Ensure Equitable and Quality Education at All Levels

Facts, Solutions, Case Studies, and Calls to Action

OVERVIEW

Educating girls and women is a powerful investment that benefits both individuals and society by unlocking the potential to improve health, nutrition, social justice, democracy, human rights, gender equality, social cohesion, and economic prosperity for current and future generations. This policy brief examines the cross-sectoral interventions that promote gender equality in and through education and support girls to access and complete school.

SECTION 1: FRAMING THE ISSUE

The global community recognizes that education is a crucial element to advancing gender equality, empowering girls and women, and reducing global poverty. Yet, as of 2016, more than 130 million girls do not have access to education.[1] While gender parity[2] has been achieved globally, on average, the situation varies by region,[3] with gender gaps persisting in low-income countries.[4] The proportion of countries with a large disparity to the disadvantage of girls has halved since 2000, but remains at 7% for primary education, 12% for lower secondary education, and 16% for upper secondary education.[5] Conflict has stagnated progress toward gender parity in regions such as Northern Africa and Western Asia.[6]

Despite global progress, there is still work to do. Just two-thirds of countries have achieved gender parity in primary education, and only half in lower secondary education.[7] For upper secondary education, only one-fourth of countries have achieved gender parity.[8] Wealth also affects educational attainment. The poorest girls are generally the worst off, as they are less likely to complete any level of schooling compared to other girls and compared to the poorest boys.[9]

Girls' access to education is limited by barriers such as gender-discriminatory norms and stereotypes, poverty, school fees, distance from schools, and the absence of menstrual hygiene management (MHM) facilities at school.[10] In many communities, pervasive patriarchal attitudes, gender stereotypes, and lack of future employment opportunities for girls may lead to prioritizing education for sons over daughters.[11] Girls' ability to stay in school is further threatened by gender-based violence; early, forced, and child marriage; and unintended pregnancy.[12] For example, a recent report found that 24 African countries, including Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, and Uganda, lack re-entry policies or laws that protect the right to education for pregnant girls and young mothers.[13] Worse, Tanzania, Equatorial Guinea, and Sierra Leone explicitly deny young mothers access to public schools and expel girls who are pregnant.[14]

Marginalized groups—such as racial, ethnic, indigenous, migrant, and linguistic minorities; children with disabilities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) children; children living with HIV; children in rural areas or slums; and refugee children—face additional barriers to quality education. These barriers include a lack of culturally appropriate curricula in native languages, lack of adequate health services and facilities, and general discrimination by teachers and peers, all of which limit marginalized children's access to and completion of education.[15, 16] For example, refugee children have a primary school attendance rate of about 61%, and a secondary school attendance rate of only 23%.[17]

However, parity alone is not a sufficient measure of gender equity in education and may mask other important discrepancies in educational attainment. To see a fuller picture, it is essential to look beyond enrollment to functional learning, including literacy and numeracy, educational outcomes, and school participation and completion rates among girls and boys.[18] For nearly two decades, literacy rates have remained stagnant, and 63% of illiterate adults are women.[19] Furthermore, girls' school participation rates can be hindered by complications of humanitarian and conflict settings.[20, 21]

Addressing education barriers and quality could reduce the existing education and skills gap around the world. According to a 2018 study by the Manpower Group, 45% of employers find it difficult to recruit employees with the necessary skills.[22] Africa is projected to have 1 billion young people by the year 2050, increasing the need to reduce this skills gap by improving access to education in low- and middle-income countries.[23] Given the persistent disadvantages of women in the labor market, it is important to provide training opportunities, including vocational education with accessible learning tools, for girls and women to gain marketable skills and become more competitive in the workforce.[24, 25] Furthermore, it is necessary to invest in leadership and civic engagement skills for girls and young women so they are not simply learning a trade or vocation that responds to market needs, but also learning skills that support and promote higher leadership ambitions and community engagement.[26]

Improving access to and completion of at least 12 years of free, safe, quality, and gender-responsive education and training opportunities for girls and women needs to be a key part of the movement toward gender equality. In order to enjoy their rights, realize their full potential in life, successfully engage in the labor market, and become leaders in their communities, it is important that girls and women have equal

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Ensuring equitable and quality education at all levels is linked to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and targets, including:

SDG 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere

- **1.1** By 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than $1.25 a day

- **1.2** By 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women, and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions

SDG 4: Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

- **4.1** By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes

- **4.2** By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality childhood development, care, and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education

- **4.3** By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education, including university

- **4.4** By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs, and entrepreneurship

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access to complete, quality, secondary and higher education beyond primary schooling. Evidence suggests that investing in girls' secondary education in lower-income countries provides returns at an even higher rate than investments made in high-income countries.[27] As countries and the development community work toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), gender-equitable education is a key part of economic and social progress.

