

Ensure Equitable and Quality Education at All Levels

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OVERVIEW

Educating girls and women is a powerful investment that benefits both individuals and society, unlocking the potential to improve health, nutrition, social justice, democracy, human rights, gender equality, social cohesion, and economic prosperity for future generations. This brief examines the cross-sectoral interventions that encourage girls to stay in school and promote life-long learning, including eliminating school fees, providing gender-segregated water and sanitation facilities in schools, and creating safe, inclusive school environments.

SECTION 1: FRAMING THE ISSUE

The global community recognizes that education is a crucial element to empowering girls and women and reducing global poverty – a fact that was underscored by the Millennium Development Goals, which sought to achieve gender parity at all levels of education by 2015.¹ Progress toward this goal in recent decades is undeniable. In two-thirds of all countries, girls now enroll in primary school at the same rate as boys.² However, global statistics mask persistent inequalities that still exist in many parts of the world, where girls are far more likely to be out of school. Hard realities such as poverty, school fees, travel distance, and the absence of menstrual hygiene management (MHM) facilities at school limit girls' access to education.³ Their ability to stay in school is further threatened by gender-based violence, early, child, and forced marriage, and unintended pregnancy.⁴ Additionally, in many communities pervasive patriarchal attitudes prioritize funding education for sons, while educating daughters takes a backseat.⁵

Even greater challenges exist at the post-primary level, for which gender parity has been achieved in just a handful of developing countries.⁶ In fact, only 29% of countries have achieved education gender parity at the upper secondary level.⁷ In Africa and South Asia, boys are 1.55 times more likely to complete secondary education than girls, underscoring the lack of gender parity in post-primary education.⁸ For nearly two decades literacy rates have remained stagnant – this is underscored by the fact that two-thirds of illiterate people aged 15 and above are women.⁹ In order to realize their full potential in life, successfully engage in the labor market, and become leaders in their communities, women need equal access to quality secondary and tertiary education. Particularly in developing countries, secondary education for girls provides substantially higher returns than primary schooling.¹⁰ Given the persistent discrimination of women in the labor market, it is important to provide training opportunities, including vocational education, for girls and women to gain marketable skills and become competitive in the workforce.¹¹

As the development community embraces the new Sustainable Development Goals, improving access to quality education and training opportunities for girls and women needs to be at the forefront of the movement towards gender equity, and, consequently, towards 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, from primary to tertiary levels of education
- Grant access to school for remote communities through improved transportation and infrastructure
- Expand initiatives that focus on vulnerable children, including children living with disabilities and those affected by humanitarian emergencies
- Improve water, sanitation, and hygiene in schools
- Create safe, supportive, and gender-sensitive school environments



Ensuring equitable and quality education at all levels is linked to the achievement of several SDG goals and targets, including:

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

- **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 number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs, and entrepreneurship
- **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

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Furthermore, health interventions at school should be considered as a means to improve community health while positively impacting education. For example, if schools can provide health information, vaccines, and programs around wellness, life skills and physical education, and age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education, this can lead to healthier students and benefits for individuals and communities.

Reduce or Eliminate the Cost of Schooling Placed on Families and Communities, from Primary to Tertiary Levels of Education

School costs continue to prevent attendance, particularly at the secondary level for girls from poor families. Granting financial assistance has been an effective way to boost girls' enrollment. In Cambodia, for example, scholarships given to girls at the end of grade 6 increased school attendance rates by 30%.¹² Yet cash incentives alone cannot always trigger effective change without addressing underlying values. Evidence suggests that parents are more likely to invest in their daughters' education when the economic opportunities for doing so are clear.¹³ Governments and NGOs should work together both to provide monetary support and raise awareness of the benefits of educating girls. These benefits include girls and women who are healthier and more engaged in the formal economy, earn more, have autonomy over how many children they have, and provide more opportunities to their children, such as increased education – all of which contributes to lifting households and communities out of poverty.¹⁴

Grant Access to School for Remote Communities Through Improved Transportation and Infrastructure

Evidence has shown that having to travel long distances to school is a major barrier to girls' attendance.¹⁵ In many parts of the world, adding school spaces, or providing transportation to and from school in the most remote areas, is the only way to ensure girls receive an education. Funding must be allocated to provide access to education for children who live long distances from school.¹⁶ Literacy programs and technical training are essential building blocks to breaking intergenerational cycles of rural poverty and need to be prioritized in public policy and program implementation.¹⁷

Case study: The Emergency Community Based Education Program – Afghanistan

Due to ongoing political unrest, many children in Afghanistan are unable to attend school. And given cultural norms that prohibit girls from traveling alone, school enrollment rates among girls are lower than among boys due to distances between home and school. Yet in northwestern Afghanistan, the Partnership for Advancing Community Education in Afghanistan (PACE-A) program – a joint initiative by USAID and the Afghan Ministry of Education – helped close the gender gap in remote communities. Through this intervention, communities provided the school space while the program partners delivered educational materials and teacher training. According to a 2013 randomized evaluation of 31 PACE-A schools, including 1,490 children, the initiative succeeded in increasing girls' enrollment by approximately 52%.¹⁸

