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Realizing the Right to Education for All: How Target 4.5 Is Advancing Gender Equality In and Through Education

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Education is a fundamental human right. All learners have the right to education without discrimination. Inequality is not only unfair – it also weakens entire systems and wastes human potential. There is ample evidence that gender-transformative education – or education that addresses the root causes of exclusion and gender inequalities – improves learning outcomes, expands opportunities and contributes to stronger, more just societies. Gender equality is inextricably linked to the right to education for all. Achieving gender equality requires a rights-based approach that ensures that learners of all genders not only gain access to and complete education cycles, but also agency in and through education. The economic case is also compelling: According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimates, ensuring all girls and boys acquire basic skills could generate up to 10 trillion dollars annually in global benefits.¹ Closing gender gaps, especially in fields like science, technology, engineering and mathematics is critical for innovation, economic growth and sustainable development. Ensuring gender-transformative education is not just a moral imperative, it is a social and economic necessity.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 – Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all – is central to the realization of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Progress on SDG 4 directly advances SDG 5 on promoting gender equality and girls’ and women’s empowerment. Through target 4.5, countries have committed to eliminating gender disparities in education and ensuring equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, Indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations. As unpacked through the Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of SDG 4, this means that all girls and boys, women and men, should have equal opportunity to enjoy education of high quality, achieve at equal levels and enjoy equal benefits from education. Adolescent girls and young women, who may be subjected or exposed to gender-based violence, child marriage, early pregnancy and a heavy load of household chores, as well as those living in poor and remote rural areas, require special attention. In contexts in which boys are disadvantaged, targeted action should be taken to support them. Moreover, policies aimed at overcoming gender inequality are more effective when they are part of a broader package of interventions that also promote health, justice, good governance and freedom from child labour.²

Where do we stand on gender equality in and through education?

- (a) Global education access has expanded significantly over the past 25 years, and gender gaps in enrolment have narrowed substantially (supported by expanded schooling and policy efforts).³

¹ UNESCO, OECD and the Commonwealth. 2024. *The Price of Inaction: The Global Private, Fiscal and Social Costs of Children and Youth Not Learning*. Paris: UNESCO.

² UNESCO. 2015. *Unpacking Sustainable Development Goal 4 Education 2030: Guide*. Paris: UNESCO.

³ UNESCO. 2026. *Global Education Monitoring Report 2026: Access and Equity – Countdown to 2030*. Paris: UNESCO.

- (b) Between 2015 and 2024, an estimated additional 29 million girls were enrolled in primary education and 35 million more in secondary education. Twenty-seven million more young women attended university.⁴
- (c) The share of countries achieving gender parity increased markedly between 2000 and 2024 – from 42 per cent to 57 per cent in lower secondary and from 17 per cent to 31 per cent in upper secondary education, while countries with severe disparities against girls dropped sharply across all levels.⁵
- (d) Africa reached gender parity in primary school enrolment in 2021 and is close to achieving it in lower secondary school enrolment. However, in 2024, there were still only 93 girls for every 100 boys in upper secondary education, and 94 women for every 100 men in tertiary education.⁶
- (e) Gender disparities in upper secondary completion have declined significantly since 2000, mainly due to progress among previously disadvantaged girls; however, in some countries this progress has gone beyond parity, reversing the gap and leaving boys at a disadvantage. In several contexts, boys are more likely to repeat grades and drop out of education.⁷
- (f) A staggering 273 million children and youth are currently out of school, including 133 million girls and 140 million boys.⁸
- (g) In around 40 countries with data, around 80 young men are enrolled in university for every 100 young women, while 80 young women are enrolled in vocational education for every 100 young men.⁹
- (h) Women represent only 35 per cent of graduates in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.¹⁰
- (i) While gender gaps in literacy are closing among youth, women comprise almost two-thirds of the 739 million adults lacking basic literacy skills.¹¹
- (j) Only 87 boys for every 100 girls reach minimum reading proficiency, while boys hold an advantage over girls in science and mathematics at higher achievement levels.¹²

⁴ UNESCO-UIS. 2024. [UIS Data Browser](#). Montreal: UNESCO.

⁵ UNESCO. 2026. [Global Education Monitoring Report 2026: Access and Equity – Countdown to 2030](#). Paris: UNESCO.

⁶ UNESCO. 2026. [Gender Equity in Access to Education in Africa](#). Paris: UNESCO.

