



COMMITTEE The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

ISSUE Addressing Girls' Access to Quality Education

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Introduction

Gender equality is a global priority at UNESCO. Globally, 122 million girls and 128 million boys are out of school. Women still account for almost two-thirds of all adults unable to read.

Ensuring that all girls and young women receive a quality education is a human right and a global development priority - as well as an item on the UN Women's agenda with utmost importance. Girls' lack of access to proper education and the completion of such is rooted in many factors: harmful gender stereotypes and wrongful gender stereotyping, child marriage, and early and unintended pregnancy, gender-based violence against women and girls, lack of inclusive and quality learning environments and inadequate and unsafe education infrastructure (including sanitation), as well as poverty. By addressing these issues, an improvement in the accessibility of primary and secondary education for girls and young women, as well as providing sufficient support for them to complete their education can be achieved.

Definition of Key Terms

Child marriage - Child marriage refers to any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child.

Unintended pregnancy - An unintended pregnancy is a pregnancy that is either unwanted, such as a pregnancy that occurred when no children or no more children were desired. Another case is when the pregnancy is mistimed, such as the pregnancy occurred earlier than desired.

Gender-based violence against women - Violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately. Such violence takes multiple

forms, including acts or omissions intended or likely to cause or result in death or physical, sexual, psychological, or economic harm or suffering to women, threats of such acts, harassment, coercion, and arbitrary deprivation of liberty.

Gender stereotype - A generalized view or preconception about attributes or characteristics that are or ought to be possessed by, or the roles that are or should be performed by women and men.

Gender stereotyping - The practice of ascribing to an individual woman or man specific attributes, characteristics, or roles by reason only of her or his membership in the social group of women or men.

School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) - Acts or threats of sexual, physical, or psychological violence occurring in and around schools, perpetrated as a result of gender norms and stereotypes, and enforced by unequal power dynamics.

General Overview

Raising the educational attainment of girls has been shown to positively affect their health and financial prospects, which benefits communities as a whole. The infant mortality rate is half that of children whose mothers are illiterate and have only completed primary education. 50% of girls in the world's poorest nations do not complete their secondary education. However, studies reveal that girls who attend school for an additional year can expect to earn 15% more financially throughout their lifetime. Since women are shown to devote a larger portion of their income to their families than men, raising female education and earning capacity also raises the standard of life for their children. However, there are still a lot of obstacles preventing girls from attending school.

HARMFUL GENDER STEREOTYPES AND WRONGFUL GENDER STEREOTYPING

Ideally, education systems should be focused on combatting gender stereotypes and gender stereotyping. But occasionally, the curriculum, textbooks, and even teachers contribute to the spread of harmful gender stereotypes, which affect girls in numerous manners throughout their lives. These effects range from the subjects and course options that they choose, which affects their chances of employment to their capacity to make decisions about their sexual and reproductive health.

Even before entering a classroom, harmful and inaccurate gender stereotypes can have an impact on young girls and also possibly deter them from attending. For instance, the stereotype that men should be the breadwinners means that boys receive preference when it comes to education, while the stereotype that girls should be domestic, homemakers, and caregivers may cause families to hesitate to let their daughters attend school if they are to become wives and mothers.

