



The Gender Tool Box gathers knowledge material and method support on gender equality in the form of Tools, Briefs and Thematic Overviews.

Gender equality is achieved when women and men, girls and boys, have equal rights, life prospects and opportunities, and the power to shape their own lives and contribute to society.

[BRIEF]

Gender and Educational attainment

Gender often influences whether or not children attend or remain in school. Across the world, girls are more likely than boys to be out of school, and the poorest girls/women from the most disadvantaged rural areas tend to have the lowest educational attainment levels. The reasons why girls are more likely than boys to be out of school relate to social power structures and socially-constructed norms that define the roles that boys/men and girls/women should play. These gender roles affect their rights, responsibilities, opportunities and capabilities, including their access to and treatment in school. While educational exclusion based on gender disproportionately affects girls/women, it also affects boys/men. This brief provides an overview of the relationship between gender and educational attainment and suggests ways of mainstreaming gender to improve school access and retention.¹

In today's complex globalised environment, a secondary education is widely regarded as the minimum level required for securing and maintaining productive employment, which is the main route for escaping poverty and contributing meaningfully to the economy and society. A failure to complete secondary education can affect individuals' long-term capabilities and earnings potential. This is especially the case for girls/women, who receive

the greatest returns to their schooling investment from secondary education.² Yet, mainly because of gendered perceptions of adolescent girls' roles and responsibilities, in most developing countries girls' enrolment rates fall when they reach lower secondary school age and then decline further when they reach upper secondary school age.³ Moreover, many children never enter school or leave without acquiring basic skills, such as reading, writing and simple arithmetic.⁴

GENDERED CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF LOW EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

The main gendered barriers that children and young people in developing countries face in accessing or remaining in education stem from issues, practices and policies at individual/household, school/community and policy/system level, including:

- *Individual/household level:* poverty; low perceived value of girls' education; gendered traditional practices; early marriage; early pregnancy; lack of parental support for education; death or illness of parents; and lack of interest in school (which is linked to other factors).
- *School/community level:* high cost of schooling/corruption; lack of a nearby school; school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV); inadequate school facilities for girls/women; unequal learning environments; and lack of female teachers and other powerful female role models.
- *Policy/system level:* inadequate or weakly enforced policies on access to school for pregnant girls/young mothers; inadequate or weakly enforced legislation on school-related gender-based violence; and inadequate or weakly enforced legislation on harmful traditional practices.

¹ This brief is based on the findings of two Sida policy papers, titled "Gender perspectives on causes and effects of school dropouts from primary and secondary education in developing countries" and "Mainstreaming gender to improve school access and retention in developing countries", both written by Gita Subrahmanyam (2016)

² Psacharopoulos, George and Patrinos, Harry: Returns to investment in education: A further update, *Education Economics*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2004)

³ Findings based on an analysis of UIS data

⁴ UIS and UNICEF: *Fixing the Broken Promise of Education for All – Findings from the Global Initiative on Out-of-School Children* (2015)

The ways in which gender relates to educational exclusion are complex, and affect males and females differently. For example, when poverty forces children out of school, boys are often sent to work, while girls are kept at home to help with domestic chores. In some cases, young people's gendered perceptions of their own roles and responsibilities may lead them to regard school as unmasculine or irrelevant. In some cases, the intersectionality between sex and other factors collectively determine gender norms and expectations and lead to educational exclusion. For example, poverty and lack of lucrative employment opportunities for women may cause some families to prioritise boys' education over girls'. Similarly, gendered traditional practices – such as rites of passage or female genital mutilation – may take place during the school term and prevent boys or girls from going to school. In many countries, rural girls are more affected by the lack of a nearby school than rural boys or urban students, because of concerns for girls' safety while travelling to school.

In terms of impacts, research suggests that low educational attainment can lead to the entrenchment of unequal power structures as well as discriminatory gender norms and attitudes at individual or household level, which may then be replicated and perpetuated at community level through unequal practices within schools and unequal opportunities in the workplace. Breaking the cycle of gender inequality and its detrimental impacts requires ending state patriarchy and overturning unequal power relations at governmental level. Yet women's subordinate position in society and low educational levels relative to men's block their equal representation in key decision-making fora, which in turn prevents gender-equalising reforms from being implemented – thus preserving the status quo.