SECTION 2: SOLUTIONS AND INTERVENTIONS

In order to ensure quality education, keep girls and women in school, and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all girls and women, efforts must be strengthened to:

- Reduce or eliminate the cost of schooling placed on families and communities through gender-responsive education sector planning, gender-responsive budgeting, and non-governmental initiatives.

- Ensure access to safe, quality education for children affected by crises and living in humanitarian emergencies.

- Expand initiatives that focus on out-of-school children, including a focus on children living with disabilities and indigenous peoples.

- Improve water, sanitation, and hygiene in schools.

- Create safe, supportive, and gender-responsive school environments that include gender responsive pedagogy.

- Engage communities, including boys and men, to challenge harmful gender norms and stereotypes that keep girls out of school.

- Ensure the provision of both school-based and out-of-school comprehensive sexuality education that aligns with the UN's 2018 International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education.[28]

Reduce or Eliminate the Cost of Schooling Placed on Families and Communities Through Gender-Responsive Education Sector Planning, Gender-Responsive Budgeting, and Non-Governmental Initiatives

One tool to combat gender disparity in education is gender-responsive education sector planning, which includes gender-responsive budgeting. This type of planning supports ministries of education and their partners to integrate gender equality considerations throughout their national planning cycles, meaning that curricula, textbooks, teacher training, infrastructure, data systems, and policies must all work to address gender imbalances.[29] Gender-responsive budgeting in the education sector can increase decision-makers' understanding of the gendered impact of financial expenditures, increase government accountability to gender equality commitments, and promote gender equality through policies and budgets.[30]

Direct and indirect school costs continue to prevent enrollment and completion, particularly at the secondary level and particularly for girls from poor families.[31] Cash-transfer programs, scholarships, and stipends have been effective at increasing girls' school attendance,[32, 33] including in refugee settings.[34] Yet cash incentives alone cannot always trigger effective change without addressing underlying values that prevent girls from attending school. Evidence suggests that parents are more likely to invest in their daughters' education when the economic opportunities for doing so are clear.[35] Multi-sectoral efforts that alleviate these financial burdens—such as decreasing transportation and school supply costs—are also needed to close the educational gap. Governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should work together to provide monetary support, address harmful gender norms and stereotypes that keep girls out of school, and raise awareness of the benefits of educating girls.

Case Study: Building a Strategy for Equity in Nepal[36]
In Nepal in recent years, the education sector has achieved gender parity at the primary and secondary levels and has seen increased attendance among children from marginalized groups. To bolster these successes, the Government of Nepal, with support from UNICEF and others, has developed an Education Equity Index. This index measures education imbalances across gender and other intersecting domains, such as disability status and wealth. It was approved in 2016 and is a key part of the government's Consolidated Equity Strategy. The index allows districts to be assessed on their progress toward equity in access, participation, and learning, and it helps decision-makers make more responsive policy, planning, and financial decisions.

Case Study: Uganda's Successful Gender Responsive Budgeting Plan[37]
Uganda's National Development Plan, 2010–2015,[38] focused on promoting gender equality and women's empowerment through gender-responsive budgeting and monitoring and evaluation plans. The original evaluation showed improved access to water and sanitation, increased gender parity in primary school education, and a reduction in unmet needs for contraception and family planning. To accelerate progress further, Uganda's Ministry of Finance, Planning, and Economic Development requested specific statements regarding how the budget allocation would improve gender equality. In the 2016/2017 budget call, multiple stakeholders had to demonstrate how they promote gender equality and the targets they used to measure progress toward these goals. Through these gender-responsive budgetary allocations, Uganda managed to increase overall enrollment in primary school; gender parity at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels; and success in keeping girls in school, suggesting higher achievement in gender equity than countries without gender-responsive budgeting.

