



# Inclusion and gender equality

## Brief on inclusion in education

Gender equality lies at the heart of inclusive education and efforts to ensure equal opportunities for all. To achieve inclusion and gender equality in and through education, governments must eliminate gender biases from curricula and learning materials, expand teacher training on gender-transformative pedagogy, and foster safe and inclusive learning environments to ensure that no one is left behind. This is key for the achievement of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and in particular Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on ensuring the right to inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning and SDG 5 on gender equality.



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## Introduction

Gender refers to the socially constructed roles and relationships, personality traits, attitudes, behaviours, values, relative power and influence that society ascribes to the two sexes on a differential basis. Gender affects people's lives every day in myriad ways. Gendered expectations, whether of oneself or of others, impact the choices people make. They structure people's relationships and have the power to shape what people believe they can and should accomplish. Gendered power structures distribute and influence power, often resulting in systemic inequalities (UNESCO, 2021).

Gender also intersects with other characteristics which can exacerbate education exclusion, such as age, geography, poverty, disability, ethnicity, indigeneity, language, religion, and migration or displacement status. Addressing the overlapping differences that create disadvantage and marginalization can help to build more inclusive and equitable education systems.

Achieving gender equality in and through education is essential for inclusive education and inclusive societies. It is key to the achievement of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and in particular Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on ensuring the right to inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning and SDG 5 on gender equality. In any country's context, this means ensuring all learners have equal access to all levels of education, equal educational pathways and equal opportunities to apply the outcomes of their education.

A world where inclusion and gender equality in and through education is achieved allows girls and boys, women and men and non-binary people to have equal rights and opportunities to education and the power and agency to shape their lives and futures.

This brief discusses how gender equality impacts learners' inclusion and the ways in which gender equality and inclusion are interconnected in education.



## Importance of gender equality to inclusive education

The concept of gender equality in and through education recognizes that education has a key role in promoting gender equality in all facets of society. Gender-transformative education seeks to address the underlying causes of gender inequalities, and not only address the different needs, aspirations, capacities and contributions of girls, boys, women and men, but also challenge existing and discriminatory policies and practices (UNESCO, 2022a).

By building gender equal education systems that respect diverse needs, abilities and characteristics and that eliminate all forms of discrimination in the learning environment, we can eliminate gender inequalities and promote inclusion in and through education. Inclusive education promotes the participation and achievement of all learners, with a particular emphasis on those who have been traditionally excluded from educational opportunities (UNESCO, 2017).

Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but it is also an important component of inclusive education and can contribute to fostering equity and inclusion in education systems. Transforming harmful gender norms and practices in society can contribute to the advancement of inclusion within the education system in several ways:

- **Access to education and educational outcomes:** Intersecting inequalities have immense power to shape children, youth and adult enrolment, retention and educational outcomes. By examining, challenging and changing harmful gender norms, practices and imbalance of power, education becomes more inclusive of all learners.
- **Curricula and teaching and learning materials:** Promoting gender-transformative education through curricula and teaching and learning materials that challenge gender-based stereotypes and biases and promote gender equality makes education more inclusive and equitable.
- **Teacher training:** Training teachers on gender-transformative pedagogy not only helps in achieving gender equality but also enhances inclusivity in the classroom by ensuring that the diverse needs of students are met. This includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and gender diverse, intersex, queer and questioning (LGBTIQ) students.
- **Safe, accessible and inclusive learning environments:** Ensuring safe and welcoming learning environments for all is crucial for both inclusion and gender equality. It can help to address gendered vulnerabilities like gender-based violence, child marriage and early pregnancy, which can disproportionately affect certain learners.





## Challenges

Governments have already stepped up efforts to achieve inclusion and gender equality in education. An increasing number of laws and policies promote gender equality and inclusion in education: by 2022, 109 countries had ratified the 1960 UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (UNESCO, 2022b). Among 196 countries, 62% have guaranteed the right to education without discrimination in their constitution and/or law, with 56% explicitly mentioning sex or gender as a prohibited ground of discrimination (UNESCO, 2022c).