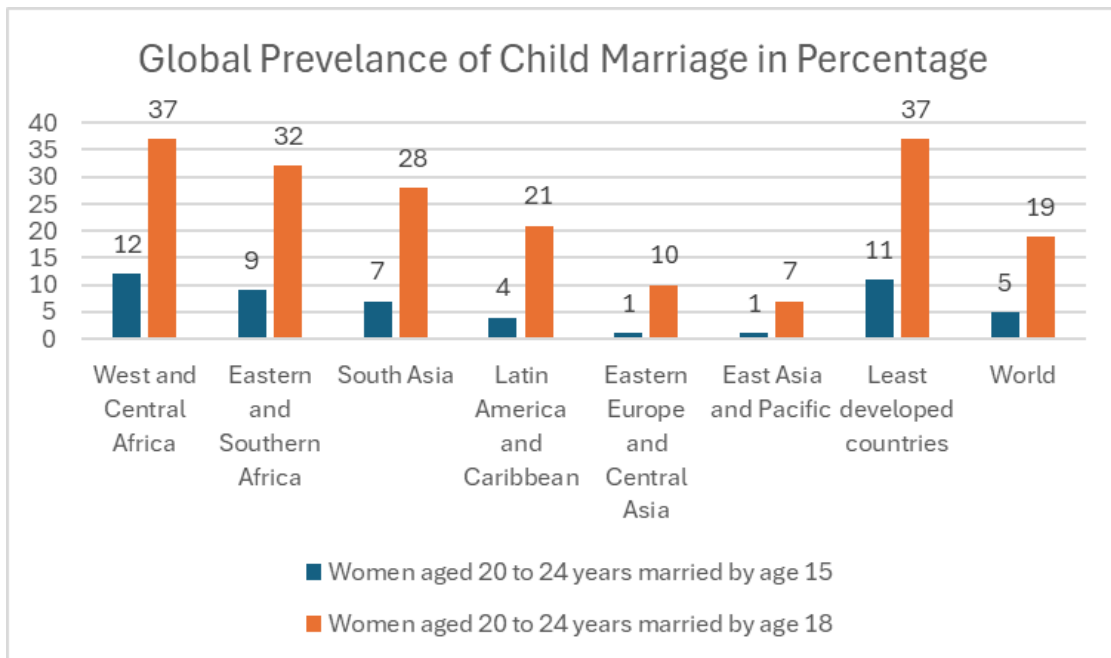
CHILD MARRIAGE AND EARLY AND UNINTENDED PREGNANCY

Child marriage is often the result of entrenched gender inequality, making girls disproportionately affected by the practice. Globally, the prevalence of child marriage among boys is just one-sixth that among girls. Due to several cultural norms, in certain countries or regions when a girl marries, she is expected to give up her formal education. This is more likely to happen during the preparatory period before or after marriage. Since young women in such situations are usually expected to look after the home, their children, and their extended family, going back to their former education is almost impossible for married girls.