- **4.5** By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in vulnerable situations

- **4.6** By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy

- **4.7** By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and nonviolence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development

- **4.a** Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability, and gender-sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive, and effective learning environments for all

SDG 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

- **5.1** End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere

- **5.2** Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation

- **5.3** Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early, and forced marriage and female genital mutilation

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Case Study: Eliminating Secondary School Fees for Girls in The Gambia[39]

Granting financial assistance has been an effective way to boost girls' enrollment in school. In The Gambia, a 2001 initiative funded by UNICEF, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund paid school and exam fees for girls in public schools grades 7 through 12. The initiative staggered rollout throughout the different regions of The Gambia and continued until The Gambian government eliminated fees for upper basic school (grades 7–9) and senior secondary school (grades 10–12) in 2015. An analysis using data from high school exit exams from before the program's start in 2001 through its duration shows that the program successfully increased access to school without compromising classroom learning quality. Overall, the program increased the number of girls taking the high school exit exam by 55%. The most dramatic increases in numbers of students taking the exit exam were seen in poorer districts and among older students.

Ensure Access to Safe, Quality Education for Children Affected by Crises and Living in Humanitarian Emergencies

In conflict settings, almost one in four children who are of primary or secondary school age are out of school.[40] Girls are also two and a half times more likely to be out of school if they live in a conflict setting.[41] Barriers such as the need to travel long distances to schools, lack of safe spaces and proper sanitation facilities in schools, higher rates of gender-based violence, and the unmet need for sexual and reproductive health services all hinder girls' participation in education and lead to an increase in girls' dropout rates.[42,43] The opportunity cost of education for girls in humanitarian emergencies is also high, as girls carry a disproportionate amount of household burdens, such as taking care of family members and collecting fuel and water.[44] The continuation of quality education during humanitarian emergencies is necessary to reduce the time children and adolescents are out of school due to crises. Not only is access to school critical for learning, it also offers children a protective and normalizing environment in the wake of a disaster.[45]

As protracted crises and natural and manmade emergencies are becoming more common, education systems need to be gender responsive and integrate disaster risk reduction and response planning into existing strategies to ensure that they consider the needs of internally displaced persons and refugees. For example, infrastructure and transportation must be able to manage the increased burden of ensuring children maintain access to school during conflicts and humanitarian crises.[46] Education must be provided both in school and out-of-school settings. Adolescents and children in humanitarian settings need access to comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and quality health services in and out of school settings. Supporting accredited, quality, informal, and accelerated educational programs that complement formal education can improve girls' and women's access to education and allow them to catch up to their peers.[47] Designed to be flexible and age appropriate, accelerated education programs can enable a return to formal education or entrance into vocational training or the labor market.[48]

As of October 2019, 100 countries have signed the Safe Schools Declaration, which signals their commitment to protecting students and teachers from the effects of war and their recognition of education as a human right.[49] The declaration urges countries to ensure the continuation of education during conflict and develop conflict-sensitive approaches to education in humanitarian and development programs.[50]

### Case Study: Creating a Network of Girl Change-Makers in Jordan

In the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, only about 20% of adolescent girls successfully complete secondary education.[51] The These Inspired Girls Enjoy Reading (TIGER) program, which evolved from a submission to the UNHCR Ideas Challenge at the World Innovation Summit on Education (WISE), seeks to decrease secondary school dropouts. The program uses a variety of interventions to support girls' interconnected needs in order to increase their sense of personal agency and encourage enrollment and retention.[52] TIGER participants meet daily in small teams and work with coaches on academic, vocational, and community service projects. They receive family support resources and have access to open education resources that are aligned with school assignments via program tablets. Interim evaluations show that TIGER girls have an increased motivation to stay in school, higher confidence levels, and stronger social networks than they reported before participation. The program has also shown some success in encouraging out-of-school girls to return to school.[53]

Case Study: Afghanistan Community Schools Boost Girls' Enrollment[54]

Twenty percent of Afghanistan's 2.5 million school-aged children and youth are out of school. Most are girls, children in remote and insecure areas, and children from vulnerable groups. Since 2013, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) has supported the Government of Afghanistan to make education more accessible for girls in these remote and insecure areas. For example, because there is a strong correlation between the number of female teachers and the number of girls in school in Afghanistan, GPE is helping increase the number of qualified female teachers in areas with high gender disparities in order to increase the enrollment of girls. As a result, 200 qualified and trained female teachers now work in these districts, some of the most volatile in the country. GPE also dedicated 41% of its program budget to mobilize local communities to overcome cultural, societal, and political barriers to education, particularly for girls. Overall, Afghanistan is making significant progress in gender equality in education, with the rate of girls enrolling in primary school increasing from 44% in 2002 to 87% in 2015.