However, not all laws and policies are translated into practice and large gender disparities still exist in education. For example, while significant progress has been made globally, in sub-Saharan Africa, as of 2020, for every 100 boys, there were 96 girls enrolled in primary, 91 in lower secondary, 87 in upper secondary and 80 in tertiary education. Women comprise almost two-thirds (63%) of all illiterate adults (UNESCO, 2023a).

The following factors affect inclusion and gender equality in education:

- Poverty is one of the most significant barriers to children's education, but the stakes are especially high for girls. Girls in poorer families and those living in rural areas, for instance, are less likely to access and attend school than boys as poor families often favour boys when investing in education. In over 20 countries, primarily in sub-Saharan Africa but also in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Guatemala, Haiti, India and Pakistan, less than 10% of poor young women living in rural areas have completed upper secondary school. In Benin, Cameroon, Congo and Mali, the situation is more dire with hardly any girls from very low-income families completing upper secondary education (UNESCO, 2023b).
- The intersection of gender with other factors of disadvantage tends to exacerbate the challenges, and often leads to severe education deprivation. In general, boys are more likely than girls to be over-referred into special needs education, with a ratio of 1.5 to 3.5 boys per 1 girl globally (Dever et al., 2016). Poor boys and boys from minority groups (specifically students of colour, students from low-income backgrounds, and students of colour from low-income backgrounds) are particularly over-represented. For instance, in the United States, African-American boys are consistently over-represented in disability education programming (NCLD, 2020).
- Child marriage and early pregnancy are one of the causes of early school leaving. Often, pregnant girls and young mothers are excluded from school and are therefore unable to continue or complete their education, especially in poorer countries. Globally, West and Central Africa have the highest rates of child marriage, with over 4 in 10 young women getting married before age 18. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that at least 10 million unintended pregnancies occur each year among adolescent girls aged 15–19 years (WHO, 2023). In some countries, policy dictates that pregnant girls are required to leave school, at least temporarily (UNESCO, 2023c). Even when policies are in place, strong stigma, discrimination and unequal gender norms can lead to girls dropping out of school early – often leading to a sharp end to their education.
- Many schools lack inclusive infrastructure, such as single-sex sanitation facilities which are essential for menstrual hygiene. For example, 1 in 4 girls in Nigeria, 1 in 5 in Côte d'Ivoire, and 1 in 7 in Burkina Faso reported missing school during their menstruation due to inadequate facilities. In Bhutan, 25% of females reported missing school during their periods, because there is nowhere at school to wash and change, and there is also nowhere at school to dispose of sanitary pads (UNESCO, UNICEF and WFP, 2023). Moreover, almost 1 in 3 of the world's schools do not have safe drinking water, and almost half have no handwashing facilities with water and soap. Children and adolescents in low-income countries are the least likely to attend schools that have these basic services (Ibid.).
- Persons with disabilities, particularly women and girls, are more likely to be missing out on the opportunities being provided by the digital revolution. Persons with disabilities are often less likely to own a mobile phone or a smartphone than those without disabilities, and women with disabilities are

the least likely of all. For example, in India, 23% of women without disabilities own a smartphone compared to only 5% of women with disabilities, while 40% of men without disabilities own a smartphone compared to 16% of men with disabilities (UNICEF, 2022b). This can have implications on access to learning and skills development. Affordability is also a major issue in poor countries, and teachers need appropriate training for assistive technologies (UNESCO, 2023a).

