



LET GIRLS LEARN!



Save the Children

Save the Children exists to help every child reach their potential.

In more than 100 countries, we help children stay safe, healthy and keep learning. We lead the way on tackling big problems like pneumonia, hunger and protecting children in war, while making sure each child's unique needs are cared for.

We know we can't do this alone. Together with children, partners and supporters, we work to help every child become whoever they want to be.

Let Girls Learn! sets out Save the Children's global policy position on girls' education and realising gender equality in and through education. It provides governments with suggestions, recommendations and data that can assist in the design of education policy and programmes to enable all children, regardless of their gender, to receive a good-quality education and to be empowered equally in and through education. This policy brief can also assist international and national civil society organisations and others in this way.

This policy brief is based on Save the Children's global theory of change for girls' education, set out in our Girls' Education Technical Package, which draws on evidence from our experience delivering education programmes with positive and transformative outcomes for girls. This package, which is available to Save the Children staff and partners, constitutes a comprehensive set of guidance on girls' education programming and advocacy.

A NOTE ON THE TERM 'GIRLS'

This briefing uses the term 'girl' throughout to include children under 18 years who identify as girls and those who were assigned female sex at birth. The data this briefing draws on is based on sex rather than gender disaggregation, so the terms 'girl' and 'boy' usually refer to children's sex, without knowledge of their gender identity, due to a lack of gender-disaggregated data and of data on intersex children and adults globally. The focus and terminology used is not intended to exclude or deny those experiences, but to contribute to understanding of gender inequality among children, through examining patterns and experiences based on sex and gender.

Acknowledgements

This paper was written by Anya Cowley. Special thanks to colleagues Smita Baruah and Emily Echessa for their support in drafting it.

This paper reflects the inputs and feedback of expert reviewers from across Save the Children country, regional and member offices, for which we are grateful.

We also acknowledge the strength of the girls featured in this report who have shared their experiences and given us permission to use their images.

Some names in this report have been changed to protect identities.

Published by
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First published 2021

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Cover photo: Elina, age 11, from Mozambique. Her home was destroyed by Cyclone Kenneth in 2019. In the aftermath of the cyclone, Elina attended a child-friendly space set up by the Ibo Foundation and Save the Children. (photo: Oskar Kollberg/Save the Children)

Typeset by Grasshopper Design Company

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Summary recommendations to realise girls' learning and empowerment

Governments, civil society and school communities – including children, parents, teachers, education staff and school management – must support efforts to:

Make teaching and learning gender-transformative

- Improve the recruitment, retention, and attendance of qualified and gender-sensitive female and male teachers, and promote gender-transformative, inclusive pedagogy through professional development of teachers.
- Ensure curricula and learning materials promote gender equality where possible.
- Create safe spaces for girls to have positive discussions about gender with female role models.

Establish girl-friendly, safe, inclusive, healthy and empowering learning environments

- Improve the learning environment by implementing gender-transformative whole-school improvement processes with girls, teachers and the wider community, and strengthen girl-friendly school facilities.
- Improve school-related gender-based violence prevention, reporting and response through gender-responsive school codes of conduct.
- Endorse and implement the Safe Schools Declaration so that all students and teachers, male and female, can learn and teach in safety.



Isra'a at a learning centre in Sharkia governorate, Egypt

Strengthen community support for girls' learning and empowerment

- Strengthen meaningful community participation in school management committees and conduct community outreach, including with men and boys, to promote girls' educational inclusion and challenge gender norms and stereotypes.
- Remove financial barriers to girls' education – for instance, by providing cash transfers/ vouchers, bursaries, livelihood support at household level, or access to child-sensitive social protection systems.
- Support female leadership within the school and community so that girls encounter strong female leaders and role models, disrupting gender stereotypes and norms.

Strengthen gender-transformative education policies and systems

- Develop and implement gender-transformative education sector plans and humanitarian education strategies and response plans, and ensure girls are able to participate meaningfully in these processes.

- Provide more and better financing for girls' education, including through multilateral channels such as Education Cannot Wait and the Global Partnership for Education. Governments should seek to spend at least 15–20% of total public expenditure on education, with targeted increases to support the most marginalised girls.
- Strengthen investments in gender-sensitive child protection systems and mechanisms in and around schools, ensuring teachers are trained in stress management and wellbeing of children and can identify and refer children with protection needs, including girls, to specialised services. This would also enable child protection and gender-based violence systems to connect and complement good-quality support for girls with protection needs, including adolescent girls.
- Ensure every girl receives gender-transformative, green learning as a key climate change strategy as part of Nationally Determined Contributions and national policies on climate change.
- Use and generate evidence of effective girls' education interventions to inform policy change, and invest in research, monitoring and evaluation.