Expand Initiatives That Focus on Out-of-School Children, Including a Focus on Children Living With Disabilities and Indigenous Peoples

As of 2017, 262 million children and adolescents between the ages of 6 and 17 were out of school.[55] Girls who face multiple disadvantages, such as living in rural areas or discrimination due to indigenous
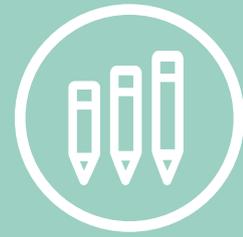
- **5.5** Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life

- **5.6** Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences

- **5.9** Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels

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status, ethnicity, or disability, have high out-of-school rates.[56] For example, in Mexico, estimates from 2017 indicate that only 47% of girls in primary school advanced to secondary school, and only 39% of indigenous girls achieved the same levels of education as their non-indigenous counterparts.[57] These inequalities in school access and completion between populations arise for various reasons, which must be addressed to ensure equity. For example, evidence has shown that having to travel long distances to school is a major barrier to indigenous girls' attendance, and distance to schools disproportionately affects children who live in rural areas. Allocating funding for transportation will help alleviate these issues and encourage school attendance among students living in rural and remote areas.[58]

Forty percent of children living with disabilities in developing countries do not attend primary school,[59] and girls living with disabilities may face additional cultural biases that deprioritize their education.[60] In countries with data available, an estimated 41.7% of girls with disabilities complete primary school, compared to 52.9% of girls without disabilities, and this disparity is even greater in low-income countries.[61] Addressing the problem of inaccessible school building infrastructure, such as by providing accessible toilets, relevant assistance, and menstruation management, would help girls with disabilities attain an education.[62] The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities underscores the right to an inclusive education for all children with disabilities and recognizes the importance of international cooperation to support national governments in realizing this aim.[63]

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states the right for indigenous children to have access to all levels and forms of education without discrimination in a manner appropriate to their culture and provided in their own language.[64] To this end, governments must involve marginalized populations in education sector planning and monitoring; require a minimum standard of accessibility to school facilities; invest in teacher training to make education inclusive; create inclusive and culturally appropriate learning materials, including materials in various languages and specialist learning modalities; and collect data to inform policy and practice, build evidence, and monitor progress.[65, 66]

Case Study: Using Technology to Bring Education to the Most Remote Areas of Pakistan[67]
Since 2012, GPE has been helping the Pakistan provincial government tackle its two most urgent problems in education: getting more children into school, especially girls, and getting them to learn and complete school. To help achieve this, GPE worked with the provincial government to develop an education plan for 2013–2018 that prioritized interventions on both fronts. As of 2015, some 700 schools were newly built or renovated, and more than 100 girls' primary and secondary schools were upgraded. To improve the quality of learning, GPE also supported the recruitment and training of qualified teachers. A strong focus was placed on hiring female teachers to help increase the enrollment of girls. Thanks to these interventions, 53,000 previously out-of-school children, of whom 72% were girls, were enrolled in GPE-supported schools. With an 89% retention rate, these schools will help students transition to higher levels of education.

Case Study: Increasing and Maintaining School Attendance of Adolescent Indigenous Girls in Guatemala[68]
Most indigenous populations live in isolated rural areas with limited access to resources and mobility, hindering the ability of indigenous girls to attend school. In an effort to address this issue, Population Council Guatemala, with support from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and other donors, launched the Abriendo Oportunidades (Opening Opportunities) program in 2004. Targeting indigenous adolescent girls at the highest levels of vulnerability in rural communities, the program trained groups of girls who met on a regular basis to enhance self-esteem, strengthen leadership instincts, and promote gender equality. The program expanded its scope in 2016 by providing 250 bicycles, which increased mobility and school attendance. School reintegration increased by 24% from the 2016 cycle to the 2017 cycle. Increased mobility allowed girls to continue secondary education, as well as engage in commercial and recreational activities.

