

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 Despite global progress toward achieving gender parity at all levels of education,^{2,3} only 66% of countries have achieved gender parity in primary education and girls are 1.5 times more likely than boys to be denied their right to a primary education.^{4,5} Only 45% of developing countries have achieved gender parity at the lower secondary level (seventh through ninth grades) and only 25% have done so at the upper secondary level (10th through 12th grades).⁶ 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 literacy and numeracy rates, school participation rates, and completion rates among girls and boys, as well as measures of female leadership in education systems and the use of gender-competent pedagogy in classrooms.⁷ For nearly two decades, literacy rates have remained stagnant, underscored by the fact that 63% of illiterate adults are women.⁸

Girls' access to education is limited by barriers such as gender-discriminatory norms and stereotypes, poverty, school fees, travel distance, and the absence of menstrual hygiene management (MHM) facilities at school.⁹ Their ability to stay in school is further threatened by gender-based violence; early child, and forced marriage; and unintended pregnancy.¹⁰ Many countries, such as Tanzania, Equatorial Guinea, and Sierra Leone, expel pregnant girls from government schools, and 24 African countries lack re-entry policies or laws that protect the right to education for pregnant girls and young mothers.¹¹ Pregnant girls and young mothers are not the only populations that face gaps in education access. There is also wide disparity in educational attainment within the cross-section of wealth and gender; the poorest girls are generally the worst off, less likely to complete any level of schooling compared to other girls and compared to the poorest boys.¹² Additionally, 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.¹³

Marginalized groups — such as racial, ethnic, indigenous, migrant, and linguistic minorities, children with disabilities or HIV, and children in rural areas or slums — face additional barriers to quality education.¹⁴ Additional barriers, such as the lack of culturally appropriate curricula in native languages, lack of adequate health services and facilities, and general discrimination by teachers and peers, limit marginalized children's access to and completion of education. For example, only 61% of refugee children attend primary school, a rate that drops to 1% in higher education programs.¹⁵

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 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.¹⁶ There is an existing educational and skills gap around the world, with 45% of employers finding it difficult to recruit employees with the necessary skills.¹⁷ This gap is projected to worsen: by 2030 in low- and middle-income countries, only 4 in 10 young people of school age will be on track to gain basic secondary-level skills.¹⁸ Africa is projected to have one 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.¹⁹ 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.^{20, 21}

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. As countries and the development community works toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), gender-equitable education is a key part of economic and social progress.

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Ensuring equitable and quality education at all levels is linked to the achievement of several 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 Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning

SDG 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



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 budgeting and planning, 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
- Engage communities, including men and boys, 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 Education²²

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

One tool to combat gender disparity in education is Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) and planning, which entails incorporating a gender perspective into decision-making aspects around how funding will be utilized to meet commitments.²³ Budgetary planning at all levels of education — primary, secondary, and tertiary — is necessary to provide access to at least twelve years of free, safe, quality, gender-responsive education.²⁴ Direct and indirect school costs continue to prevent enrollment and completion, particularly at the secondary level, and particularly for girls from poor families.²⁵ Cash-transfer programs, scholarships, and stipends have been effective in increasing girls' attendance in schools.²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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 NGOs should work together to provide monetary support, to address harmful gender norms and stereotypes that keep girls out of school, and to raise awareness of the benefits of educating girls.

Case Study: Uganda's Successful Gender Responsive Budgeting Plan²⁸

The National Development Plan, 2010-2015,²⁹ in Uganda 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, the Ministry of Finance, Planning, and Economic Development requested specific statements regarding how the budget allocation would alleviate gender equality. In the 2016/2017 budget call, multiple stakeholders have to demonstrate how they promote gender equality and the targets they use 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 increased success in keeping girls in school, suggesting higher achievement in gender equity than countries without gender-responsive budgeting.

Case Study: Eliminating Secondary School Fees for Girls in The Gambia³⁰

Granting financial assistance has also 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. Using data from high school exit exams from before the program's start through its duration, an analysis shows that the program successfully increased access to school without compromising classroom learning quality. Overall, the program increased the number of girls enrolled in 12th grade by 28 percentage points, and 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.

