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Global Education
Monitoring Report



#HerEducationOurFuture

An unfulfilled promise:
**12 years of
education for
every girl**

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GENERATION EQUALITY FORUM

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Just over 25 years ago in 1995, 189 governments adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action – a visionary agenda for women’s empowerment and the most comprehensive global policy framework to advance gender equality to date. Girls’ and women’s education and training featured in the document as one of 12 key areas where urgent action was needed to ensure greater equality.

Since Beijing, the international community has emphasized the transformative power of girls’ and women’s education and its benefits – not only for girls and women, but for entire societies and even future generations. Under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on inclusive, equitable quality education and lifelong learning sets ambitious targets to ensure equality of opportunity – including a target aiming to ensure that all girls and boys complete 12 years of education by 2030.

Are we fulfilling our promises to girls? This short paper explores the evolution of girls’ and boys’ completion rates in primary and secondary education since 1995 – and calls for action to deliver on our commitments to leaving no one behind.

GIRLS ARE CATCHING UP IN COMPLETION RATES, BUT DISADVANTAGE REMAINS ACUTE IN SOME COUNTRIES

Overall, just as girls’ enrolment in education has improved dramatically over the past 25 years, with 180 million more girls enrolled in primary and secondary education,¹ girls have also made impressive gains in closing the gap in primary and secondary education completion. Girls’ average primary completion rates have increased by almost 20 percentage points over the past 25 years, to reach 87%. The fastest progress was in Central and South Asia, where just over half of all girls completed primary school in 1995, compared to 90% of the current generation.

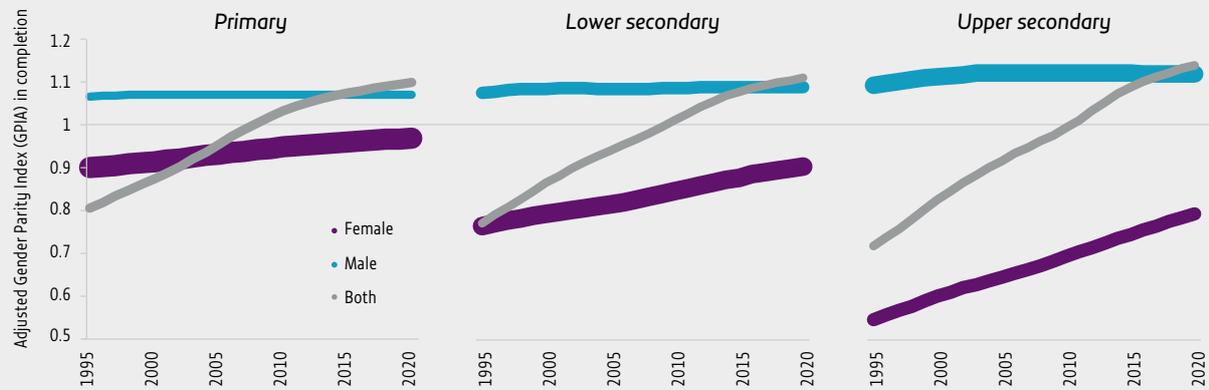
Progress since 1995 has been in favour of girls. There are three groups of countries (**Figure 1**): those with disparity at the expense of girls throughout the past 25 years (purple lines), those with disparity at the expense of boys (blue lines) and those that switched from disparity at the expense of girls to disparity at the expense of boys (grey lines). In primary education, most countries (thick purple line) had disparity at the expense of girls but have moved steadily towards parity. In upper secondary education, most countries (thick, flat blue line) had disparity at the expense of boys and little progress has been achieved; but in the smaller group of countries with disparity at the expense of girls, despite rapid progress (thin, upwardly sloping purple line), gaps can still be observed, the most severe of any education level.



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FIGURE 1:

Girls have improved their relative chances of completion faster than boys, but still face a larger challenge in some countries
 Adjusted gender parity index of the completion rate, by education level and type of disparity, 1995–2019



Notes: GPIA = adjusted gender parity index. The colour of the line represents a country group, depending on the type of gender disparity in the past 25 years: countries with disparity at the expense of girls, i.e. gender parity index below 1 (purple); countries with disparity at the expense of boys, i.e. gender parity index above 1 (blue); and countries that switched from disparity at the expense of girls to disparity at the expense of boys, i.e. the gender parity index changed from less than 1 to more than 1 (grey). The width of the lines represents the number of countries in that group (i.e. the more countries, the thicker the line).

Source: GEM Report team calculations using household surveys.