“I remember the sound of guns and weapons. I was so scared I wanted to be at home and not outside. I saw some of the armed groups' bombs. We couldn't go to school because we were so scared of how we would get home. What if something happened to us on the way?”

Roqia, age 12, was forced to flee Pakistan in 2016 because of conflict. She's now living in Afghanistan.

Girls are still left behind

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015 by UN Member States, committed to achieving gender equality by 2030 and supporting all women and girls to be empowered. Achieving all 17 SDGs is key to realising gender equality and the SDGs will not be achieved without gender equality. As part of SDG 4 – to ensure inclusive and equitable good-quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all – countries committed to eliminating gender disparities in education and ensuring equal access to all levels of education.

More than 130 million children have gained access to school since governments signed the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995. Of those children, 60% were girls.¹ The Generation Equality process will provide continued impetus towards implementation of the Beijing Declaration

and Platform for Action. Led by UN Women, France and Mexico, the process is mobilising governments, civil society and the private sector to make gender equality a lived reality for marginalised girls, including a commitment to mainstream education as a theme across its emerging framework for action.

STOLEN FUTURES: HOW GIRLS MISS OUT ON EDUCATION

- Prior to the pandemic, 132 million girls were out of school, comprising 34.3 million girls of primary school age, 30 million of lower-secondary age, and 67.4 million of upper-secondary age. In only two-thirds of countries are girls as likely as boys to be in primary school. At the secondary level, inequalities increase dramatically as girls fail to transition; less than half of countries have achieved gender parity in lower secondary enrolment, dropping to just a quarter in upper secondary.²
- Globally, girls and young women account for 59% of the young people who are illiterate. Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, and South Asia have the widest gender literacy gaps. In Chad, for every 100 literate young men, there are only 55 literate young women.³
- In low-income countries, for every 100 young men completing secondary school, only 69 young women do the same. In a study of 20 countries, fewer than 1% of poor rural women had completed secondary school.⁴ In Nigeria, only 4% of poor young women in the North West zone can read, compared with 99% of rich young women in the South East.⁵
- COVID-19 threatens to reverse gains made in girls' education: 11 million girls are at risk of never returning to school, with damaging potential impact on their health, protection, and wellbeing.⁶
- In countries affected by conflict, adolescent girls are 90% more likely to be out of school than girls in stable contexts.⁷

However, even before schools were forced to close in response to COVID-19, the number of out-of-school girls had begun to rise.⁸ While girls in school are, on average, getting better grades than boys in selected subjects, girls continue to face gender-based barriers to learning and completing good-quality education.⁹

Being out of school has also had a significant impact on the protection and wellbeing of children, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation, violence, abuse and neglect.¹⁰ As this paper sets out, for girls, this includes the risk of early child marriage, harmful work, recruitment and use by armed actors, violence in the home, and psychological distress.

COVID-19 THREATENS TO REVERSE GAINS MADE FOR GIRLS

COVID-19 threatens to erase the progress made for girls' education over the past 25 years.¹¹ School closures caused 90% of the total population of students to miss out on education, including 743 million girls.¹²

Girls are at disproportionate risk of dropping out, which is both a result and cause of increased risk of sexual exploitation, adolescent pregnancy, and child, early and forced marriage, increasing gender gaps in education. In 2020 alone, the economic impacts of the pandemic were predicted to lead to an additional 2.5 million girls at risk of child marriage and 1 million more adolescent pregnancies.¹³ In a Save the Children study of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), parents reported that girls have been married or become impregnated during the lockdown, affecting their chances of returning to school.¹⁴ Travel restrictions and the diversion of resources to tackle the pandemic have made essential health, child protection and mental health services for girls more difficult to access, and have meant it has been physically hard to reach girls and their communities, particularly in rural areas. Programmes such as girls' clubs and support networks have stopped, meaning girls cannot access the support they need.