⁷ UNESCO. 2026. [Global Education Monitoring Report 2026: Access and Equity – Countdown to 2030](#). Paris: UNESCO; UNESCO. 2022. [Leave No Child Behind: Global Report On Boys' Disengagement from Education](#). Paris: UNESCO.

⁸ UNESCO. 2026. [Global Education Monitoring Report 2026: Access and Equity – Countdown to 2030](#). Paris: UNESCO.

⁹ UNESCO. 2025. [Global Education Monitoring Report: Gender Report – Women Lead For Learning](#). Paris: UNESCO.

¹⁰ UNESCO. 2025. [Global Education Monitoring Report: Gender Report – Women Lead for Learning](#). Paris: UNESCO.

¹¹ UNESCO-UIS. 2024. [UIS Data Browser](#). Montreal: UNESCO.

¹² UNESCO. 2025. [Global Education Monitoring Report: Gender Report – Women Lead for Learning](#). Paris: UNESCO.

- (k) Each year, an estimated 11.5 million unintended pregnancies occur among girls aged 15–19 in developing regions, often resulting in an abrupt end to their education.¹³
- (l) Child marriage fell globally from 25 per cent (1995) to 19 per cent (2024) but remains high in some regions.¹⁴
- (m) Between 2018–2022, the prevalence of bullying increased for girls in 34 of 66 countries with data, compared with 22 countries for boys. Bullying remains a widespread barrier to education globally, contributing to school avoidance and increased dropout rates.¹⁵
- (n) Globally, women account for 93 per cent of teachers in pre-primary, 69 per cent in primary, 56 per cent in secondary and 44 per cent in higher education.¹⁶
- (o) Only 11 per cent of countries promote gender parity in the selection of school leaders.¹⁷
- (p) Gender data, in terms of parity, is widely available, but other equity dimensions rely on less consistent household surveys. Some measurement tools need to be adjusted to be more informative and gender equality needs to be measured in all its dimensions.¹⁸

Success story 1: Advancing gender equality in and through education through partnerships, evidence, accountability and policy action

At the United Nations Secretary-General’s Transforming Education Summit (TES) in September 2022, leaders and education advocates launched the [Global Platform for Gender Equality in and through Education](#) through the landmark [call to Action to accelerate progress on gender equality and girls’ and women’s empowerment in and through education](#). Co-led by UNESCO, the Global Platform convenes governments, donors, partners and civil society to monitor progress, highlight gaps and propel transformative action on gender equality in and through education.

Within this framework, significant efforts have strengthened the global evidence base on gender equality in and through education to support accountability and drive policy action. The Platform’s [Global Accountability Dashboard](#) expanded its coverage to over 1,160 programmes across 193 countries, providing a comprehensive overview of actions, commitments and evidence on gender equality in and through education. To enhance accessibility and reach, the dashboard was also expanded to include two additional language versions, enabling broader engagement and use by stakeholders across regions. Additionally, expert consultations through technical working groups have strengthened efforts to improve the availability, quality and comparability of cross-national

¹³ World Health Organization. 2025. [WHO Guideline on Preventing Early Pregnancy and Poor Reproductive Outcomes among Adolescents in Low- and Middle-Income Countries](#). Geneva: World Health Organization.

¹⁴ UNESCO. 2026. [Global Education Monitoring Report 2026: Access and Equity – Countdown to 2030](#). Paris: UNESCO.

¹⁵ UNESCO. 2025. [Global Education Monitoring Report: Gender Report – Women Lead for Learning](#). Paris: UNESCO.

¹⁶ UNESCO-UIS. 2024. [UIS Data Browser](#). Montreal: UNESCO.

¹⁷ UNESCO. 2025. [Global Education Monitoring Report: Gender Report – Women Lead for Learning](#). Paris: UNESCO.

¹⁸ UNESCO. 2026. [Global Education Monitoring Report 2026: Access and Equity – Countdown to 2030](#). Paris: UNESCO.

data on gender equality in and through education, while advancing the development of new indicators, including measures of gender-transformative curricula.

Beyond monitoring progress, the Global Platform has enhanced global coordination and advocacy by bringing together diverse stakeholders around a shared agenda for action. It has increased the visibility of gender equality in and through education within global and regional forums and facilitated the exchange of promising practices through key convenings such as the Global Education Meeting, the Pan-African Conference on Girls' and Women's Education, the Commission on the Status of Women and the Transforming Education Summit stocktaking processes. These efforts have supported countries and partners in translating commitments into concrete action, strengthened accountability for gender equality in education, provided a platform to showcase leadership and share good practices and reinforced collective momentum towards achieving SDG 4.