Case Study: Financial Support as Part of a Multidimensional Education Support Strategy in Tanzania³¹

The Campaign for Female Education (Camfed) uses multidimensional interventions in order to address the range of barriers that girls may face in attaining secondary education, such as poverty; child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM); or teenaged pregnancy. Supports include covering direct and indirect school costs for targeted populations, encouraging community-led school improvement initiatives, and providing teacher training and leadership courses. In sum, Camfed provided multidimensional support to almost 150,000 marginalized and less-marginalized students across 201 secondary schools in Tanzania as part of the Department for International Development's (DFID's) Girls' Education Challenge program. In one analysis of a subset of 1,640 of girls in six districts, girls in Camfed-supported schools were found to have experienced better education outcomes than those in comparison schools. Overall, girls in supported schools were 18% less likely to drop out than those in



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



unsupported schools. Girls receiving targeted scholarships as part of the intervention package were 31% less likely to drop out. In addition to higher retention, Camfed's interventions led to better overall learning outcomes, with supported girls earning learning assessment scores nearly three times higher than they had before the intervention. Notably, the multi-dimensional intervention successfully reached girls living with disabilities; girls living with disabilities demonstrated rates of retention and learning improvement similar to girls not reporting living with a disability.³²

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

Approximately 535 million children are living in countries affected by conflict and crises, which compromises their access to education.^{33,34} For example, traveling long distances to schools, lack of safe spaces and proper sanitation facilities in schools, higher rates of gender-based violence, and unmet need for sexual and reproductive health services all hinder girls' participation in education and lead to an increase in girls' dropout rates.^{35,36} The opportunity cost of education for girls in humanitarian emergencies is also high, as girls carry disproportionate household burdens, such as taking care of family members and collecting fuel and water.³⁷ Conflict-affected countries house 20% of the global population of primary school-aged children, but 50% of the global population of out-of-school primary school-aged children.³⁸ The continuation of quality education in humanitarian emergencies is necessary to reduce the time children and adolescents are out of school due to conflict. 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.

As protracted crises 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 of natural and manmade emergencies. For example, infrastructure and transportation must also be able to manage the increased burden of ensuring children maintain access to school during conflicts and humanitarian crises.³⁹ Education must be provided both in school and out-of-school settings. Adolescents and children in humanitarian settings need access to comprehensive sexuality education and adequate and quality health services in and out of school settings. Supporting accredited, quality, non-formal, and accelerated educational opportunities that complement formal education can improve girls' and women's access to education and allows them to catch up to their peers.⁴⁰ Recognizing the human right to education, 80 countries signed the Safe Schools Declaration, which signals their commitment to protecting students and teachers from the effects of war and urges countries to ensure the continuation of education during conflict and develop conflict-sensitive approaches to education in humanitarian and development programs.⁴¹ In June 2018, leaders from the Group of Seven (G7) countries announced a \$3.8 billion global commitment for girls' education in crisis.

Case Study: Creating a network of girl change makers in Jordan⁴²

In the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, only about 20% of adolescent girls successfully complete secondary education.⁴³ Evolved from a submission to the UNHCR Ideas Challenge at the World Innovation Summit on Education (WISE) the 'These Inspired Girls Enjoy Reading' (TIGER) program seeks to decrease secondary school dropouts. To increase girls' sense of personal agency and to encourage enrollment and retention, the program uses a variety of interventions to support the girls' interconnected needs.⁴⁴ TIGER participants meet daily in small teams and work with coaches on academic, vocational, and community service projects, 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 show an increased motivation to stay in school, have 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.⁴⁵

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

Children who face multiple disadvantages, such as coming from large and poor families, living in rural areas, or facing discrimination due to ethnicity or disability, have high out-of-school rates.⁴⁶ Girls from these populations face additional gender-based barriers to school access. For example, in Mexico, estimates from 2017 indicate that only 47% of girls in primary school advance to secondary school, and that only 39% of indigenous girls achieved the same levels of education as their non-indigenous counterparts.⁴⁷ In developing countries, 90% of children with disabilities do not attend school,⁴⁸ and girls living with disabilities may face additional cultural biases that de-prioritize their education. 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.⁴⁹

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 to alleviate these concerns and encourage school attendance from students living in rural and remote areas.⁵⁰ Addressing the concern of inaccessible school building infrastructure, such as by adding accessible toilets, toileting assistance, and menstruation management, would help girls with disabilities attain an education.⁵¹ Supporting the development and use of culturally appropriate and inclusive curricula — including materials in native languages and specialist learning modalities — can increase education equity for indigenous children.⁵²

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.⁵³ The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states



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



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.⁵⁴ 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 learning materials; and collect data to inform policy and practice, build evidence, and monitor progress.^{55,56}

Case Study: Increasing and Maintaining School Attendance of Adolescent Indigenous Girls in Guatemala

Most indigenous populations live in isolated rural areas with limited access to resources and mobility, hindering the ability of 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 that 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.⁵⁷