Girls are also at greater risk of learning loss during school closures. In a large global survey

of Save the Children programme participants, more than half of girls reported an increase in household chores and increased caregiving responsibilities, which stopped them from being able to study.¹⁵ Save the Children studies in DRC and Mozambique found that girls were more likely than boys to engage in household work during the lockdown.¹⁶ Another study found that nearly one-third of caregivers reported that girls had not engaged in any learning retention activities since schools closed, and the vast majority did not have access to informal teaching or tutoring.¹⁷

Learning inequalities are also exacerbated by the gender digital divide. Studies found that boys use computers, phones, radio and the internet at home more frequently than girls. For instance, a Save the Children study from Mozambique found that, compared with boys, girls were less likely to have access to mobile phones or radio programmes for learning during school closures.¹⁸ Refugee and internally displaced girls are even less likely to have access to digital technology. Refugees and internally displaced people are half as likely as the general population to have internet-enabled phones, and 29% of refugees have no phone at all.¹⁹ Gender norms that limit girls' use of digital technologies may widen this gap further for girls.



PHOTO: TEAM MIRABREHA/SAVE THE CHILDREN

“As the schools were closed and I was staying at home, my parents told me I was going to get married soon. I became very scared. I did nothing but cry day and night.”

Arsema, 14, Ethiopia, narrowly escaped early marriage. She is one of 26 million children whose schools have closed in Ethiopia because of the coronavirus pandemic. The prolonged school closures have left many girls at heightened risk of early marriage.

Arsema’s older brother alerted the school principal of the risk to Arsema, and the principal in turn informed Save the Children’s child-safeguarding focal point. The marriage was cancelled. Arsema’s parents were given information about the risks of early and forced marriage.

“I couldn’t be happier,” said Arsema. “Now I can study hard and become a doctor.”

The intersecting barriers to girls learning

While girls in school are, on average, getting better grades than boys, girls continue to face gender-based barriers to learning and completing a good-quality education. Gender interacts with other disadvantages to exacerbate learning inequalities. Girls who face multiple disadvantages – such as low family-income, living in a rural or underserved location, disability, being a refugee or internally displaced, and belonging to a minority ethno-linguistic or religious group – are furthest behind.

Gender gaps in parents' and children's aspirations for education and livelihoods commonly appear between middle childhood and early adolescence, following societal expectations of women's role in domestic work as mothers and spouses. Gender and social norms may lead low-income households to prioritise boys' education over girls', as it is more likely to lead to formal work opportunities and higher income. Young men are almost twice as likely as young women to have completed the school-to-work transition.²⁰

In turn, education systems may reinforce these norms rather than teaching gender equality and supporting girls to be empowered. Gender norms may also result in discrimination in school, particularly where there is a lack of female teachers and role models to help disrupt gender stereotypes and norms, and a lack of male teachers who are adequately trained in tackling gender discrimination. Teachers may also influence their students' choice of subject, contributing to girls' under-representation in careers in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), which help drive innovation, social wellbeing, inclusive growth and sustainable development.

Violence against girls in school is widely reported, including sexual exploitation for grades. In Uganda one in 20 girls was found to have experienced sexual abuse in school. In a study of ten countries, nearly 400,000 girls reported sexual abuse in school in the last 12 months.²¹ Burkina Faso has now passed laws against a person employed in the education system having sex with a child, with additional penalties if a girl becomes pregnant as a result.²² The risk of gender-based violence on the way to

school means the distance from home to school can have a significant impact on girls' attendance. In Afghanistan, every extra mile of travel required for a girl to reach school results on average in a 19% decrease in attendance for girls, compared with 13% for boys.²³ Save the Children is a member of the UN Girls Education Initiative School-Related Gender-Based Violence Group that supports ministries of education to develop and implement gender-transformative education sector plans that better address gender-based violence prevention and response.

Even when there is a school nearby, a lack of basic amenities can be a barrier for girls to continue to attend. Schools without basic amenities, such as sex-segregated latrines, a clean water supply and play areas, negatively impact girls' learning experience. A lack of girl-friendly facilities may lead parents to withdraw their daughters from school when they reach adolescence. A lack of period management products and information may also prevent girls from attending school consistently.