Expand Initiatives That Focus on Vulnerable Children, Including Children Living with Disabilities and Those Affected by Humanitarian Emergencies

Roughly 65 million children are directly affected by humanitarian emergencies and protracted crises,¹⁹ which compromise their access to education. Roughly 30%, or 37 million, of lower secondary age out-of-school children are from crisis-affected countries.²⁰ Not only is access to school critical for learning, but it also offers children a protective and normalizing environment in the wake of a disaster. Children, particularly girls, are more at risk of abuse following an emergency.²¹ As protracted crises are becoming the norm, education systems need to integrate disaster risk reduction and response planning into existing strategies, ensuring that they consider the needs of internally displaced persons and refugees of natural and manmade emergencies.

Estimates suggest that children living with disabilities make up one-third, or about 19 million, of the 58 million out-of-school children globally.²² In developing countries, 90% of children with disabilities do not attend school.²³ Due to a lack of infrastructure and resources accommodating their needs, children with disabilities encounter a host of obstacles accessing quality education, such as unaccommodating transportation systems and an absence of specialized learning modalities. And where girls suffer restricted access to school based on gender alone, girls with disabilities are doubly impeded. 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.²⁴ Towards this end, governments must: 1) Involve populations living with disabilities (including children and adolescents) in planning and monitoring; 2) Require a minimum standard of accessibility to school facilities for children living with disabilities; 3) Invest in teacher training to make education inclusive; 4) Create inclusive learning materials; and 5) Collect data to inform policy and practice and build evidence, and monitor progress.²⁵

Case Study: Improving Access to Education for Out-of-School Children (OOSC)-Sudan

Largely due to a turbulent history of political conflict and poverty, Sudan has the highest rate of out of school children in Northern Africa.²⁶ Nearly 3 million Sudanese children are missing out on basic education. The UNICEF-supported Improving Access to Education for OOSC-Sudan project provides direct support to



- **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 non-violence, 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 Goal 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
- **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



600,000 children who are out of school or at risk of leaving.²⁷ The project targets vulnerable populations, including girls, nomadic groups, children with special needs, and children affected by poverty and conflict. Through a three-pronged approach, it encourages children aged six to nine to enroll directly into the formal education system; offers an Alternative Learning Program (ALP) curriculum for older children; rehabilitates classrooms to include WASH facilities; and provides teaching and learning materials.^{28,29}

Case Study: Specialist Support from Traveling Teachers in Uganda

Facilitating inclusion in the classroom is critical to ensuring that all children with disabilities realize their right to a quality education. To make classrooms more accessible for disabled children in Uganda, the non-profit Sightsavers trains teachers who travel around the country to help children with disabilities transition to a school environment. Traveling Teachers support inclusive classrooms in a variety of ways. For example, they find children with disabilities who are not in school and work with their families and communities to ensure they are found a place. They also visit children at home to help prepare them for school, for instance, by teaching Braille.³⁰

Improve Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene in Schools

The absence of clean water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities in schools contributes to absenteeism among girls, particularly in upper primary and secondary school due to an unmet need to manage menstrual hygiene.³¹ Yet a recent UNICEF survey suggests that less than half of all primary schools in developing countries have WASH facilities on site.³² Improving access to WASH not only reduces absenteeism, but it can also bring down the incidence and severity of illness among students.³³ School-based hand-washing campaigns also reduce illness and absenteeism, emphasizing the role hygiene education can play in keeping children healthy.³⁴ Furthermore, for girls to manage menstruation privately and hygienically, it is essential that they have access to water and sanitation facilities, along with menstrual hygiene products and information. In the absence of such facilities, adolescent girls often miss school during menstruation or drop out altogether.³⁵ 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.³⁶

Case Study: WASH in Schools Supports Healthier Schools and Healthier Children

Schooling conditions can greatly affect the health and wellbeing of school-aged children. In recent years, the global partnership WASH in Schools has been advocating for schools to provide safe and drinkable water, improved sanitation facilities, and hygiene education that creates healthy habits for a lifetime.³⁷ WASH in schools is important for adolescent girls who often miss school due to conditions that make menstrual hygiene management difficult, which is detrimental to their education progress.³⁸ More research is needed to estimate the broad benefits that improved access to water and sanitation has on absenteeism among girls, but it is clear that the ability to manage menstruation safely and in privacy significantly improves their quality of life and confidence.³⁹ A recent qualitative study conducted by UNICEF during the Yatra WASH carnival in India (Maharashtra province) revealed successful approaches – including small group sessions, data collection, and visual aids – to breaking the silence and taboos around menstruation, hygiene management, and safe solutions to reuse and dispose of menstrual waste.⁴⁰

Create Safe, Supportive, and Gender-Sensitive School Environments

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 gender diverse children.⁴¹ Girls and gender diverse young people should be integrated 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 helps build the skill base girls need to lead active lives and boost confidence.⁴² Research on sport, gender, and development has shown that sport 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.⁴³