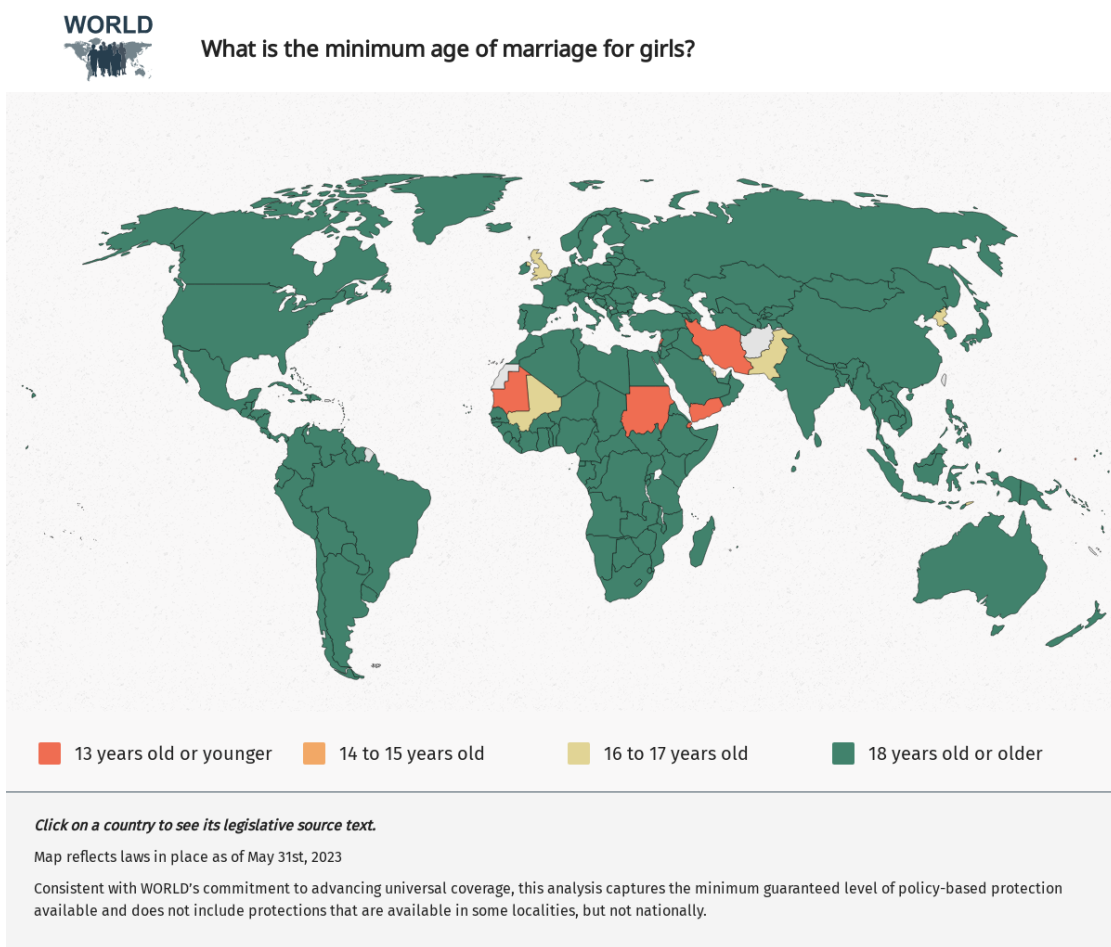
Furthermore, child marriage often leads to adolescent pregnancy resulting in an increase of adolescent girls giving up or being expelled from school due to national laws, lack of support to re-enrollment, and stigma. The earlier the girl is married the more significant the impact.

Across the globe, levels of child marriage are highest in West and Central Africa, where nearly 4 in 10 young women were married before age 18. Lower levels of child marriage are found in Eastern and Southern Africa (32 per cent), South Asia (28 per cent), and Latin America and the Caribbean (21 per cent). The diagram below shows UNICEF's data from 2022 on the global prevalence of child marriage in percentage by larger regions.¹

¹ Estimates are based on a subset of 101 countries covering 77 percent of the population of women aged 20 to 24 . Regional estimates represent data covering at least 50 per cent of the regional population. Data coverage was insufficient to calculate regional estimates for the Middle East and North Africa, North America and Western Europe.



The map of the WORLD Policy Analysis Center below illustrates that very few states have set the minimum age of marriage at 18. This is particularly true of the Americas, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia – all regions with high child marriage prevalence rates. It should also be pointed out that child marriage is permissible by law in several ‘global north’ countries, notably the US.



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GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRL

Gender-based violence (GBV) against girls, for instance, rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment and assault, corporal punishment, and harmful practices such as child marriage (see above) and female genital mutilation can keep girls out of school temporarily or indefinitely. Evidence collected by the World Bank Group shows that in Nicaragua, '63% of the children of abused women had to repeat a school year and dropped out of school on average four years earlier than others.' In Zambia, 'girls who experienced sexual violence were found to have more difficulty concentrating on their studies, some students transferred to another school to escape harassment, and others dropped out of school because of pregnancy.'