Girls with disabilities face additional barriers to learning, including misconceptions and stigma around disability; inaccessible transport and school facilities; increased risk of sexual violence, exploitation and abuse; and limited inclusive measures and learning materials. Globally, 90% of children with disabilities were not in school prior to the pandemic.²⁴ Girls with disabilities are almost 9% less likely to complete primary school than boys with disabilities.²⁵ While the overall literacy rate for adults with disabilities is 3%, for women with disabilities it is just 1%.²⁶

Even when girls can learn at school, the impact of the inequality they face at key phases of their lives, such as adolescence, often means that their education does not translate into careers and independence later in life. Expectations and norms about what societal roles are appropriate for adolescent girls limit their educational opportunities as well as their access to secure and productive

livelihoods.²⁷ Adolescent girls face barriers, including pressure to marry and other forms of gender-based violence, increasing the risk of school drop-out. In sub-Saharan Africa, marrying at age 16 reduces the likelihood of completing secondary education by 7.8 percentage points.²⁸ This subsequently limits girls' ability to develop foundational and transferable skills.

PHOTO: NOUR WHID/SAVE THE CHILDREN



“I love to learn. My sister helps me hold the pen and write my homework. She also tests my maths knowledge.”

Nada, age 15, from Lebanon, has physical and mental disabilities. She was turned away from three different schools before finally getting accepted. She then had to work hard to catch up on years of lost education. But she's managed to more than make up the ground and now excels in school.

Asked how she would react if anyone tried to stop her from going to school, Nada says, “I would never accept it, because I want to keep learning.”

Girls affected by conflict and crisis

Conflict, insecurity and disaster have a disproportionate impact on girls' access to education and a safe environment for learning. However, the specific needs of girls, including adolescent girls, are often not considered in humanitarian responses that are orientated towards child protection or adult services. Prior to the pandemic, nearly one-third of out-of-school children – an estimated 104 million – lived in countries affected by emergencies.²⁹ Girls affected by conflict and forced displacement are more than twice as likely to be out of school than boys.³⁰ In at least 21 countries between 2015 and 2019, girls were directly targeted or more exposed to risks such as attacks in and around schools because of their gender. The risks girls faced include sexual violence, violent repression of their education, recruitment and use by armed forces or groups, abduction, and forced marriage.³¹

Violent conflict and displacement can erode girls' access to protection they receive through their families, peer groups and communities. These social networks may control girls' access to economic, social and political resources. They may also seek to reduce girls' exposure to child protection risks, such as recruitment into armed groups and child labour, which can in turn reduce girls' access to education and ultimately their educational outcomes. Save the Children research from the DRC showed that being active in village-based groups led to higher school enrolment and retention rates for girls, with greater benefits for poor households. Household membership in a women's group increased the probability of a child being enrolled in primary school by 4.1 percentage points. Among the poorest households, 100% of children from households with savings group membership were enrolled in school.³²

During conflict, disasters and their aftermath, girls are at higher risk of sexual and other forms of gender-based violence, including child, early and forced marriage. The UN Secretary-General's 2019 report on children and armed conflict identified 933 cases of sexual violence, of which 87% were committed against girls; however, the true number is likely to be higher.³³ Sexual violence continues to be used as part of a broader strategy of conflict, with women and girls predominantly targeted and affected. Climate change is set to intensify this threat.

Climate change exacerbates gender inequalities. The most marginalised populations are often disproportionately affected by climate change, with women and girls facing the greatest impact.³⁴ Gender stereotypes and norms that expect girls to perform unpaid domestic labour mean that, in climate-induced disasters, girls are the first to be taken out of school to support with household and caring duties and are at increased risk of early marriage due to the economic impact of climate-related shocks on households. The World Bank suggests that more than 143 million people could be internally displaced by 2050 in just three regions due to the slow-onset impact of climate change.³⁵ Without stronger education and protection systems, including social protection, climate change is likely to significantly increase the barriers to girls' learning.

As co-lead of the Global Education Cluster and Child Protection Sub-Cluster, Save the Children is well-placed to support governments and partners to ensure education in emergencies responses identify and respond to the needs of girls. This involves, for instance, advocating for and supporting coordination of gender-disaggregated data in needs assessments and reporting; promoting recruitment, retention, and support for female teachers; and addressing child protection risks, including gender-based violence in and around educational facilities in cluster strategies and national response plans.