KEY INTERVENTIONS FOR IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

To overcome these issues and make faster progress in achieving development goals, developing countries need to put in place policies that simultaneously improve educational access and retention while reducing gender inequality. To do this, they need to implement measures that address the root causes of exclusion by:

- engendering a more even gender balance of power at each level of aggregation (individual/household, school/community, and policy/system level);
 - challenging commonly-held norms and perceptions regarding females and/or males, including their roles and responsibilities;
 - ending harmful traditional practices;
 - strengthening the rights of and/or improving opportunities for groups that are disadvantaged based on gender;
 - improving the capabilities, status and/or conditions of groups that are disadvantaged based on gender;
 - providing an alternative and empowered vision of women's role in society; and/or
 - overcoming the opportunity cost of education for the poor.
- These are key to substantive change and for progress to be sustained in the longer term.
- In addition, to have the greatest impact on the greatest number of out-of-school children and youth, policies should be tightly targeted to the groups most in need of support. This means gaining a better understanding of the intersectionality between sex and other factors, which together determine gender norms and attitudes and can lead to exclusion from school. The level of aggregation at which interventions take place may also differ, and in some cases multiple coordinated efforts at different levels of aggregation may be required to achieve an intended outcome.
- Examples of interventions that have been implemented in developing countries to overcome the main gendered causes of educational exclusion include:
- 1) *Legal measures*: compulsory education laws, child labour laws, laws preventing SRGBV, laws prohibiting child marriage or setting a legal minimum age for marriage, and laws allowing pregnant girls and young mothers to continue their education.
 - 2) *Financial measures*: stipends/conditional cash transfers tied to education, tuition-free education, free bicycle schemes for rural students, school feeding, and subsidised childcare.
 - 3) *Flexible school schedules*: that target children and young people (including mothers and fathers) who work or have family commitments.
 - 4) *Sensitisation campaigns*: programmes for raising awareness of the benefits of educating girls and/or the detrimental impacts of gendered traditional practices or SRGBV.
 - 5) *Equal opportunities policies*: policies to improve the gender balance in schools, increase the number of women in school management positions, improve women's access to well-paid jobs, or introduce political gender quotas.
 - 6) *Empowerment programmes*: offering training to build individuals' capacity to recognise and uphold their rights, including their right to education, or providing sexual education, access to contraception and/or youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services in schools.
 - 7) *Governance and accountability mechanisms*: establishing and enforcing codes of conduct for school staff, collecting and disseminating information on educational quality and equality, involving students, parents and community leaders in school management committees, and creating a safe environment for students to report harmful, unfair or corrupt practices.

- 8) *Capacity-building schemes*: equipping teachers and school managers with the knowledge, skills and capacity to exercise control over school resources, respond to the learning needs of girls as well as boys, use positive and non-violent forms of discipline, and recognise sexual harassment and abuse of power.
- 9) *Infrastructural investments*: school construction programmes, transportation investments, and upgrading the school infrastructure and learning materials to make them more gender-sensitive and gender-responsive.

FAWE gender-responsive schools in Africa¹

The Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), a pan-African non-government organisation, has published a handbook on gender responsive pedagogy for creating more equal learning environments. The FAWE model is based on a 'whole school' approach and is the product of a series of consultations, discussions, research and workshops on gender. The handbook covers: gender issues in teaching and learning; gender equality in the governance and operations of schools, including the school infrastructure; promoting the participation of girls in science, mathematics and technology subjects; tracking student and staff performance and welfare; bursaries for underprivileged girls; empowerment training for girls and boys; and community involvement in school management.

FAWE Centres of Excellence boast impressive results in improving gender equality as well as educational attainment. For example, implementation of the FAWE model in Gisozi, Rwanda is reported to have resulted in: 100% improvement in girls' enrolment rates; 99% improvement in girls' retention rates; 100% improvement in girls' completion rates; 93% improvement in end-of-year school exam scores; and 99% reduction in sexual harassment and pregnancies.²

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

- 1) *Legal measures*: by themselves may not lead to greater gender equality or improved educational access and retention, as they may be resisted by families and communities owing to financial exigencies and/or deeply entrenched gender norms. Therefore, legislation should be paired with sensitisation campaigns to raise awareness and help communities to challenge their gender perceptions and practices. Making communities the agents of change can also reduce the costs of enforcing legislation and lead to more sustainable outcomes.
- 2) *Financial measures*: can be effective in improving school access and retention, especially if programme benefits cover the direct, indirect and opportunity costs of education for poor families. However, financial measures will not by themselves alter gender norms, attitudes and practices. They also will not raise school quality or improve the opportunities available to girls/women at the end of school. Therefore, financial measures should be complemented by policies that raise awareness of gender issues, improve school quality and relevance, and/or enhance the opportunities available to girls/women after school completion.
- 3) *Flexible school schedules*: can improve school access and retention by allowing boys/men and girls/women to fit school around their work and domestic commitments. However, flexible schooling arrangements accommodate rather than challenge gender norms, attitudes and practices.
- 4) *Sensitisation campaigns*: constitute a powerful but low-cost means of challenging gender norms, attitudes and practices and can be effective in improving school access and retention. Ensuring that sensitisation campaigns target groups at more than one level of aggregation (household, community/school and state) could ensure that gains made are preserved over time. However, not all groups will be amenable to participating in these campaigns; hence, the recommended action is to work with groups that are willing to participate to build the momentum for wider change at a later stage.
- 5) *Equal opportunities policies*: can improve girls' school access, retention and performance by providing girls with positive role models and challenging gender norms and attitudes. They can also raise social perceptions regarding women's capabilities, particularly if the women given these opportunities perform well in their new role. Moreover, equal opportunities policies that result in women being able to accumulate economic assets can protect women from domestic violence and improve their bargaining power in the home, which in turn could permanently alter household power structures.
- 6) *Empowerment programmes*: can lower the incidence of harmful gendered practices, such as child marriage and SRGBV, and thereby improve school access and retention. Engaging community leaders and other key stakeholders as gatekeepers of these programmes can significantly increase their positive impacts and lead to more rapid and sustainable progress. To have a substantial and sustainable impact in challenging gender norms and assumptions, empowerment programmes should target both weak and powerful groups (for example, girls as well as boys, and teachers as well as students).
- 7) *Governance and accountability mechanisms*: establishing and enforcing codes of conduct in schools can improve school access and retention by reducing school-based corruption and gender-based violence in schools. Collecting and disseminating information on staff conduct and educational provision can improve transparency and thereby strengthen accountability. Involving students in developing and enforcing codes of conduct in schools can improve staff compliance, since students gain knowledge of their rights. Involving parents and