Improve Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene in Schools

The absence of clean water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities in schools, particularly in upper primary and secondary schools, contributes to absenteeism and causes girls to drop out due to an inability to manage menstrual hygiene.[69] Among 145 countries with data, fewer than 50% of primary schools in 28 countries had access to basic sanitation facilities. Only nine out of 44 countries had more than 75% of primary schools with single-sex facilities.[70]

Improving access to WASH in schools not only reduces absenteeism, it also can bring down the incidence and severity of illness among students.[71] School-based handwashing campaigns reduce illness and absenteeism, emphasizing the role that hygiene education can play in keeping children healthy.[72] Furthermore, for girls to manage menstruation privately and hygienically, they must have access to water and sanitation facilities, along with menstrual hygiene products. In the absence of such facilities, adolescent girls often miss school during menstruation or drop out altogether.[73] For example, 95% of girls in Ghana noted that they sometimes miss school due to menses.[74] Ensuring that all schools have safe water and sanitation facilities is a proven way to create a healthy school environment and make private menstrual health management possible for adolescent girls.[75] Access to water and sanitation facilities and products should be provided alongside a comprehensive sexuality education curricula that covers topics such as stigma, menstruation, and puberty in order to address negative perceptions and taboos around menstruation that may also affect girls.

Case Study: Keeping Girls in School With Better Sanitary Care and Education
In Bolivia, almost 20% of people do not have access to improved sanitation at home, and lack of access to adequate facilities is common in schools as well. Combined with a taboo surrounding topics of puberty and menstrual hygiene management, this lack of access constitutes a barrier for girls' school continuation.[76] In 2017,

Plan International and the Kimberly-Clark Corporation partnered with communities in the Bolivian department of Santa Cruz de la Sierra to address this through the Keeping Girls in School project. The project worked in four schools to construct washroom facilities and provide education around menstruation, sexuality, and sanitation.[77] Communities engaged from the beginning of the project, participating in education sessions and managing aspects of the project through committees. In total, 27 gender-segregated washroom facilities were constructed to be used by 677 current students. Thirty teachers and 344 adolescent girls were trained on menstruation, sexual health, and gender, and 677 adolescent girls and boys were trained on basic sanitation.[78] At the end of one year, total ownership of the project was transferred to the government and communities.[79]

Create Safe, Supportive, and Gender-Responsive School Environments That Include Gender Responsive Pedagogy

Creating gender-sensitive learning environments is part of the Education 2030 Framework for Action.[80] Programs that train teachers on gender-sensitive pedagogy and develop attitudes of tolerance and inclusion have the potential to enhance the educational experience of girls and LGBTQIA+ children.[81] For example, a group of Ugandan teachers who received training focused on gender equality learned that, contrary to common belief, girls and boys have the same abilities in both math and science. From this training, teachers were better able to emphasize this fact as they taught female and male students, and in turn saw an improvement in girls' grades in both subjects.[82] Textbooks and other learning materials should also reflect gender equality, demonstrate positive female role models, and refrain from using gender stereotypes.[83] Curricula and textbooks that are free from gender bias and promote equality in gender relations can affect how individuals act in society. Some countries, such as Ukraine and Vietnam, have incorporated gender mainstreaming in their textbook and curricula review processes.[84]

It has been shown that improving the recruitment and retention of female teachers can positively impact girls' experience at school.[85, 86] Women in leadership positions can serve as role models for girls,[87] but such female leadership in education is lacking. In OECD countries, women account for 68% of lower secondary teachers but only 45% of principals.[88]

Creating safe and supportive spaces also requires the integration of girls and gender-diverse young people into formal school programs and extracurricular school activities, such as physical education and sports teams. Not only is exercise crucial to a healthy lifestyle, but it also helps build the skill base girls need to lead active lives and boost confidence.[89] Research on sports, gender, and development has shown that sports can benefit girls and women in many ways, including promoting self-esteem and empowerment; fostering social inclusion and integration; changing gender norms; and paving the way for leadership and achievement.[90, 91] Programs that challenge sexist, homophobic, racist, and harmful notions of manhood should be implemented in schools and sports to create supportive learning environments for all children.[92]