Gender equality begins with girls' education

Principally, education is a girls' fundamental right, recognised since the UN Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of Children and the UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Education is also one of the most important investments in human development as it contributes to improved health and nutrition outcomes in women and children, to economic growth, and to girls' political and individual empowerment. Good-quality education can enable girls to develop a range of capabilities, such as literacy and numeracy, critical thinking, and communication and cooperation skills; and by transforming unequal power relations and discriminatory norms, it can support girls to be empowered. This lays the foundations for girls to obtain secure and productive livelihood opportunities of their choice, economic independence, agency, and beneficial social relationships later in life.

For girls, schools can serve as a protective factor against adolescent pregnancy, as well as child marriage and other forms of violence, including gender-based violence, through their proximity to trusted adults, access to formal and informal child protection systems, increased interaction with peers and improved knowledge of rights. Frequently girls access menstrual hygiene products and information through school, enabling them to manage their periods and improve their attendance. Comprehensive sexuality education is crucial to help protect girls against unwanted pregnancy and violence, make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health rights, and support them to enjoy healthy and fulfilling relationships.

Education is also key to breaking down barriers to women and girls' political participation and leadership. A gender-transformative education

equips girls with the knowledge and skills they need to develop their agency; build and participate in movements that drive progress for social justice, gender justice and climate action; and realise their potential as feminist leaders. From Black Lives Matter to Fridays for Future, education can play a central role in powering movements by providing girls with the competencies to bring about systemic change.

Increasing girls' and women's participation in leadership and decision-making processes can change community attitudes and aspirations for girls' education. Studies from India found that, in villages with female leadership at local level, the gender gap in educational attainment was erased and the amount of time girls spent on household activities declined.³⁶

In many countries, boys are disadvantaged when it comes to certain learning outcomes, such as literacy. In 24 countries participating in the Programme for International Student Assessment in 2018, over 70% of poor boys did not achieve the minimum reading proficiency level.³⁷ Female disadvantages persist in countries with weak education systems, where both girls and boys are least likely to enter and complete primary school. Male learning disadvantages emerge in countries where girls and boys are more likely to enter and complete primary school. Investing in strengthening weak education and child protection systems, where girls tend to be at a relative disadvantage, therefore benefits both boys and girls.³⁸



“I wanted to study, but they forced me into marriage before my final examination results were released. Later, my examination results revealed that I had qualified to join high school.

Sadly, I did not know when my parents were planning for my marriage. Our families agreed and the dowry was paid. One day during the rainy season, my father told me to go with the man. I was in shock, sad and silently moved into the new role of a wife and immediately a mother.

I still have hope. I want to invest in my children. I have been trained by Save the Children on issues of sexual reproductive health, financial literacy, life skills and generating income for sustained livelihood. I am a community champion and I understand the importance of education and why we should fight against child marriage. I will work hard to ensure that my children don't get married off early and that they finish school.”

Tatu, 17, Tanzania, is a member of Save the Children's Supporting Civil Society to Counter Harmful Traditional Practices project, which ensures that men, women, boys and girls in two districts of Shinyanga are empowered to act to counter harmful traditional practices and discriminatory gender norms. The project focuses particularly on adolescent girls.

Girls' education: a powerful response to the climate crisis

Girls' education plays a critical role in both climate change adaptation and mitigation. Enhancing girls' life skills through education strengthens resilience and adaptive capacity to climate change and prepares them to participate in green-sector jobs.³⁹ Every additional year of schooling a girl receives helps to improve her country's resilience to climate disasters. Girls with high levels of schooling are more likely to live in countries less vulnerable to climate disasters, yet among the most vulnerable countries, every additional year of schooling could help reduce a country's climate vulnerability score.⁴⁰ Studies also project that if 70% of women aged 20–39 achieved at least lower-secondary education, disaster-related deaths in 130 countries could be reduced by 60% by 2050.⁴¹

Supporting girls to be empowered with green life skills can help them take a leading role in the transition to a green economy and enable a transition that is progressive, fairer and leaves

no one behind. Girls' education also helps to deconstruct harmful gender and social norms and enables girls and women to act for and become leaders and advocates for climate justice.