GBV often occurs in schools, known as 'school-related gender-based violence' (SRGBV), which frequently causes girls to do poorly in school or to stop attending entirely. Girls on their way home or to school, where there is little to no supervision, are frequently the victims of SRGBV. For instance, female students in Japan have reported experiencing sexual assault on public transportation. According to a World Bank Group analysis, female enrolment rates in Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East are impacted by parental concerns about their daughters' safety when traveling to school. Because of "fears surrounding the potential role of education as a catalyst for social, cultural, economic, and political transformation," SRGBV also includes attacks on girls who seek education (OHCHR). Notable instances include Boko Haram's kidnapping of around 300 schoolgirls in northeastern Nigeria in April 2014 and the Taliban's 2012 shooting of education activist Malala Yousafzai in Pakistan.

LACK OF INCLUSIVE AND QUALITY LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AND INADEQUATE AND UNSAFE EDUCATION INFRASTRUCTURE

A poor school environment can discourage girls from going to school and have a detrimental effect on the standard of education they do receive. The term "school environment" encompasses both the physical layout of the school and the larger learning environment. Typical obstacles pertaining to the learning setting include discriminatory pedagogies, learning resources, and curriculum; bullying culture; or educational policies and discriminatory clothing standards, such as the prohibition of religious symbols in classrooms.

A lack of female teachers, especially in low- and middle-income nations, is arguably one of the biggest obstacles to an inclusive and high-quality learning environment. This deficiency is a result of historical barriers to education as well as damaging gender stereotypes about the role of women. However, as UNESCO also highlighted in 2008, an increasing number of female

teachers has a positive effect on girls' educational environment and the availability of such. This is due to factors such as:

- in some conservative communities, parents will not allow their daughters to be taught by a male teacher;
- girls' academic success and school retention can both benefit from having more women in the classroom;
- women educators can advocate for girls at the school policy level by speaking out for their needs and viewpoints and encouraging additional learning that is geared toward girls;
- gender stereotypes are dismantled by female teachers, who offer girls new and diverse role models.

Regarding infrastructure, girls may be deterred from attending school by unsafe and inadequate physical school facilities, such as those that lack gender-segregated restrooms, changing areas, and access to clean drinking water. Both boys and girls are impacted by the lack of restrooms, especially those that are gender-segregated, although females are disproportionately affected due to their hygiene needs. Girls need access to sanitary products and restrooms for menstrual hygiene. Without such, girls frequently leave school due to the social stigma associated with menstruation and find it difficult to focus in class, among other reasons. For instance, according to the Guardian, girls from low-income homes in the United Kingdom frequently skip school due to their inability to pay for sanitary products and their refusal to request them.

POVERTY

According to the Global Education Monitoring report, in all regions except sub-Saharan Africa, children from rich families, whether boy or girl, will most likely attend all levels of basic education. However, girls from poor families in sub-Saharan Africa, Northern Africa, Western Asia, and Southern Asia are less likely than their male peers to attend school and this lack of participation increases at higher education levels.

The largest obstacle to girls from low-income families being able to attend school is the absence of free education, especially during their early years. This could occur because governments lack the legislative and policy frameworks necessary to make free education a reality, or they might exist but not be properly implemented, resourced, or subject to corruption that diverts funds from their intended purposes.

Governments have been trending toward cutting back on the amount of money they collect through taxes, which includes cutting back on spending on public services like education. Because women and girls are the most marginalized group in society and typically receive public services, the effects of these austerity measures have been disproportionately felt by them. The rise of private education providers is one of the effects of austerity and states' inability to successfully create, carry out, fund, and uphold free education legal and policy frameworks in accordance with their human rights obligations. This phenomenon is primarily seen in low- and middle-income countries, but it is also becoming more noticeable in high-income countries (see the UK, US, and Sweden, for example).

The privatization of education raises several human rights issues that could harm girls' education. For example, it could promote further divestment from public education, progressively weakening the system's ability to serve the most marginalized students, especially those with disabilities. Additionally, private education providers could indirectly discriminate against girls by charging fees that have a disproportionately negative impact on girls' participation in school because of parents who support boys' education.