Improve Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene in Schools

The absence of clean water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities in schools contributes to absenteeism and is a dropout cause among girls, particularly in upper primary and secondary school due to an unmet need to manage menstrual hygiene.⁵⁸ Among 145 countries with data, less 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 only single-sex facilities.⁵⁹ A national survey conducted in Bangladesh in 2014 found that only 12% of girls reported access to single-sex toilets, even though separate sanitation facilities are mandated by regulations.⁶⁰

Improving access to WASH not only reduces absenteeism, but also can bring down the incidence and severity of illness among students.⁶¹ School-based hand-washing campaigns also reduce illness and absenteeism, emphasizing the role that hygiene education can play in keeping children healthy.⁶² 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.⁶³ For example, 95% of girls in Ghana noted that they sometimes miss school due to menses.⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵ 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

From 2012 to 2014, Plan International conducted a trial to estimate the association between poor menstrual health management and health, education, and psychosocial outcomes. The quasi-randomized control trial included 1,124 girls across eight schools in rural Uganda. Girls were divided into three intervention groups – provision of puberty education alone, provision of reusable pads alone, provision of both puberty education and reusable pads – and one control group. While a substantial portion of girls dropped out throughout the study period, the impact study still found that girls in the control group had significantly lower attendance rates than girls in the intervention groups. Attendance rates did not vary between intervention groups, and girls receiving menstrual health management care attended school 2.5 days more than girls in the control group in a 15-day time period.⁶⁶ A follow-up report in 2018 found that girls who could change their pads at least three times a day had higher school attendance rates.⁶⁷

Create Safe, Supportive, and Gender-Responsive 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.⁶⁸ 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 knowledge in their teaching with both female and male students, and in turn saw an increase in girls' marks in both subjects.⁶⁹ Textbooks and other learning materials should also reflect gender equality and demonstrate positive female role models that refrain from using gender stereotypes.⁷⁰ 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 Ghana and Vietnam, have incorporated formal gender analysis in their textbook review process.⁷¹ Youth and their parents can help monitor textbook content for harmful gender-normative content.⁷²

It has also been shown that improving the recruitment and retention of female teachers can positively impact girls' experience at school.^{73,74} 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.⁷⁵ 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



Relevant International Agreements:

- 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)



achievement.⁷⁶ Programs that challenge sexist, homophobic, racist, and harmful notions of manhood should be implemented in schools and sport to create supportive learning environments for all children.⁷⁷

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.⁷⁸ Studies indicate that some of the promising school-based interventions are ones that promote dialogue about gender roles, discrimination, and violence through girls' and boys' clubs, led by trained mentors, encouraging girls and boys to participate in non-traditional extra-curricular activities (girls in sport, boys in home economics); equip teachers, school administrators and support staff with the skills to recognize and address SRGBV; create mechanisms in schools by which students can report instances of violence with processes in place for due action; and work with boys to shift negative social norms that undermine the rights of girls in schools.^{79,80} Working with parents and the community should be an integral part of interventions focusing on school-related gender-based violence.⁸¹

Case Study: FAWE's Gender Responsive Pedagogy Intervention

The Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), a Pan-African NGO, has been implementing a Gender Responsive Pedagogy (GRP) intervention since 2005.⁸² This intervention model intends to create a gender-sensitive teaching environment to encourage equal classroom participation of boys and girls.⁸³ 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.⁸⁴ Many teachers who participated were unaware as to how much their negative attitude and language affected their students, especially girls.⁸⁵ 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.⁸⁶

Engage Communities, Including Men and Boys, 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 the 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.⁸⁷ However, as of 2016, many communities in Malawi still have not realized this policy.⁸⁸ 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.⁸⁹ 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.⁹⁰ 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.⁹¹ For example, a cultural shift is needed to reduce 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.⁹² By engaging and building partnerships with traditional leaders and village forums, community members can become catalysts for cultural change.⁹³ Communities should be able to understand the larger impacts of policy change, such as the effect that girls' education has on nutrition — 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.⁹⁴ 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.⁹⁵

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. 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. Particularly, any headman who allowed CEFM in his area was removed from his role and the parents were subject to negative consequences. This decision was endorsed by the District Commissioner and District Education Manager and eventually contributed to reducing the girls' dropout rate from 25% to 5%, and supported 74 married girls returning to school.⁹⁶

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.⁹⁷ Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is an evidence-based curriculum that teaches children and young people the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to improve their health and wellbeing.⁹⁸ 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.⁹⁹ 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 tackling gender-based violence.¹⁰⁰