When in school, as well as while traveling to and from school, girls, LGBTQIA+ youth, and other marginalized young people should be protected from gender-based violence. School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) affects more than 246 million children and adolescents worldwide each year.[93] Studies indicate that promising school-based interventions include promoting dialogue about gender roles, discrimination, and violence through girls' and boys' clubs that are led by trained mentors; encouraging girls and boys to participate in nontraditional extra-curricular activities (girls in sport, boys in home economics); equipping teachers, school administrators, and support staff with the skills to recognize and address SRGBV; creating mechanisms in schools that enable students to report instances of violence, with processes in place for due action; and working with boys to shift negative social norms that undermine the rights of girls in schools.[94, 95] Working with parents and the community should be an integral part of interventions focusing on school-related gender-based violence.[96]

Case Study: FAWE's Gender-Responsive Pedagogy Intervention[97]
The Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), a pan-African NGO, has been implementing a Gender-Responsive Pedagogy (GRP) intervention since 2005. This model intends to create a gender-sensitive teaching environment to encourage equal classroom participation of boys and girls. The model is comprised of three key elements: 1) gender assessment and policy analysis in the target institutions and countries; 2) training of teachers targeting their knowledge, attitudes, and practical skills; and 3) training of the school management team. Many teachers who participated were unaware as to how much their negative attitudes and language affected their students, especially girls. In Malawi and Ethiopia, the ministries of education have embraced the GRP model, and as a result, girls and boys have begun to support one another rather than compete in the classroom, increasing retention and participation rates for girls.

Engage Communities, Including Boys and Men, to Challenge Harmful Gender Norms and Stereotypes That Keep Girls Out of School

In order to effectively improve girls' educational opportunities, communities must be engaged and transformed into agents of change for gender equity in education. Even the most progressive policies aimed at improving girls' education could fail if they do not have the support of the community in which they are enacted. For example, in 1993 Malawi introduced its Readmission Policy, which allowed school-aged mothers to return to school following childbirth, a reversal of a prior policy forbidding mothers from re-enrolling in school.[98] However, as of 2016 many communities in Malawi still have not realized this policy.[99] One-fifth of the girls that this policy was designed to help face pressure from their communities urging them to take on the role of mother and wife rather than returning to school.[100] Likewise, school environments are not always welcoming to young mothers. School-age mothers in some communities are discriminated against by both fellow students and teachers.[101] Without the communities taking ownership, the Readmission Policy was unable to succeed.

Policy changes must be accompanied by larger efforts to bring forth gender equality in communities. Communities need to be sensitized to gender issues and tolerance needs to be promoted with the help of civil society organizations. For example, a cultural shift is needed to reduce the stigma associated with menstruation and the practice of harmful cultural norms that perpetuate childhood marriage and gender-based violence. Community-driven groups can play an important role in offering trainings and recreational opportunities that bring men and women together. Recognizing that gender norms and stereotypes are embedded at an early age, education plays a vital role in teaching boys about positive masculinity and dismantling harmful gender stereotypes that have devastating impacts for all.[102]

By engaging in and building partnerships with traditional leaders and village forums, community members can become catalysts for cultural change.[103] Communities need to understand the larger impacts of policy change. For example, they should be aware that educated mothers are more likely to ensure that their children are well-nourished, and they tend to have more power in the home when it comes to child nutritional needs.[104] When whole communities are engaged with policy changes and are committed to seeing the impact of those changes, community leaders can be held accountable for not following through.[105]

Case Study: Community Action Against Child Marriage, a Major Barrier to Girls' Education

In Malawi, 50% of women marry before the legal age of 18 years, forcing them to drop out of school.[106] Given the dire consequences of child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM), traditional chiefs, who are powerful leaders with authority and convening power, brought together village headmen and other stakeholders, including education advisors, to make CEFM a punishable offence. Specifically, any headman who allowed CEFM in his area was removed from his role, and the parents were subject to negative consequences.[107] This decision, endorsed by the district commissioner and district education manager, eventually contributed to reducing the girls' dropout rate from 25% to 5% between 2011 and 2016 and supported 74 married girls returning to school.[108]

Ensure the Provision of Both School-Based and Out-of-School Comprehensive Sexuality Education That Aligns With the UN's 2018 International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education