- Indigenous girls and women face multiple obstacles in accessing education and confront even greater disadvantages than indigenous boys and men. In Guatemala, the country's overall literacy rate is 85% for men and 78% for women, but among the indigenous population, only 67% of women can read and write, compared to 78% of men (UN Women, 2022). In Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, there are gender disparities in access to quality education due to challenges faced by indigenous girls, such as domestic labor, child marriage, early pregnancies, as well as child abuse, and various forms of violence (UN, 2017).
- A significant gender gap exists in refugee education. Globally, there are less than 8 refugee girls for every 10 refugee boys in primary school; the proportion is significantly worse in secondary education, with fewer than 7 refugee girls for every 10 refugee boys. The disparity is particularly evident in areas where there are considerable cultural barriers to girls' and women's education. In Pakistan, for example, 47% of Afghan boys attend primary education compared to 23% of Afghan girls. Dropout rates among Afghan refugee girls are significant, reaching up to 90% in some locations. As a result, less than 8% of refugee girls and women in Pakistan are literate (UNHCR, 2023). Furthermore, the academic performance of girls is often worse than that of boys due to the quality of education they receive in comparison to boys (Naylor, 2021).
- School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) is a major barrier to inclusive education. While boys experience physical violence more often than girls, girls are more likely than boys to be subject to verbal and sexual harassment, abuse and violence in and around schools. LGBTIQ students are disproportionately affected by SRGBV. For example, research showed that boys in the the United Kingdom who identify as LGBTIQ were three times more likely than girls who identify as LGBTIQ to experience physical violence at school (12% compared to 4%). Additionally, research showed that LGBTIQ students with disabilities in British schools were more likely to encounter violence in the classroom (UNESCO, 2020c).
- Countries continue to develop and use curricula and teaching and learning materials with gender stereotypes that lack reference to women and girls, as well as LGBTIQ people (UNESCO, 2020a; UNESCO and IGLYO, 2021). In one study of primary school textbooks in Greece (Kostas, 2021), men and women were found to be generally portrayed in stereotypical roles and professions, with men in positions of power and authority and women completing household chores and in nurturing roles. Gender stereotypes influence educational aspirations, along with educational and professional pathways, with long-term repercussions on individuals' wages, benefits and job security, and the labour market more broadly (Brussino and McBrien, 2022).
- Gender inequality persists in teacher recruitment and promotion to leadership. In 2020, female teachers globally were over-represented in pre-primary (94%), primary (67%), and lower-secondary (57%) levels, but they are severely under-represented in the tertiary sector (44%) (UNESCO, 2023d). In emergency contexts, only 38% of secondary school teachers are female compared to a global average of over 54% (INEE, 2021). There is also a glass ceiling for women hoping to reach leadership positions in education. For example, in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Togo, only around 1 in 10 primary school leaders are women (UNICEF, 2023). To create more inclusive learning environments, the teacher workforce should more accurately reflect students' diversity.
- In many contexts, teachers still have gender-biased attitudes that negatively influence both girls and boys in a variety of ways, including their academic outcomes and career choices. For instance, a study of 6-year-old students in the United States showed preschool teachers had stereotyped views about boys being better than girls at robotics and programming. In Italy, girls taught by teachers with gender bias demonstrated poorer performance in mathematics (UNESCO, 2020a). Teachers often lack training on gender-transformative pedagogy and self-efficacy to promote gender equality and inclusion and support LGBTIQ students (UNESCO and IGLYO, 2021).



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- Gender-stereotypical parenting also negatively influences educational outcomes and career trajectories. Children from families with traditional gender roles are more likely to have gender-stereotypical expectations in the future. Stereotypical expectations by parents and communities of women and men can push girls and boys out of school to engage in domestic chores and in child labour or work, the former mostly affecting girls, the latter boys (UNESCO, 2022a, 2022d).
- At the school level, language use in education often interacts with gender, increasing the risk of girls being left behind (British Council, 2021). Girls and women are less exposed than boys and men to other languages outside the home (World Bank, 2021). For example, the performance of both boys and girls in Rwanda dropped when taught in languages they did not know but girls were more likely to fail due to their limited access to and use of the national language (Milligan and Adamson, 2022).
- Some subjects remain dominated by one gender. Male students are overrepresented in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) as well as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects. Female students are overrepresented in the arts and humanities in tertiary education (UNESCO, 2020a; UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2020).



## Policy recommendations

The journey towards achieving SDGs 4 and 5 is a process that requires ensuring inclusion at all levels and in all facets of education. Addressing the above challenges requires the implementation of inclusive and gender-transformative education through a two-pronged approach that mainstreams gender equality through participation, performance and retention, as well as targeted interventions to empower and respect the diversity of all learners. (UNESCO, 2020a). This two-pronged approach will ensure inclusion and gender equality in and through education go hand in hand.