In sub-Saharan Africa, improved completion rates do not necessarily bring parity

From 1995 to 2019, primary completion rates for girls increased in sub-Saharan Africa from 41% to 66%. Some countries have made particularly impressive gains over time. Ethiopia saw the fastest progress in the region, with girls’ completion rates overtaking those of boys. The adjusted gender parity index rose from 0.63 in 1995 to an estimated 1.27 in 2019.

Reaching gender parity in completion is not necessarily associated with overall progress. While Guinea-Bissau has achieved parity, estimated completion rates for girls and boys are still very low (rising from 9% in 1995 to 23% in 2017). Conversely, rapid progress towards completion may be compatible with continuing gender disparity. In Guinea, completion rates have much increased for both girls and boys (from 14% in 1995 to an estimated 52% in 2017), but girls remain at a disadvantage compared to boys and gender parity in completion of primary education still remains far from reach (Figure 2a).

“ From 1995 to 2019, primary completion rates for girls increased in sub-Saharan Africa from 41% to 66%. ”

FIRST GENERATION GRADUATE:

Lilian from Kenya

‘I am from Eldoret, Kenya. I am the first born in a family of two girls and three boys. I was born and raised in a humble Christian home. I have a Post Graduate Diploma. My biggest challenge was raising fees and personal upkeep, but my parents, my late grandparents and the community supported me through fundraising. I realized my dreams and have changed my attitude towards life. I encourage young girls not to give up. My hope is to make sure they achieve their best.’

In Southern Asia, progress has been rapid for girls

In Southern Asia, some countries made impressive gains in primary education completion rates and gender parity in completion. While girls were at a disadvantage in Bangladesh in 1995, by the mid-2000s, girls had surpassed boys. Afghanistan made large absolute gains both for girls and boys: the completion rate for girls increased from 6% in 1995 to an estimated 50% in 2018. Yet, Afghanistan remains one generation behind India, reaching the level at which India began in 1995 not until 2019 (Figure 2b).

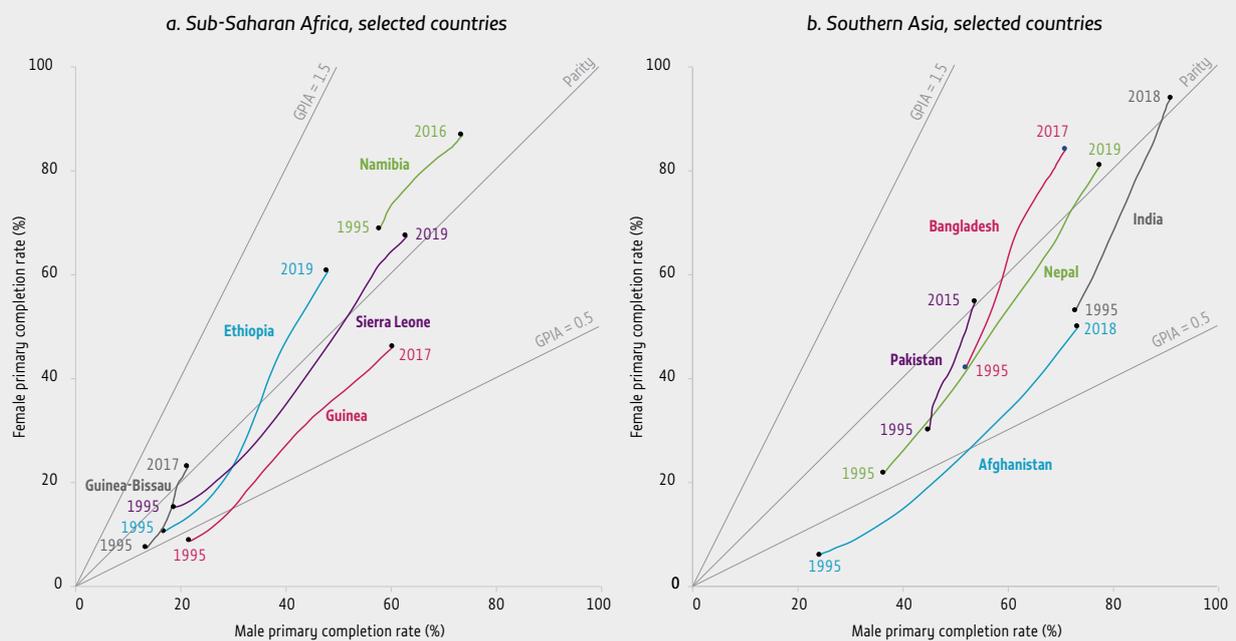
Nepal has made particularly impressive gains, with the completion rate for girls estimated to have increased from 22% in 1995 to 81% in 2018, ultimately achieving gender parity. Progress is related to significant improvements in services for sexual and reproductive health and rights, education, economic empowerment and protection of women in the country. Since the 1990s, legal reform has led to the promotion of gender equality and legislation protecting women's rights.²