The [Accountability for Gender Equality in Education \(AGEE\): Bridging the Local, National and Global](#) project, led by University College London in partnership with UNESCO and the University of Malawi, aims to improve how gender equality in and through education is documented and addressed in three countries – Indonesia, Kenya and Malawi. This work is supported by GPE KIX, a joint endeavour with IDRC, Canada.

Using the [AGEE Framework](#) – an indicator framework for participatory work on documenting and evaluating gender equality in and through education – the project focuses on auditing existing data, identifying missing data and enhancing data collection and usage across local, national and global education processes. Project activities involve developing local and national data dashboards, piloting new data sources and tools, including through the use of artificial intelligence. Project activities also include building capacities across government and civil society for improved decisions and policymaking addressing gender equality in and through education. This project emphasizes participatory and cross-sectoral collaboration. It engages a diverse range of stakeholders, including women's advocacy groups, youth organizations, faith-based groups and government agencies across the education, gender, health and social development sectors.

In Indonesia, AGEE insights have informed national advocacy efforts and the refinement of inclusion indicators within the education sector. The AGEE Framework was introduced through the country's Global Partnership for Education (GPE) mechanisms, particularly the Local Education Group (LEG), co-chaired by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. It contributed to strengthening discussions on gender equality in and through education and informed the discussion on refinement of GPE inclusion indicators by helping stakeholders identify national priorities, particularly the need to strengthen the use of education data through a gender-responsive lens. Beyond the GPE process, AGEE has also strengthened the work of government institutions, women's rights organizations and research institutions, including the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, KAPAL Perempuan (Alternative Education Circle for Women, a non-governmental organization) and the SMERU Research Institute. These organizations have integrated the AGEE Framework into surveys, advocacy initiatives and learning resources, using it to strengthen evidence on the links between

gender equality and education, inform advocacy to address child marriage and improve education and training materials.

In Kenya, AGEE outcomes and data insights will inform the development of the next National Education Sector Strategic Plan and influenced both national assessment reforms and the Ministry of Education's Secondary Education Equity Programme. Through AGEE's adaptability to local contexts and its participatory approach, discussions at the local level, particularly in Wajir County, contributed to the Ministry of Education action to integrate the religious curriculum into the national curriculum to ensure no child is left behind or drops out during the transition from religious to formal education at national level.

Success story 2: Addressing boys' disengagement from education for the benefit of boys, girls and society

As evidenced by the [2022 UNESCO global report on boys' disengagement from education](#), although girls are less likely to enter education in the first place, in many countries boys are at greater risk than girls of repeating grades, having poor learning outcomes and failing to complete their education.

Since the early 2000s, boys' disengagement has been a concern in high- and upper-middle-income contexts, or in regions such as Latin America and the Caribbean. And new patterns are emerging. Gender gaps in some low- and lower-middle income countries – where historically girls were less likely to be in school – are narrowing, and several countries are facing a 'reversal', with fewer boys progressing through and completing their education. Across all countries, evidence of boys' disengagement is most prevalent at the secondary level.¹⁹

Gender norms and stereotypes significantly impact boys' and girls' educational experiences and outcomes. Societal expectations around masculinity often discourage boys from engaging fully in school, exposing them to negative behaviours and limiting their academic self-perception. These norms intersect with poverty and economic pressures, further pushing boys out of school. Addressing these harmful gender norms could support boys' continued learning and foster better attitudes about gender equality.²⁰

The [Lifting Barriers: Educating Boys for Gender Equality](#) project, led by UNESCO in collaboration with Equimundo and the University of East Anglia, directly addresses boys' disengagement from education. It works to promote inclusive, positive masculinities and create education systems that are safer, more equitable and more responsive to all learners' needs. This work is supported by the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (GPE KIX), a joint endeavour with IDRC, Canada.

Building on national research on boys' disengagement from education and harmful gender norms, the project developed and adapted a comprehensive school intervention toolkit for the Malawi

¹⁹ UNESCO. 2022. [Leave No Child Behind: Global Report on Boys' Disengagement from Education](#). Paris: UNESCO.

