publication; (4) transition to formal school; and (5) management costs.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Most of the girls who participate in GATE have not previously had the opportunity to attend school, indicating that the programme is delivering on its goal to reach the most disadvantaged out-of-school girls in the country. The girls' reasons for not attending school are related to poverty, to the burden of household responsibilities placed upon them as individuals and to the traditional roles ascribed to girls and women in their communities.

The GATE programme enrolled more than 7,000 girls in five districts of Nepal in its 2018/19 cohort, thanks to the efforts of facilitators who have been involved in sensitizing parents to the importance of education for girls.

Many of these participants have since successfully made the transition to the formal school system and gone on to achieve important strides in their learning.

Despite GATE participants' admirable optimism for the future, they nevertheless face obstacles when making the transition to formal school. As well as discrimination from their peers and teachers, there are school fees and associated costs that their families may be unable to shoulder. These factors will need to be addressed to retain GATE graduates in formal school to complete their education. Of those girls who relinquished the opportunity to go on to school after completing the programme, most did so in order to earn an income to help support their families.

These findings lead to the following recommendations:

Recommendations for UNICEF and implementing partners:

- Continue with the expansion of the current programme to other provinces in Nepal, targeting palikas with a high proportion of out-of-school children from marginalized groups.
- Due to the cost-effectiveness of the programme, explore the feasibility of replicating GATE in other countries – with appropriate context-specific adaptations as required – to help out-of-school marginalized children eventually make the transition to formal school systems.
- Provide additional support through facilitators to help convince parents to enrol GATE graduates in formal school once the girls have completed the programme.
- Conduct intersectoral work through Communication for Development (C4D) or other community engagement programmes to address the stigmatization of ethnic groups and GATE learners, to avoid their discrimination in formal schools.
- Work closely with provincial governments to tie in their work with the girls' education agenda, to deliver advocacy and resources that will support girls to continue their education.

Recommendations for the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, wider government and development partners:

- Provide financial support to girls who successfully make the transition from the GATE programme to formal school, particularly to cover the costs associated with schooling.
- Work with school authorities and communities to ensure that schools are child-friendly, and to decrease discriminatory practices in formal schools that receive GATE graduates – emphasizing in particular that welcoming GATE learners will not negatively affect school performance.
- Work closely with local governments to link older GATE learners with entrepreneurs to ensure decent livelihoods for the future.

Recommendations for researchers:

- Collect longitudinal data on short- and medium-term outcomes for girls to help understand what additional outcomes the GATE programme may contribute to and what barriers to success remain.
- Continue the measurement of learning alongside data collection on background characteristics of students as well as availability of supplies and learning materials.
- Identify the factors that account for the lower rates of completion and transition in the lower-performing GATE programme districts.

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APPENDIX A: UNIT COST CALCULATIONS AND COMPARISONS

Calculation of cost of primary school and GATE cost per student

Background information

- Student population of Nepal in public primary schools (2019/20): 3,312,062 students (UNESCO UIS.Stat; <http://data.uis.unesco.org>)
- Total public education budget for Nepal: 166.1 billion Nepalese rupees in 2018/19 (education spending constituted 5.25% of GDP for that year) (SSDP report, 2019)
- Proportion of education expenditure directed to primary schools: 53.8% in 2015 (UNESCO UIS.Stat)

Calculating cost per primary school student

According to the UNESCO UIS.Stat website, primary education received the largest share of education funding in 2015 – 53.8% of the total education expenditure. Assuming that the percentage of spending on primary from total expenditure has remained constant (53.8%) – a reasonable assumption – the following steps were taken to calculate the unit cost of primary education (per student per year):

1. Multiplied the total annual public education budget (166.1 billion Nepalese rupees) by proportion allocated to primary education (0.538):

$166.1 \text{ billion Nepalese rupees} * 0.538 = 89.4 \text{ billion Nepalese rupees}$

2. Divided the annual budget for primary education (89.4 billion Nepalese rupees) by the total number of students in public primary schools in 2018/19 (3,312,062):

$89.4 \text{ billion Nepalese rupees} / 3,312,062 \text{ students} = 26,992 \text{ Nepalese rupees per student}$

3. Applied the current exchange rate (110 Nepalese rupees = \$1) to calculate the amount in US dollars: \$245 per student

Calculating cost per GATE student

The following steps were taken to obtain the unit cost of the GATE programme (per student per year):

1. Divided the total GATE budget (64,465,493 Nepalese rupees) by the number of GATE participants (7,691).

$64,465,493 \text{ Nepalese rupees} / 7,691 \text{ GATE participants} = 8,381.9 \text{ Nepalese rupees per student}$

2. Applied the current exchange rate (110 Nepalese rupees = \$1) to calculate the amount in US dollars: \$76 per student

APPENDIX B: COMPARISON OF PERFORMANCE IN FORMAL SCHOOLS (GRADES 3–5) FOR GATE GRADUATES AND NON-GATE GIRLS – BREAKDOWN OF MATHEMATICS SCORES (ADAPTED VERSION OF EARLY GRADE MATH ASSESSMENT)

Section focus	Task/sub-task	Non-GATE girls	GATE graduates
Tally and counting	Count objects by observing given images and tally (three questions out of six)	63%	96%
Counting	Orally count from 1 to 100 (score out of 10)	78%	69%
Understanding numbers	Identify numbers and read (10 numbers taken randomly from 1 to 100, covering all 10 digits)	67%	63%
Number word reading	Read numbers written in words and write in number form (10 words)	47%	42%
Counting and adding	Count objects and add (three questions)	91%	96%
Understanding place value	Two-digit place value (tens, ones) (six questions)	64%	67%
Addition	One-digit and two-digit additions with and without carry-over (three questions)	77%	83%
Subtraction	Two-digit subtraction with and without borrowing (three questions)	61%	65%
Simple multiplication	Two-digit multiplicand and multipliers are 4, 6 and 8 (three questions)	53%	52%
Multiplication table	3 times table (score out of 10)	81%	75%
	4 times table (score out of 10)	79%	69%
Problem solving	Correctly solve three problems written in words	59%	59%
Average score		68%	69%