The adoption of the Beijing Declaration in 1995 was a milestone in this respect, resulting in the establishment of Nepal's first Ministry for Women. Nepal also saw the creation of civil society organizations advocating for women's rights. However, challenges remain. Implementation of progressive laws and policies remains weak. Progress has been uneven across social and geographical groupings. The unequal division of household labour and early marriage still limit girls' education opportunities. One third of women aged 20 to 24 years were married before the age of 18 in 2019.³ Discriminatory practices such as the isolation of menstruating girls also persists.⁴

“ In three countries in Northern Africa and Western Asia, female completion rates have advanced to such an extent that boys are now less likely to complete than girls. ”

FIGURE 2:

Impressive progress was achieved in Africa and Southern Asia but cases of large gender disparity remain
Primary education completion rate, by sex, and gender parity index, 1995–2019



Note: GPIA = adjusted gender parity index. Estimation up to 2019 is conditional on recent survey data availability.
Source: GEM Report team calculations using household surveys.

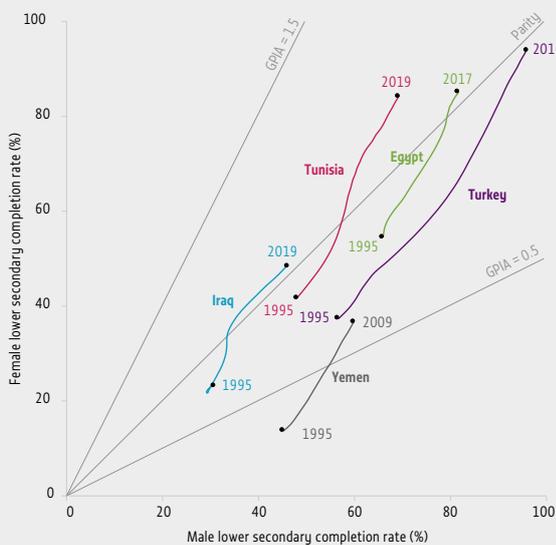
Northern Africa and Western Asia have made progress but conflict may have halted it

In Northern Africa and Western Asia, female completion rates in lower secondary education rose from 39% in 1995 to 74% in 2019. In three countries (Egypt, Iraq and Tunisia), the rates have advanced to such an extent that boys are now less likely to complete than girls (**Figure 3**). Turkey also made notable gains towards gender parity in lower secondary completion: its adjusted gender parity index increased from 0.65 in 1995 to 0.97 in 2016, with estimated female completion rates increasing from 36% to 92%.

Yemen showed highly promising progress before the outbreak of conflict, as the adjusted gender parity index increased from 0.3 in 1995 to 0.6 in 2009. Since the outbreak of conflict in March 2015, data are not available, but the completion rates are likely to have been negatively affected by the violence and associated attacks on schools.

FIGURE 3:

Some countries in Northern Africa and Western Asia have moved towards parity at full speed
Lower secondary education completion rate, by sex, and gender parity index, selected countries in Northern Africa and Western Asia, 1995–2019



Note: GPIA = adjusted gender parity index. Estimation up to 2019 is conditional on recent survey data availability.
Source: GEM Report team calculations using household surveys.

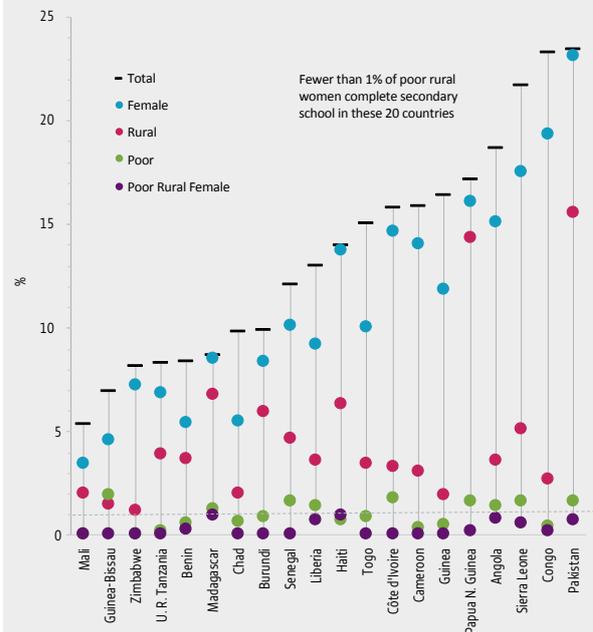
FEMALE ADVANTAGE IN UPPER SECONDARY EDUCATION HAS NOT PREVENTED EXTREME DISPARITY FOR GIRLS FROM CONTINUING IN SOME COUNTRIES