Program outcomes depend on full adherence to implementation guidance, as modifications to CSE programs can reduce effectiveness.¹⁰¹ A review of 48 countries found that supportive policies for comprehensive sexuality education are not always implemented.¹⁰² Some barriers to implementation include lack of trained teachers, lack of program supervision and school support, and cultural and religious opposition.¹⁰³ 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 UN's 2018 revised International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education.¹⁰⁴ 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.¹⁰⁵ 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, and human rights, among others. The guide suggests engaging men and boys to reverse harmful gender norms by providing information on healthy relationships, diverse sexualities, and promoting discussions about masculinities, 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 (including Human Papillomavirus), 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.¹⁰⁶ CSE provides a clear gender-responsive education through the life cycle with continued educational opportunities into adulthood, improving girls' outcomes in school, increases their life skills, and possibly participation in the labor force.

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.¹⁰⁷ Educating women is also proven to help break intergenerational poverty.¹⁰⁸ Every additional year of secondary schooling for a girl increases her future earnings by 10 to 20%.¹⁰⁹ 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.¹¹⁰ Women with tertiary education are 25.4 percentage points more likely to participate in the labor force than women with primary education or less.¹¹¹ Each additional year of average schooling increases the average annual GDP by 0.37%.¹¹² Every dollar invested in an additional year of schooling has a return of \$10 in low-income countries and \$4 in lower-middle-income countries.¹¹³ In addition, gender inequality in earnings is estimated to account for \$160.2 trillion in lost human capital wealth globally – a staggering figure.¹¹⁴ 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 \$15 trillion to \$30 trillion.¹¹⁵ 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.

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. Each year of secondary education may reduce the likelihood of child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) or having a child before the age of 18 by an average of six percentage points.¹¹⁶ Evidence also shows that if all girls in sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia received secondary education, CEFM would see a 64% decline.¹¹⁷ Studies indicate that a one-year increase in girls' education is associated with a 6.5-9.9% reduction in under-5 child mortality in low- and middle-income countries.¹¹⁸ Increased educational opportunities for girls is credited with more than half of the reduction in infant mortality in the past 40 years,¹¹⁹ 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.¹²⁰

Investing in education for girls is cost-effective. For example, a cash transfer intervention in Malawi increased the likelihood of girls staying in school by 10% within one year at the cost of around \$5 a month per household.¹²¹ A bicycle program in India that cost \$1 per month for each recipient increased girls' enrollment in secondary school by 30%.¹²² 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 income-generating activities; this program cost about \$28 per girl in the first year, and dropped to \$18 per girl in the second.¹²³ These investments contribute to tremendous positive impacts for girls and women.

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-responsive education for all, at every level of schooling. Financial commitments to girls' education, such as the \$3.8 billion investment agreed upon at the G7 Leaders' Summit in June 2018¹²⁴ and the approval of national policies that require gender-sensitive curricula and materials, are steps towards achieving gender equality in education. 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 planning process in order to ensure ownership and sustainability.¹²⁵ 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 to 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.¹²⁶

In order to power progress for all, 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 schooling. (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 on 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 the provision of comprehensive sexuality education that aligns with the UN's 2018 International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education implemented fully in schools and out-of-schools. (Most relevant for: governments, civil society, academia, the United Nations, and the private sector)



- 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 through internships, apprenticeships, mentoring programs, and training opportunities. (Most relevant for: governments, civil society, and the private sector)

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Prepared by: Ania Chaluda, FHI 360

Reviewed by: Genine Babakian, Consultant; Juliana Bennington, Natalie Poulson, Global Partnership for Education; Nora Fyles, UNGEI; Sujata Bordoloi, UNGEI and Global Working Group to End SRGBV; Mary Crippen, Women Deliver; Masha DeVoe, Women Deliver; Tatiana DiLanzo, Women Deliver; Louise Dunn, Women Deliver; Katja Iversen, Women Deliver; Jessica Malter, Women Deliver; Susan Papp, Women Deliver; Natalie Poulson, Global Partnership for Education; Savannah Russo, Women Deliver; Athena Rayburn, Women Deliver; Liuba Grechen Shirley, Consultant; Petra ten Hoope-Bender, Women Deliver; Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights; Yona Nestel, Plan International; Rachel Fowler, Women Deliver; Stuti Sachdeva, Women Deliver; Dani Murphy, Women Deliver

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 effecting girls and women in global development. These materials are designed to be open-sourced and available for your use.

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