Harmful gender norms, stigma, unintended pregnancy, gender-based violence, sexuality transmitted infection and HIV/AIDS, and the lack of access to sexual and reproductive health information and care keep girls out of school. Marginalized populations, such as indigenous peoples and LGBTQIA+ youth, experience high rates of discrimination and stigmatization and need services in school that adequately address their specific sexual and reproductive health needs in inclusive and culturally appropriate ways.[109] Comprehensive sexuality education is an evidence-based curriculum that teaches children and young people the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to improve their health and wellbeing.[110] The evidence base for CSE is clear. Those who complete CSE courses tend to have higher rates of condom and contraception use and lower rates of risky sexual behavior than those who have not been exposed to the curriculum.[111] Provision of CSE can increase school attendance and completion by improving sexual and reproductive health of children and adolescents. It also creates safe and inclusive school environments by addressing sexual diversity, gender identity and expression, and gender-based violence.[112]

Program outcomes depend on full adherence to implementation guidance, as modifications to CSE programs can reduce effectiveness.[113] A review of 48 countries found that supportive policies for comprehensive sexuality education are not always implemented.[114] Some barriers to implementation include lack of trained teachers, lack of program supervision and school support, and cultural and religious opposition.[115] To create safe and gender-responsive learning environments that increase girls' access to, participation in, and completion of education, schools should provide CSE that aligns with the United Nations' 2018 revised International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education.[116] CSE should also be delivered in out-of-school settings for those who cannot access formal education and/or live in fragile and humanitarian contexts.[117] The revised guide is scientifically accurate; age, developmentally, and culturally appropriate; gender-transformative; and comprehensive. It addresses the topics of puberty and menstruation, contraception, STIs, cultural and social norms, human rights, and others. The guide suggests engaging boys and men to reverse harmful gender norms by providing information on healthy relationships and diverse sexualities, and promoting discussions about masculinity, gender, and consent.

CSE is most effective when combined with community and vocational programs that improve health and wellbeing, serving to strengthen and improve community health while positively impacting education. For example, if schools can provide health information; vaccines for conditions such as human papillomavirus (HPV); programs around wellness, nutrition, life skills, and physical education; and age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education, this can lead to healthier students and benefits for individuals and communities.[118] CSE provides a clear gender-responsive education through the life cycle, with continued educational opportunities into adulthood, improving girls' outcomes in school, increasing their life skills, and possibly expanding their participation in the labor force.

Case Study: Delivering Age-Appropriate Comprehensive Sexuality Education in Uganda and Ethiopia

From 2013 to 2015, Save the Children Netherlands implemented the Keep It Real program in Ethiopia and Uganda.[119] Funded by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and working with the Save the Children International offices in each country, Keep It Real targeted young people between the ages of 10 and 24 with age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education in both school and out-of-school settings.[120] The program took a multi-sector approach, engaging civil society organizations alongside decentralized health and education government offices. Key elements of Keep It Real included supportive supervision and training of both schoolteachers and after-school club staff to deliver curricula, as well as training of peer educators in appropriate age groups. The health and education ministries approved program materials. Within two years, 49,000 young people were reached with programming—45,000 students in schools and 4,000 out-of-school young people. Program participants reported increased levels of age-appropriate life skills, knowledge of sexuality, and value placed on gender equality.[121]

SECTION 3: THE BENEFITS OF INVESTMENT

Given the transformative power it has on society as a whole, the education of girls and women is a cost-effective investment. Women who are better educated have fewer unplanned children, are less likely to marry early, and are more likely to drive national economic growth.[122] Every additional year of secondary schooling for a girl increases her future earnings by 10% to 20%.[123] Compared to women with no education, women with secondary education earn almost twice as much, and those with tertiary education almost three times as much.[124] Women with tertiary education are 25.4 percentage points more likely to participate in the labor force than women with primary education or less.[125] In addition, gender inequality in earnings is estimated to account for $160.2 trillion in lost human capital wealth globally—a staggering figure.[126] In 2018 alone, the estimated loss in human capital wealth incurred simply from women not benefiting from 12 years of schooling was estimated to range between US$15 trillion to US$30 trillion.[127] Ensuring gender equality in and through education, including in learning outcomes, completion, and skills development, can go a long way to enabling and empowering women to be active participants in the labor market.