HOW EDUCATING GIRLS HELPS REALISE THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

- According to the World Bank, one year of secondary education increases women's wages later in life by up to 20%.⁴²
- Every additional year of education for girls cuts both infant mortality and maternal mortality rates. Women with six or fewer years of schooling are two to three times more likely to die during childbirth than women with 12 years of schooling.⁴³
- Educated mothers are better informed of health and nutrition needs and of the importance of good-quality care for their own children. While 24% of educated mothers are malnourished, among children of less educated mothers, the malnutrition rate is over 39%.⁴⁴
- Each year of secondary education may reduce the likelihood of marriage before the age of 18 by five percentage points or more in many countries. By contrast, girls who face child, early and forced marriage are much more likely to drop out of school and complete fewer years of education than their peers.⁴⁵
- Providing universal quality secondary education for girls could avert 51 million child marriages by 2030.⁴⁶
- Empowering girls through good-quality education enables them to have a positive impact on peace and stability in their societies; when women participate in a peace process, the likelihood of peace lasting 15 years increases by 35%.⁴⁷

Girls' education programming

Save the Children is one of the largest recipients of the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's Girls Education Challenge Transition (GEC-T) funding, implementing a combined value of £44 million across three awards in Afghanistan, DRC and Mozambique. During the Girls Education Challenge (GEC) phase I (2013–17), Save the Children also implemented girls' education projects in the same countries as well as in Ethiopia with a total value of approximately £34 million.

With support of GEC-T funding, Save the Children has:

- reached more than 113,000 girls with formal and alternative education pathways
- provided more than 3,000 teachers with professional development to improve classroom teaching practices and support girls' wellbeing and learning
- supported 262 girls to apprentice as teachers to increase girls' enrolment
- established 75 distance learning centres, helping ensure more than 2,000 children receive secondary education, including more than 1,000 girls
- provided menstrual-hygiene-management kits to more than 2,000 girls, which has helped to increase school attendance

The GEC was launched by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in 2012 as a 12-year commitment to reach more than a million of the most marginalised girls in the world and is the largest global fund dedicated to girls' education.

The first phase of the GEC (2012–17) directly provided good-quality education to more than a million marginalised girls. The GEC is now in its second phase (2017–25), providing almost £500 million in funding for up to 41 projects in 17 countries. The second phase is enabling existing GEC beneficiary girls to complete primary school, transition to secondary education, and progress on to technical vocational training or employment.

WHAT IS A GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACH TO GIRLS' EDUCATION?

Save the Children's approach to girls' education reflects its commitment to deliver **gender-transformative** programming. All programming must identify, consider and account for the different needs, abilities and opportunities of children and adults. To achieve a gender-transformative approach, we work with local, regional, and global stakeholders to identify, address and positively transform the root causes of gender inequality with and for all girls, boys and adults.⁴⁸

Education has enormous potential to effect change in harmful gender views and practices, to tackle their root causes and to support a generation of empowered female and male child champions for gender equality through to adulthood. Gender equality therefore requires an approach that ensures that all children regardless of their gender not only gain access to, transition through and complete education cycles with improved learning outcomes but are also empowered equally in and through education.

SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION AND ADVANCEMENT OF RIGHTS FOR GIRLS, MOZAMBIQUE

Save the Children's Successful Transition and Advancement of Rights for Girls (STAR-G) project in Mozambique supports girls in the primary grades of 4–7 in the three provinces of Gaza, Manica and Tete. Under the Girls' Education Challenge umbrella, STAR-G aims to help build literacy and numeracy skills and to support school transitions.

Mozambique's education outcomes have seen improvements over the last 15 years. However, challenges around access to schooling and the quality of teaching persist, particularly for girls. Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, more girls than boys were out of school across primary and secondary levels (366,227 girls and 239,982 boys), with net enrolment figures for secondary education at just 18.8% for girls. Girls face a variety of barriers to learning that hinder their ability to learn and transition successfully. In a baseline study,

almost three-quarters of households reported financial barriers to sending girls to school.⁴⁹ Girls reported barriers to teaching and learning, with over half believing teachers treated boys and girls differently. Barriers related to traditional gender and social norms were also found, with a quarter of girls reporting chore burdens affecting time spent learning.

In addition to supporting the Portuguese language and arithmetic skills of students, STAR-G delivers a professional development programme for primary school teachers that includes training on gender-responsive pedagogy. To improve transition from primary to secondary school, the project supports girls' clubs, which provide sexual and reproductive health training and information on gender equality, and engages with community members, sensitising them to girls' rights through girls' and boys' led advocacy.

