



The increase in girls' school enrolment has been one of the most remarkable achievements of recent decades. SDG 4 broadens the focus from equal access to primary education to cover the quality of education and opportunities for lifelong learning at all ages, with particular implications for women and girls. Across the globe, but mainly in developing countries, schools are grossly under-resourced, with negative consequences for all students. At the same time, girls face specific challenges: for example, where adequate sanitation and transport facilities are lacking, concerns over safety and menstrual hygiene management may keep girls away from school or compromise their learning experience.

Facts and Figures

- Globally, 66 per cent of countries have achieved gender parity in primary education, 45 per cent in lower secondary education, 25 per cent in upper secondary education and only 4 per cent in tertiary education.¹
- 29 per cent of low-income countries have achieved gender parity in primary education versus 83 per cent of high-income countries.
- While the global gender gap in primary school enrolment has narrowed, 53 per cent of the 61 million out-of-school children of primary school age were girls in 2014.²
- Globally, literacy rates are lower among women (83 per cent) than men (90 per cent). In low-income countries, the numbers fall to 53 per cent and 69 per cent respectively.³
- Worldwide, 81 per cent of primary schools and 87 per cent of lower-secondary schools have single sex sanitation facilities. In least developed countries, the proportion falls to 57 and 72 per cent respectively.⁴

Policy messages

1. Despite positive trends, gender disparities in access to education are persistent and reinforced by poverty.

Notwithstanding major milestones in access to education for girls and boys, achieving gender parity in education at all levels remains a challenge, particularly in poorer countries. Only 29 per cent of low-income countries have achieved gender parity in primary education.⁵ The world's poorest children are 4 times less likely to go to school than the world's richest children. Among poor children, girls are less likely to attend school than boys. Poverty plays a key role in driving exclusion from education. In poor households, heavy unpaid care and domestic work is often delegated to children, mainly girls, compromising their school attendance and academic performance.⁶ In addition, gender stereotypes, discriminatory social norms and harmful practices affect girls' educational trajectories.⁷ Gender disparities are exacerbated in marginalized communities, rural areas and during conflicts and crises.⁸

2. School enrollment does not necessarily lead to completion, especially for girls. Greater efforts are needed to provide education free of charge and create gender-sensitive learning environments.

Despite improvements in participation rates, many children do not make the transition to secondary school and/or do not reach the end of secondary education. In 2010–2015, completion rates at the global level were 83 per cent for primary, 69 per cent for lower secondary and 45 per cent for upper secondary education.⁹ Globally, gender parity in completion has been achieved at almost all levels, but imbalances persist in poor countries. Girls are more vulnerable to school dropout, and household poverty exacerbates the risk of exclusion from schools.¹⁰ Numerous factors prevent girls from completing education – from the intra-household level to the school system and broader policy level. Some countries reveal strong associations between school drop-out, early marriage and adolescent pregnancy. Parental perceptions about lower returns on girls' education can be exacerbated where schooling is associated with user fees and other costs. Lack of

adequate school infrastructure, such as sanitation and hygiene facilities, including single-sex toilets, can be a challenge for adolescent girls who need to manage menstrual hygiene. Beyond provision of these basic amenities, gender-sensitive learning environments are also systematically needed.

3. Gender disparities in learning outcomes persist into adulthood, thus policies should prioritize gender-sensitive learning and investment in teachers.

The world is facing a learning crisis, as it is increasingly recognized that primary school completion does not lead to literacy.¹¹ Gender disparities in learning outcomes emerge among subjects and over time.¹² For example, in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa, girls are disadvantaged in mathematics in the upper primary school grades. A gender disparity at the expense of women persists in youth and adult literacy rates, especially in poor countries.¹³ Sufficient numbers of well-trained teachers and better retention through decent working conditions¹⁴ are critical for addressing the learning crisis. Yet, in 2017, only 62 per cent of the teachers in the least developed countries and 50 per cent of the teachers in low-income countries had received at least the minimum organized teacher training.¹⁵ In addition, sex-disaggregated data are critical to assess and monitor learning outcomes and design gender-responsive policies for their improvement.¹⁶

4. Efforts are needed to strengthen women's participation and leadership in the educational sector.

Beyond the positive impact of better educated women on society as a whole, female role models can increase girls' educational attainment and career aspirations.¹⁷ While women are over-represented in front-line service delivery in the educational sector, globally, they remain underrepresented in decision-making, notably in school leadership.¹⁸ In least developed countries, women account for less than half of the teaching workforce,¹⁹ despite the positive influence on girls' enrollment and retention, especially in rural areas.

¹ UNESCO, 2018. Global education monitoring report (GEMR) gender review 2018: 'Meeting our commitments to gender equality in education'.

² UNESCO, 2016. GEMR gender review: 'Creating sustainable futures for all'.

³ UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) Database.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ UNESCO, 2018.

⁶ Chopra, D. and E. Zambelli, 2017. 'No Time to Rest: Women's Lived Experiences of Balancing Paid Work and Unpaid Care Work. Global Synthesis Report for Women's Economic Empowerment Policy and Programming'. Brighton, Sussex: IDS.

⁷ Koissy-Kpein S.A. (2020) Achieving Gender Equality in Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Progress and Challenges in Moving from the MDGs to the SDGs. In: Konte M., Tirivayi N. (eds) Women and Sustainable Human Development. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham

⁸ UNESCO, 2016.

⁹ UNESCO, 2018. Based on household survey data.

¹⁰ UN Women, 2018. *Turning Promises into Action: Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. New York.

¹¹ The World Bank Group, 2018. World Development Report 2018 – 'Learning to Realize Education's Promise'.

¹² UNESCO, 2018. GEMR 2017/8. Accountability in education: Meeting our commitments.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ United Nations, Economic and Social Council, *Social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls: report of the Secretary-General*, E/CN.6/2019/3 (20 December 2018), available from undocs.org/en/E/CN.6/2019/3.

¹⁵ UIS UNESCO.

¹⁶ UN Women, 2018.

¹⁷ Beaman, L. et al. 2012. 'Female leadership raises aspirations and educational attainment for girls: A policy experiment in India.' *Science*, 335(6068), 582-586.

¹⁸ UNESCO, 2018. GEMR 2017/8. Accountability in education: Meeting our commitments.

United Nations, Economic and Social Council, *Review of the implementation of the agreed conclusions of the sixtieth session of the Commission on the Status of Women: Report of the Secretary-General*, E/CN.6/2019/4 (17 December 2018), available from undocs.org/en/E/CN.6/2019/4

¹⁹ UIS UNESCO.