Major Parties Involved

Africa: Gender disparities in human resources, opportunity, and voice and agency have steadily closed during the last few decades. Yet, the resiliency of gender norms has impeded growth overall, particularly in developing countries. However, there are regions of Africa - most notably South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa - where gender disparities are widening with respect to secondary school admission and labor force participation. In Sub-Saharan Africa, more teenage girls than ever before are enrolled in school, yet only 42% of them complete secondary education, a shockingly low ratio. Furthermore, for women who attend school, the benefits of their education are not reflected in the labor market, partly because girls leave school early because of social and cultural constraints. Data from Violence Against Children Surveys of 2019 has also found that between 15% and 51% of girls under the age of 18 experienced sexual violence in Malawi, Nigeria, Zambia and Uganda.

Asia and the Middle East: In Asia, initiatives aimed at providing girls with primary and even secondary education have been incredibly effective. Many nations have achieved nearly full primary coverage and notable increases in secondary school enrolment rates. Across the area, the proportion of women enrolled in secondary schools has skyrocketed, and

in many nations, the gender disparity in secondary school enrollment that once existed is slowly closing. Enrollment in secondary schools is almost equal for both sexes in South Korea, Thailand, and Hong Kong, while it continues to be significantly higher for women in the Philippines. In Afghanistan, the mass exclusion of girls from education means that 60% of girls are not in primary (compared to 46% of boys) and 74% of girls are not in lower-secondary school (compared to 50% of boys).

Latin America: Latin American educators and policymakers have long recognized the value of educating girls, especially in the area of literacy. Nonetheless, there is still a sizable gender gap in the region's literacy and educational levels. For instance, women in Guatemala only have a 64.2% literacy rate, compared to 99.8% in Uruguay. The regional average for females' gross enrollment in primary education, as reported by UNESCO, is 95.5%, although there are considerable national variations in this figure. For instance, Bolivia has a gross enrollment rate of just 73.8%. Girls outnumber boys in primary school, but when students advance to secondary school and beyond, the proportion of girls enrolling declines. Many people are still either compelled to drop out of school early or are not enrolled at all. "Latin America and the Caribbean is the only region where the number of girls not in school is increasing," according to UNESCO. There are numerous explanations for this disparity. Latin American girls frequently experience abuse and discrimination in their homes and schools, which causes them to drop out. Moreover, the customary duties that girls play in their homes.

Timeline of Events

1960 - UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960, Articles 1-4).

1966 - International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966, Articles 2 and 13; General Comments 13 and 16).

1966 - International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966, Articles 2, 3, 24, 25 and 26; General Comment 28).

1975 - The United Nations declared 1976-1985 the Decade for Women, which profoundly impacted raising awareness about gender inequalities, including those in education.

1976-1985 - Decade for Women declared by the UN. The period witnessed international conferences focusing on women, the first of which was in Mexico City in 1975, the second in Copenhagen in 1980, and the third in Nairobi in 1985.

1979 - Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979, Article 10; General Recommendations 19, 25, 28, 35, and 36)

1989 - Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989, Articles 2, 28, and 29; General Comment 1)

2003 - Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (2003, Article 12).

2004 - Arab Charter on Human Rights (2004, Article 41)

2007 - Recommendation on Gender Mainstreaming in Education

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979, CEDAW) adapts the fundamental education provision to include obligations to make efforts to keep girls in school and to organize 'programmes for girls and women who have left school prematurely' (Article 10 (f)). Programmes that allow girls to re-enter education are known as 're-entry programmes'. Successful examples of re-entry programmes include Zambia and Uganda.

Possible Solutions and Approaches

Political will is needed to ignite organizational structures that permit gender equality in the workplace, which can then inspire girls to pursue further education and careers in disciplines that have historically been dominated by men. Projects centered on teacher preparation and education in schools should be clearer about the milestones for progress toward closing the gender gap in their production, outcome, and impact metrics. In order to prevent child marriage, states must establish and enforce a minimum age of marriage of 18.

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