The following recommendations draw on the UN Call to Action, issued by countries, development partners, young people and other stakeholders during the 2022 Transforming Education Summit and describe what governments must do to implement inclusive and gender-transformative education policies and practice (UN, 2022a, 2022b):

- ▶ **Put gender equality at the heart of education sector plans, budgets and policies**, identifying gender disparities and their underlying factors from the early years and beyond, and including and increasing budgets, strategies and commitments that transform harmful gender norms in pedagogy.
  - ▶ **Eliminate gender disparity in education access, participation and completion**. Widen the understanding of inclusive education: it should include all learners, regardless of identity, background or ability. This includes applying universal design to ensure inclusive systems fulfil every learner's potential.
  - ▶ **Target financing to those left behind**. This needs an approach that allocates general funding to foster an inclusive learning environment for all learners, as well as targeted funding to follow the furthest behind as early as possible.
  - ▶ **Build the institutional and human capacity of education sector staff to advance gender equality and tap into the potential of diversity and ensure gender parity and non-discrimination at all levels and in all subjects of education, and in teaching, education and ministerial leadership positions**. This includes supporting women teachers with fair and equal compensation, safe housing, transport and other resources needed to work in remote areas, and other efforts to break the glass ceiling
- in educational leadership and administration. This also includes promoting more men into early childhood care and education, investing in teacher training, including in teachers with disabilities, that enables and empowers teachers to create learning environments that accommodate diverse learning styles.
  - ▶ **Remove gender bias and stereotypes from curricula, teaching and learning materials and ensure all teachers and learners acquire the knowledge and skills** needed to examine, challenge and change harmful gender norms, attitudes and practices, unequal power relations, gender discrimination and wider intersecting inequalities. This includes early learning materials, as evidence shows that gender stereotypes and norms are understood and embedded in children as young as two years of age.
  - ▶ **Ensure safe, gender-transformative and inclusive learning spaces**, including school-based water, sanitation and menstrual hygiene management facilities, education programmes and mechanisms to prevent and respond to school-related gender-based violence, and comprehensive sexuality education. Address the longer-term impact of COVID-19 and the global hunger crisis, and take medium-term efforts, particularly in emergency and crisis contexts where vulnerabilities are most pronounced.
  - ▶ **Transform data systems to better collect high-quality data and understand the intersections between gender and other characteristics such as minority status or disability** that lead to marginalization, inequality and learning poverty, and use data to take targeted action to leave no one behind. This includes citizen-inclusive data from households on out-of-school children and ensuring all education data is fully disaggregated by gender and other key education indicators.
  - ▶ **Support coordinated, cross-sectoral, intersectional and intergenerational collaboration across Ministries**, civil society, grassroots youth organizations and other actors working on education, health, nutrition, gender, protection, youth, employment, economic, social and climate justice to safeguard rights and promote equal educational pathways, formal sector employment and related outcomes.





## Conclusion

Gender equality in and through education is vital for the inclusion of all learners in all of their diversity, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, ethnic or social origin, language, religion, nationality, economic condition, ability or any other characteristic.

Education systems that promote gender equality and inclusion and embrace diversity enable all to learn and help build peaceful, just, prosperous and inclusive societies.

Inclusive and gender-transformative education has the power to unlock the potential of all learners and create a more equal world.

Governments need to transform their education sector plans, budgets, policies, and practices – promoting diversity and inclusion of the most marginalized.



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The **UNESCO Briefs on Inclusion in Education** are a series of short notes that seek to answer various questions that policy-makers and key stakeholders have about the planning and implementation of inclusive education policies and practices. The Briefs are a follow-up to the UNESCO International Forum on Inclusion and Equity in Education held in Cali, Colombia in September 2019.

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The electronic version can be accessed at: <https://on.unesco.org/InclusionInED> and <https://on.unesco.org/GenED>

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Education is UNESCO's top priority because it is a basic human right and the foundation for peace and sustainable development. UNESCO is the United Nations' specialized agency for education, providing global and regional leadership to drive progress, strengthening the resilience and capacity of national systems to serve all learners. UNESCO also leads efforts to respond to contemporary global challenges through transformative learning, with special focus on gender equality and Africa across all actions.



### The Global Education 2030 Agenda

UNESCO, as the United Nations' specialized agency for education, is entrusted to lead and coordinate the Education 2030 Agenda, which is part of a global movement to eradicate poverty through 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Education, essential to achieve all of these goals, has its own dedicated Goal 4, which aims to *"ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."* The Education 2030 Framework for Action provides guidance for the implementation of this ambitious goal and commitments.



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