When in school, as well as while traveling to and from school, girls, transgender children, and other marginalized young people should be protected from gender-based violence. School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) affects millions of children and adolescents worldwide. Studies indicate that interventions such as engaging girls in sport, establishing girls' clubs led by trained female mentors, incorporating boys into education and outreach programming, and creating a forum to discuss gender-related issues can change negative social norms that undermine the rights of girls in schools.⁴⁴ Support from parents and the community should be an integral part of interventions focusing on school-related gender-based violence.⁴⁵ Comprehensive sexuality education curricula that include life skills can also play a role in shifting gender roles. Combining sexuality education with teaching about cultural aspects of gender inequality has the potential to build students' knowledge, confidence, and life skills to pave the way to a more equitable society. Research suggests that sexuality education may be most effective in empowering women when combined with training that provides them with concrete skills to help with transition into the labor market.⁴⁶ Equipped with knowledge about healthy, as well as risky, sexual behaviors and encouraged by employment prospects, women are much less likely to engage in unsafe sexual behaviors and more likely to pursue productive job opportunities.⁴⁷



SDG Goal 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

- **6.2** By 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations

SDG Goal 8: Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all

- **8.5** By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value
- **8.6** By 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education, or training
- **8.b** By 2020, develop and operationalize a global strategy for youth employment and implement the Global Jobs Pact of the International Labour Organization

SDG Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries

- **10.1** By 2030, progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average
- **10.2** By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic, and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic or other status
- **10.3** Ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies, and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies, and action in this regard



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. Studies indicate that a one-year increase in girls' education is associated with a 6.5–9.9% reduction in child mortality in low- and middle-income countries.⁴⁸ Increased educational opportunities for girls is credited with more than half of the reduction in infant mortality in the past 40 years.⁴⁹ Furthermore, women who are better educated have fewer unplanned children, are less likely to marry early, and are more likely to drive national economic growth.⁵⁰ Educating women is also proven to help break intergenerational poverty.⁵¹ Every additional year of schooling for a girl increases her future earnings by 10 to 20%.⁵² Each additional year of schooling per child increases the average annual GDP by .37%.⁵³

Evidence repeatedly points to a strong return on investment for girls' education, including its relationship to achieving gender equality. For example, a cash transfer intervention in Malawi increased the likelihood of girls staying in school by 10% within one year and cost around US\$5 a month per household.⁵⁴ A bicycle program in India that cost \$1 per month for each recipient increased girls' enrollment in secondary school by 30%.⁵⁵ An intervention combining sex education with vocational training resulted in a 50% increase in condom use and a 35% rise in girls and women engaging in the formal economy; this program cost about \$28 per girl in the first year, and dropped to \$18 per girl in the second.⁵⁶ These investments contribute to tremendous positive impacts for girls and women. Evidence also shows that if all girls in sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia received secondary education, child marriage would see a 64% decline.⁵⁷ Across the board, 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.

SECTION 4: CALLS TO ACTION

In order to achieve gender equality in primary, secondary, and tertiary education, governments must make targeted equity investments to close the gender gap and ensure quality and gender-sensitive education for all at every level of schooling. Donors can play their part by investing in the infrastructure and programs needed to increase access to all education levels for girls and women and expanding support to proven, affordable, and scalable programs that increase girls' chances of staying in and excelling in schools. Finally, civil society groups and communities have an important role to play, acting as champions for education parity, encouraging lawmakers to enact legislation supporting education parity for girls and women, and creating school environments inside and outside the classroom where girls can thrive.

In order to power progress for all, many different constituents must work together – governments, civil society, academia, media, affected populations, the United Nations, and the private sector—to take the following actions for girls and women:

- Create and enforce legislation, policies, and budgets that promote equal access to education systems and gender parity at all levels, including vocational training.
(Most relevant for: governments)
- Reduce or eliminate the cost of schooling placed on families and communities across all levels of education.
(Most relevant for: governments)
- Work with parents and communities to raise awareness on the importance of educating girls.
(Most relevant for: civil society and governments)
- Ensure gender-sensitive educations for all—including 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)
- Scale up education initiatives that focus on out-of-school children, including children living with disabilities and those affected by crises.
(Most relevant for: governments, civil society, academia, the United Nations, and the private sector)
- Invest in programs offering girls and women marketable skills through internships, apprenticeships, mentoring programs, and training opportunities.
(Most relevant for: governments, civil society, and the private sector)
- Increase sport programs in formal and informal education settings as a way to teach girls critical life skills, boost their self-esteem, and promote gender equality.
(Most relevant for: civil society and governments)



SDG Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable

- **11.2** By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible, and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities, and older persons

Relevant international agreements that promote gender equality in education:

- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979)
- World Conference on Education for All (1990)
- Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995)
- World Conference on Education for All in Dakar (2000)
- Millennium Development Goals (2000 – 2015)
- Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action (2015)
- Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2030)



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