When you invest in education, there is a ripple effect that yields improvements in girls' and women's health, rights, and wellbeing, and advances economic opportunities at the individual, community, and national levels. Each year of secondary education may reduce the likelihood of child, early, and forced marriage or having a child before the age of 18 by an average of six percentage points.[128] Studies indicate that a one-year increase in girls' education is associated with a 6.5% to 9.9% reduction in under-5 child mortality in low- and middle-income countries.[129] Increased educational opportunities for girls is credited with more than half of the reduction in infant mortality in the past 40 years,[130] and the Education Commission estimates that educating girls can be credited with averting more than 30 million deaths of children under 5 and 100 million adult deaths in the same timeframe.[131]

Investing in education for girls is cost-effective. For example, in Niger's Zinder region, a joint UNICEF, World Food Programme (WFP), and UNFPA program providing monthly $7 scholarships, school meals, and nutrition education increased secondary school year completion from 32% to 68%.[132] An evaluation of a multi-dimensional education intervention for adolescent girls in rural Tanzania found that for every $100

expended, average educational attainment increased by 1.7 years.[133] In Kenya, girls who received free uniforms for two years, at a cost of about $12, were 16% less likely to drop out of school.[134]

SECTION 4: CALLS TO ACTION

In order to achieve gender equality in and through primary, secondary, and tertiary education, governments must make targeted equity investments to close the gender gap and ensure quality and gender-responsive education for all, at every level of schooling. Financial commitments to girls' education and the approval of national policies that require gender-responsive curricula and materials are steps toward achieving gender equality in education.[135, 136, 137] Additional efforts to reach vulnerable children in humanitarian settings and marginalized populations are also essential for reaching global education goals.

Community stakeholders, particularly young people, should be consulted and included throughout the gender-responsive education sector planning process in order to ensure ownership and sustainability.[138] Donors can play their part by investing in strengthening education systems needed to increase access to quality education at all levels for girls and women and expanding support for proven, affordable, and scalable programs that increase girls' chances of staying in and excelling in schools. Accountability mechanisms that hold governments and organizations responsible for their commitments are needed. The involvement of young people in accountability is crucial, as they can provide direct information on their school environments and the status of program implementation. Youth advocates at the local, national, and international levels can advise education ministries, lead regional councils, and join coalitions to ensure their voices shape education policy. Finally, civil society groups and communities have an important role to play in ensuring that stakeholders remain accountable, acting as champions for gender equality in education and encouraging lawmakers to enact legislation supporting 12 years of free, safe, gender-responsive, quality education in schools and learning environments outside the classroom where girls can thrive.[139]

Many different constituencies must work together—governments, civil society, academia, families and communities, media, teachers, young people, the United Nations, and the private sector—to take the following actions for girls and women:

- Create and enforce legislation, policies, plans, and budgets that promote gender equality in and through education at all levels, including legislation for compulsory 12 years of free, safe, gender-responsive quality education. (Most relevant for: governments, development partners, and civil society)

- Reduce or eliminate the direct and indirect costs of schooling placed on families and communities across all levels of education. (Most relevant for: governments)

- Work with young people, families, faith groups, and communities to raise awareness of the importance of educating girls and to change harmful gender norms. (Most relevant for: civil society and governments)

- Ensure gender-responsive education systems, which remove gender bias from curriculum, textbooks, and pedagogy, as well as safe transportation, safe environments in schools, and appropriate water and sanitation infrastructure such as menstrual hygiene management facilities and products. (Most relevant for: governments, civil society, the United Nations, and the private sector)

- Ensure comprehensive sexuality education that aligns with the United Nations' 2018 International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education is fully implemented in schools and out of schools. (Most relevant for: governments, civil society, academia, and the United Nations)

- Invest in provisions that protect girls' access to education and skills-building opportunities in humanitarian and conflict settings. (Most relevant for: governments, civil society, academia, and the United Nations)

- Scale up education initiatives that focus on out-of-school children and children with limited access to education, including children living with disabilities and indigenous peoples. (Most relevant for: governments, civil society, academia, the United Nations, and the private sector)

- Invest in programs offering girls and women marketable skills, including leadership skills, through internships, apprenticeships, mentoring programs, and training opportunities. (Most relevant for: governments, civil society, and the private sector)

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this technical paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of all partnering organizations.

These briefs are intended to be used by policymakers, decision-makers, advocates, and activists to advance issues affecting girls and women in global development. These materials are designed to be open-sourced and available for your use.

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