²⁰ Jere, C. M., Cann, V., Jones, B., Acharya, S., Bogossian, T., Zacharia, H., Chunga, J., Kayange, J., and Bhunu, W. 2026. [Lifting Barriers: Boys' Disengagement from Education, Volume 1: Scoping Study](#). Paris: UNESCO, Equimundo and UEA.

context through collaboration with the Malawi Institute for Education (MIE), Centre for Alternatives for Victimized Women and Children, Centre for Social Research – University of Malawi, Equipundo and UNESCO. The toolkit included an educators’ guide, in-classroom modules, a parents’ guide and a boys’ club manual, alongside related teacher-training materials. A global version of the school toolkit was also developed and prepared to be adapted to different national contexts.

The school intervention pilot was launched in 11 schools across four districts in Malawi: Blantyre Urban, Chikwawa, Dedza and Mzimba South, for the 2025–2026 academic year. Before implementation, training workshops were delivered for teachers, facilitators and school leaders on boys’ disengagement from education, harmful gender norms and use of the toolkit. The intervention combined classroom activities, boys’ clubs, teacher support and community engagement. During the reporting period, implementation activities included sensitization meetings with teachers, primary education advisors (PEAs) and community leaders, the formation of parents’ groups and the delivery of classroom and boys’ club sessions using the toolkit.

The periodic evaluation of the school intervention – based on feedback from teachers, headteachers, volunteer facilitators and PEAs – has shown very encouraging results. These include reduced absenteeism across the four districts, improved academic performance, stronger relationships between learners and teachers and safer and more inclusive learning environments. The project also facilitated the reintegration of a number of boys who had previously dropped out of school.

Additionally, a global guide for developing gender transformative teaching and learning materials, designed for ministry staff and curriculum developers, completes the toolkit and has been adapted to the contexts of Cambodia, Lesotho and Malawi. Training materials to strengthen stakeholders’ capacities on gender norms, boys’ disengagement and the practical application of the guide were also developed, and stakeholders involved in the development and review of teaching and learning materials trained.

The project contributed to curriculum discussions in Malawi. Through sustained engagement and co-creation with MIE, the project supported ongoing efforts to strengthen gender-transformative approaches within curriculum reform processes, particularly in life skills and health and well-being education.

Beyond Malawi, the project also supported national adaptation and capacity-building in Cambodia and Lesotho. In Cambodia, working with the Cambodia Development Research Institute and UNESCO Phnom Penh, the project used national research findings to inform dialogue with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. This engagement contributed to the approval of Cambodia’s Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Plan 2025–2029 on 31 December 2025, which incorporates several project tools and approaches, including adaptation of the school toolkit to the Cambodian context. The project also began generating interest beyond the original implementation countries. During 2025, Belize and Namibia started adapting the materials to their national contexts.

As this project shows, addressing restrictive and harmful male gender norms and promoting positive and healthy masculinities at school has the potential to keep boys engaged in school and learning. Supporting boys does not mean compromising on efforts for girls and women. This is not a zero-sum game. Gender-transformative strategies that benefit boys also benefit girls and contribute to more equitable and resilient societies for everyone.

What we need next

The Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development and its target 4.5 have placed a renewed and broader focus on inclusion, equity and gender equality. This has contributed to progress towards gender equality in and through education, including through multistakeholder and multi-level initiatives as illustrated through the success stories presented above. Yet, with the 2030 deadline for the SDGs rapidly approaching, progress remains uneven, and the urgency to accelerate action toward inclusive, equitable and quality education for all has never been greater.

The post-2030 education agenda will need to build on this success and go further: moving beyond a focus on access and parity alone, it should place gender equality in and through education at its core. While ensuring equal participation, progression and completion remains essential, achieving genuine gender equality requires addressing the unequal power relations, discriminatory social norms and practices, stereotypes and structural barriers that continue to limit opportunities and outcomes for learners and perpetuate exclusion and inequality.

This calls for education systems that are not only inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs, interests and lived experiences of all learners, but that also actively address gendered and intersectional barriers at their root – enabling every learner to realize their right to participate in, complete and benefit fully from education. This also means ensuring that curricula, teaching practices, learning environments and leadership opportunities challenge discriminatory norms and build agency among all learners regardless of their gender. At the same time, greater attention must be paid to the intersecting gender-related barriers faced by marginalized learners, particularly those affected by poverty, disability, displacement and crisis, to ensure that progress reaches those who are most often left behind.

As we look toward 2030 and beyond, accelerating progress will require stronger evidence, better and more disaggregated data, enhanced partnerships across sectors and stakeholders, and sustained investment to drive transformative, resilient and lasting change. By placing gender equality at the heart of education systems and priorities, the post-2030 agenda can harness the transformative power of education to advance more just, inclusive and sustainable societies for all.