While globally, more countries have a female advantage in upper secondary education, in countries where girls are behind, they fall further behind than at any other education level. Barriers to education for adolescent girls include poverty, domestic chores, gender-based violence, child marriage, early pregnancy and inadequate menstrual hygiene management. Many of these barriers have grown during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵

In countries with the largest disparity at the expense of girls, gender interacts with other forms of disadvantage which worsen the chances of girls completing secondary school. In at least 20 countries with data, hardly any poor, rural young women complete secondary school.⁶ Most of these countries are in sub-Saharan Africa, but they also include Haiti, Pakistan and Papua New Guinea (**Figure 4**).

FIGURE 4:

In at least 20 countries, hardly any poor, rural young women complete upper secondary school
Upper secondary school completion rate, by sex, location and wealth, selected countries, 2013–2018



Source: World Inequality Database on Education.

12 YEARS OF EDUCATION FOR GIRLS IS A STRATEGIC INVESTMENT FOR ALL

Making sure that girls complete the full cycle of basic education is a smart development objective with a huge transformative impact on all of society. Doing so:

- **Raises income:** One additional year of school can increase a woman's earnings by up to 20%. Women with secondary education can expect to make almost twice as much as those with no education, and women with tertiary education almost four times as much.⁷
- **Increases chances to find decent work:** When women complete secondary education, they are 9.6 percentage points more likely to work than if they only had a primary education or less.⁸
- **Increases women's agency and decision-making:** Achieving universal secondary education could increase women's reported ability to make decisions within the household by one tenth.⁹
- **Can save lives:** If all women had a secondary education, mortality of children under five could be reduced by one fifth in many countries.¹⁰
- **Improves child nutrition:** If all women had a secondary education, stunting rates for their children could be reduced by more than a third in many countries.¹¹
- **Hastens the demographic transition to lower birth rates:** Universal secondary education could cut fertility by a third in many countries. Each additional year a girl completes secondary school reduces the likelihood of adolescent pregnancy by 6%. If all girls complete secondary education, adolescent pregnancy could be cut by three fourths.¹²
- **Reduces early marriage:** Each additional year a girl completes secondary education cuts down early marriage by 6%. If all girls complete secondary education early marriage could be virtually eliminated.¹³



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UNI235433/Noorani

Recommendations

2021 is a critical year for investment in girls' education. G7 countries recently issued the 'Declaration on girls' education: recovering from COVID-19 and unlocking Agenda 2030' with the ambition to get 40 million more girls into school and 20 million more girls reaching minimum proficiency in reading by the end of primary school in low- and lower-middle-income countries by 2026. It reaffirms the commitment as outlined in the Education 2030 Framework for Action of 12 years of safe and quality education for all children. The Generation Equality Forum also aims to make concrete, ambitious and sustainable commitments towards achieving gender equality, with education a transversal theme across the Action Coalitions. Last, but not least, the Global Education Summit: Financing GPE (Global Partnership for Education) 2021–2025 aims to secure financial commitments to support quality education for girls and boys.

Governments and partners need to invest in the following critical areas to ensure that all girls complete a full cycle of basic education by 2030:

- **Collection, analysis and use of data on girls' education:** Strengthen country capacity to collect, analyse and use sex-disaggregated data as a solid basis for policymaking.
- **Gender-responsive education sector plans:** Institutionalize gender-responsive education sector planning, analysis and implementation for education systems that promote gender equality.
- **Gender-responsive teaching and learning materials:** Ensure equal representation of women and girls in curriculum and textbooks with material free of biases and stereotypes.
- **Female education workforce:** Ensure that there are sufficient, well-trained female teachers in the right locations, at all levels of education, especially in leadership positions.
- **Affordability:** Reduce direct and indirect costs for families through cash and in-kind transfers, scholarships and stipends.
- **Nutrition, sanitation and hygiene:** Provide school meals and water and sanitation facilities in schools, especially single-sex toilets and menstrual hygiene management.
- **Prevention of school-related gender-based violence:** Adopt a holistic approach addressing the drivers and root causes of violence both at school and community levels.
- **Comprehensive sexuality education:** Implement such programmes, teaching girls and boys how to be safe and healthy, how to protect themselves and how to respect each other.
- **COVID-19 recovery:** Use the post-COVID-19 period as a unique opportunity to build gender-transformative education systems, adopting a system-wide approach to school reopening, prioritizing action to bring all girls back to school, prioritizing the leadership of girls and women and promoting an integrated and coordinated approach that addresses girls' holistic education, health and protection needs.¹⁴

Endnotes

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