

Press Release

UNESCO report illustrates leap forward in girls' education over past 25 years, now threatened by Covid-19

Paris, 9 October—A UNESCO report released on the occasion of the International Day of the Girl Child (11 October) shows that 180 million more girls have enrolled in primary and secondary education since 1995. However, despite an increase across all levels of education, girls are still more likely to suffer exclusion than boys, and this is further exacerbated by the current pandemic. It therefore remains vital for governments to tackle persisting discrimination to achieve equality for the next generation of girls, argues the Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report, *A New Generation: 25 years of efforts for gender equality in education*.

“We all know that education is the cornerstone of equality – and the education of girls and women is the first step towards a more gender-equal world. Though we are happy to report the progress achieved in girls’ and women’s education through the continued efforts of the international community, this publication also shows we are still failing the most disadvantaged: three-quarters of all primary-age children who may never set foot in school are girls,” said UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay. “At this critical moment, with COVID-19 exacerbating gender inequalities, we must renew our commitment to educating girls and women. Progress in this field echoes through generations – as do reversals of this progress.”

The report calls for action in the following areas:

1. **Eliminate gender disparity in education access, participation and completion.** There are fewer than 9 females enrolled for every 10 males in 4% of countries in primary school, 9% in lower secondary, 15% in upper secondary and 21% in tertiary education.
2. **All pregnant girls and young parents must be supported to go to school.** Despite the global decline, early pregnancy rates remain high in sub-Saharan Africa. In Chad, Mali and Niger rates are higher than in 1995. Active bans still prevent pregnant girls from going to school in Equatorial Guinea and the United Republic of Tanzania.
3. **All teachers, school and career counsellors must have training** to prevent negative gender stereotypes spilling over into teaching and students’ subject choices. Globally, the percentage of females studying engineering or ICT is below 25% in over two-thirds of countries. The share of women in technical and vocational education (TVET) declined from 45% in 1995 to 42% in 2018. Few women pursue careers in ICT.
4. **All curriculum and textbooks must represent females** in a way that does not perpetuate gender stereotypes. Textbook reviews in many countries found that text and images do not portray women in active social and economic positions but in traditional home-bound roles.
5. **All students must have access to comprehensive sexuality education** which has been shown to prevent school-related gender-based violence by promoting understanding and respect of students’ gender identities. It also leads to a reduction of the prevalence of early pregnancies.

6. **Encourage more women in leadership positions**, to help change social and gender norms – and act as role models for female students. The report finds that negative stereotyping of women as unsuited to be leaders are reinforced by a scarcity of female teachers in higher education. Globally, women make up 94% of teachers in pre-primary but only 43% in tertiary education. Even fewer women hold leadership positions in universities and in education administration.

The new publication by the GEM Report takes stock of progress in girls' education over the last two and a half decades since the [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#), a landmark commitment by 189 countries to advance the rights of girls and women. Since 1995, the global enrolment rate for girls increased from 73% to 89%, with the biggest improvements seen in sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia and especially in India. Significant progress has been made in primary education enrolment in 23 countries including Bhutan, Djibouti and Nepal, where gender parity has been achieved compared to 1995 when fewer than 80 girls for every 100 boys attended school.

Three times more women are also now enrolled in universities than two decades ago, with particular progress seen in Northern Africa and Western Asia. In Morocco, parity was achieved in 2018, compared to just 3 women enrolled for every 10 men in the early 1990s.

Despite encouraging progress, gender still plays a significant role in enrolment in many countries. In Chad, Guinea-Bissau and Yemen, fewer than 80 girls for every 100 boys completed primary school and boys are more than twice as likely to complete secondary school as girls. Large gender disparities persist particularly for disadvantaged learners. In at least 20 countries, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa but also in Belize, Haiti, Pakistan and Papua New Guinea, hardly any poor rural young women have completed upper secondary school.

The legacy of past discrimination is such that women still account for almost two-thirds of illiterate adults. Many also face additional barriers, such as poverty and disability. In 59 countries, women aged 15-49 from the poorest households are four times more likely to be unable to read and write than those from the richest households.

Manos Antoninis, Director of UNESCO's GEM Report stated: **“Twenty-five years since the historic Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, girls still face barriers that keep them away from school and realising their potential.** Education is the springboard for achieving the six Action Coalitions at the Generation Equality Forum planned for 2021, where the next iteration of the Beijing Declaration will be produced. It makes the timing of this Report particularly critical.”

Hon Dr David Moinina Sengeh, Minister of Basic and Senior Secondary Education in Sierra Leone and newly appointed Chair of the Advisory Board for the GEM Report, added: “Since the Beijing Declaration in 1995, progress towards gender equality in education has been strong but uneven. Governments need to be fully committed and societies' full attention is also needed to stop education exclusion from holding girls and women back. This GEM 2020 Gender Report shows that the fulfilment of women's rights is intrinsically linked to their education opportunities. Its recommendations must be put into action by all stakeholders to achieve full equality for the next generation.”

The GEM Report has launched a campaign called **#Iamthe1stGirl**. This campaign aims to show the world what happens when governments invest in girls' education. It aims to share the positive contribution to society by millions of women who are the first in their family to finish secondary school or university.

Notes to editors

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Please click here to access the full [report](#)

Virtual Launch Event: A high-level discussion co-hosted by the Government of France, Plan International and UNESCO will be held on **Monday 12 October 2020 from 15:00 – 16:30 AM CEST.**

The virtual event will feature an in-depth discussion between female leaders, young women and girls - whose lives have been transformed by gains in education made over the past 25 years - and Ministers of Education from Finland and Senegal and Audrey Azoulay, Director-General, UNESCO.

[Click here](#) for more information and to register

Beijing+25: Generation Equality begins with adolescent girls' education is a second joint publication released today and produced by the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Plan International France and UNESCO. It provides recommendations to fast-track investments and action on adolescent girls' education during the Generation Equality Forum, and the related Action Coalitions aiming to accelerate progress for gender equality, focusing on three 'levers of action': comprehensive sexuality education, involvement of adolescent girls in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, and the development of adolescent girls' leadership.