¹ FAWE: *Gender Responsive Pedagogy: A Teacher's Handbook* (2005)

² <http://fawe.org/activities/interventions/GOEs/rwanda/index.php>

community leaders in school governance structures can further strengthen accountability and, through communicating expected standards of behaviour, have positive spillover effects on gender norms and practices in households.

- 8) *Capacity-building schemes*: can increase school access and retention by lowering propensities for school-based corruption and violence and improve gender equality in educational outcomes. However, in some cases, sensitisation measures may be needed prior to offering capacity-building to convince school staff of the need for change.
- 9) *Infrastructural investments*: that reduce the time and/or distance that it takes to get to school have been shown to increase school enrolments as well as secure greater gender parity in enrolments. However, the specific mechanisms by which this takes place are not clear.

Tostan Community Empowerment Programme¹

Tostan, an international NGO based in Senegal, runs a non-formal education programme in rural villages, providing basic training in hygiene, problem solving, women's health and human rights, as well as the detrimental effects of harmful traditional practices, such as child marriage and female genital mutilation and cutting (FGM/C). Programme participants – mainly women, but also village leaders – are encouraged to pass on their new knowledge to others, both inside and outside the community, through inter-village meetings. By placing women in positions of power as authority figures dispensing knowledge, the programme has had a positive impact on both educational attainment and gender equality. In the communities where the programme has been run, girls' school enrolments have risen, either because of role model effects or improved perceptions of the benefits of educating girls. Women's economic engagement and decision-making power in their household and community have also increased. The programme has also led to declarations against child marriage and FGM/C in more than 300 villages, with evidence that the villages have actually abandoned the practices.

ENTRY POINTS FOR SIDA

The main message of this brief is that measures aimed at overcoming the gendered barriers to educational access and retention should:

- address the root (that is, gendered) causes of educational exclusion or dropout; and

- produce the greatest benefits for the greatest number of out-of-school children and youth.

After all, the end goal is to achieve the greatest impact in reaching educational goals and ensure that progress is sustained.

To achieve these aims, measures should:

- tightly target the groups most at risk of being out of school based on gender, as well as the specific issues contributing to their exclusion;
- involve families, community leaders, school staff, boys/men and girls/women in the design and implementation of policies/programmes;
- seek to effect change at different levels of aggregation to more firmly embed progress;
- focus on educational quality and effectiveness, not just enrolments and completion; and
- link education to other areas (for example, health, human rights and social protection) to address cross-cutting issues.

In line with these aims, evaluations of policies and programmes should:

- report impacts separately for males versus females;
- take into account and reflect the intersectionality of identities that individuals possess, which shapes gender – most importantly, sex, wealth and location; and
- assess the gender impacts of measures on groups at different levels of aggregation.

FURTHER READING

Subrahmanyam, Gita (2016) *Gender perspectives on causes and effects of school dropouts in developing countries* (Stockholm: Sida).

Subrahmanyam, Gita (2016) *Mainstreaming gender to improve school access and retention in developing countries* (Stockholm: Sida).

Stromquist, Nelly (2014) *Out-of-school children: Why gender matters*, Background paper prepared for *Fixing the Broken Promise of Education for All: Findings from the Global Initiative on Out-of-School Children* (Montreal: UIS).

UIS and UNICEF (2015) *Fixing the Broken Promise of Education for All: Findings from the Global Initiative on Out-of-School Children*.

UNESCO (2016) *Gender Review – Creating Sustainable Futures for All: EFA Global Monitoring Report* (Paris: UNESCO).

World Bank (2012) *World Development Report 2012: Gender equality and development*.

¹ Population Council *Evaluation of the Long-term Impact of the TOSTAN Programme on the Abandonment of FGM/C and Early Marriage* (2008)