Children in Mozambique have faced multiple disruptions to their education, including Cyclones Idai and Kenneth in 2019, and most recently,



Children in a temporary classroom in Mozambique in the aftermath of Cyclone Idai in 2019.

in 2021, Cyclone Eloise, together with severe tropical storms, and flooding. School closures due to COVID-19, and ongoing national education reform have exacerbated these impacts.

In response, the programme has incorporated new components such as distance learning and community-based education, supporting girls' empowerment through girls' clubs, school governance strengthening, and provision of transport and bursaries to marginalised girls.

STAR-G builds on Save the Children's Promoting Advancement of Girls Education programme in Mozambique, which ran in the first phase of the GEC from 2013 to 2017 and was found to have a positive effect on girls' literacy and numeracy skills. Enrolment rates were also higher for those who attended girls' clubs or reading camps with their parents, and for those with a peer mentor or receiving a bursary. However, ongoing political and military tensions had a significant impact on learning outcomes and attendance in conflict areas, which may have made it more difficult for the project to achieve visible impact at statistically significant levels. For all learning outcomes, girls in non-conflict areas outperformed girls in conflict areas on average.

STEPS TOWARDS AFGHAN GIRLS' SUCCESS II, AFGHANISTAN

Save the Children's Steps Towards Afghan Girls' Success (STAGES) II project (2017–21) delivers community-based education to marginalised girls in 16 provinces of Afghanistan.

While Afghanistan appears to have experienced growth in educational access, with overall enrolment increases from 1 million (primarily boys) in 2001 to 9.5 million (39% girls) in 2020, these figures are likely to be inflated given that enrolments are not adjusted for drop-out rates for up to three years after observing non-attendance. There are also gender disparities for literacy levels, with only 37% of adolescent girls literate compared with 66% of adolescent boys. Girls-only schools are also scarce or non-existent in rural areas and even where they do exist, far distances to travel to school prohibit older girls from attending due to cultural

restrictions and insecurity. A study conducted for the project found that girls in poorer households and those who do not speak the language of instruction were found to have poorer learning outcomes. Strong decreases in enrolment were also seen at the age we would expect girls to transition from primary to lower-secondary school grades. According to Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) data, female teacher recruitment has remained stagnant at 39% since 2013, which has directly impacted girls' enrolment and advancement to higher grades.

In response, STAGES II aims to contribute to the learning and transition of 22,731 girls enrolled in primary- and lower-secondary community-based education and accelerated learning programmes, with a focus on girls with disabilities, girls who do not speak the language of instruction and girls from poor households. Project activities include training teachers in community-based education and government schools; supporting and training school management councils; renovating classrooms, supplying school equipment, facilities, infrastructure and learning resources; and providing female teacher apprenticeships and flexible school grants. In addition, through the Girls Learning to Teach Afghanistan project, adolescent girls are supported to apprentice as teachers for community-based education classes to increase girls' enrolment.

STAGES II has been found to contribute to improved self-confidence in enrolled girls through peer group support, increased teacher competencies, especially for female teachers, and enhanced women's ownership of community-based and government school management.⁵⁰ Findings from the STAGES I (2013–17) evaluation found that the programme made a significant contribution to enrolling girls in school; supporting their learning, retention and attendance; building the professional capacity of teachers; increasing community acceptance of and support for girls' education; and mobilising in-kind community funds.⁵¹ Building community acceptance for girls' education, especially in Taliban-controlled areas deprived of access, remains a key feature of Save the Children's girls' education programming in Afghanistan and is the foundation of sustainable gains in equity and inclusion.



A girl fetches water in Afghanistan

Recommendations for strengthening girls' learning and empowerment

To achieve good-quality education for all girls we must address the intersecting challenges to girls' protection, access to education, learning, school completion and transitions from primary to secondary school. Save the Children's approach reflects our understanding of good-quality education outlined in the Quality Learning Framework, recognising that realising girls' education also enhances overall education quality for all children.⁵²

To strengthen learning and wellbeing for the most marginalised girls and to support girls' empowerment and equality in and through education, Save the Children calls on governments, donors and humanitarian and development actors, together with whole-school communities, including children, parents, caregivers, teachers, education staff and school management, to prioritise the following actions:

1. MAKE TEACHING AND LEARNING GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE

- Governments must strengthen strategies to improve the recruitment, retention and attendance of qualified and gender-sensitive female and male teachers, and ensure that teaching practices are child-centred, gender-transformative and inclusive – through support for equitable and appropriate gender-sensitive teacher professional development.
- Governments must ensure curricula and learning materials reflect and explicitly teach issues of gender equality or where this is not possible discuss gender stereotypes and facilitate positive conversations on gender norms. Materials must be child-friendly, relevant, appropriate, participatory and inclusive. In some contexts, schools should consider creating dedicated safe spaces for girls to have positive discussions about gender with female teachers who can also serve as role models.
- Governments and local authorities should ensure child protection systems are linked with schools to identify children at risk of dropping

out of school, considering the specific risks facing girls. Girls who have been out of school should be provided with a learning assessment to inform the type of support they need to catch up on lost learning, such as catch-up classes, remedial programmes and accelerated education programmes.

2. ESTABLISH GIRL-FRIENDLY, SAFE, INCLUSIVE, HEALTHY AND EMPOWERING LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

- School authorities should involve the school and community in a whole-school process to identify learning and protection needs, supporting children, including girls themselves, to lead school safety mappings via existing or newly mobilised school committees. For instance, the Improving Learning Environments Together in Emergencies (ILET) package may be used to improve the learning environment through devising and implementing school improvement plans.⁵³
- Governments and humanitarian actors must strengthen investment in gender-sensitive child protection systems and mechanisms in and around schools, ensuring teachers are trained in stress management and wellbeing of children, and can identify and refer children with protection needs, including girls, to specialised services. Connecting with child protection systems and systems to tackle gender-based violence can enhance the quality of support for girls with protection needs, including adolescent girls.

- Girl-friendly school facilities should be strengthened to ensure adequate water, sanitation and hygiene facilities are in place, including clean, safe and sex-segregated latrines, and access to and means of disposing sanitary materials. Where necessary, safe transportation to and from school must be ensured.
- School authorities should work to improve the prevention, reporting and response to school-related gender-based violence by ensuring the participatory development and implementation of a gender-responsive comprehensive school code of conduct. This should outline ethical norms and standards of acceptable behaviour for education staff, teachers, students and parents. Codes of conduct must be developed alongside functional reporting, monitoring, response and referral mechanisms for incidents of abuse or harassment. Teachers and school staff should also be trained to prevent, identify, and respond to cases of violence, including gender-based violence and bullying in school.
- Governments and local authorities should ensure gender equitable access to psychosocial support through the education system to support all children, including girls with mild to moderate distress, to stay in school and improve academic, social and emotional learning outcomes. Specialist referrals for girls must be made in all cases of distress and harm.
- Governments should endorse and implement the Safe Schools Declaration⁵⁴ to ensure that all students and teachers, female and male, can learn and teach in safety, and avoid the use of schools for military purposes, in line with the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use and considering the different ways in which female students and educators may be impacted.⁵⁵
- Governments should engage with school communities, including girls, to develop risk analyses, early warning systems, protective response, and comprehensive safety and security plans for attacks on education, including special protection for girls and women where they

Munni (right), age 16, is teaching women and girls to read and write in her neighbourhood in Patna, India. "If we have education then we must give it to those women and our brothers and sisters who are illiterate," she says.



are, or are likely to be, specifically targeted or affected differently from boys and men. For instance, policy and military units should create units to prevent and respond to attacks on education, with specific training in protecting girls from attacks, such as abduction and sexual violence. Wherever feasible, ensure adequate numbers of unarmed, trained, vetted female guards responsible for interaction with girls.⁵⁶

3. STRENGTHEN COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR GIRLS' LEARNING AND EMPOWERMENT

- School authorities should take steps to improve relations between the school and community, including through strengthening meaningful community participation in school management committees and parent–teacher associations. Community groups should be supported to promote actions in the community to sustain girls' educational inclusion and to increase information-sharing and accountability loops between parents, school management and girls themselves.
- Governments, together with local influencers such as religious and traditional leaders, should conduct outreach, mobilisation, mass media campaigns and behaviour-change communication campaigns to transform perceptions of the social and economic value of educating girls. This should target parents, caregivers and children. Public messaging should be child-friendly, age-appropriate, gender-sensitive and accessible, and shared through different modalities. Campaigns should focus on information about every child's right to good-quality education, expected standards of education and practical information, such as how to register for school and financial support. Such campaigns should always be coupled with efforts to ensure schools provide a safe, protective and good-quality learning environment. Boys and men must be engaged to challenge gender norms and stereotypes that threaten girls' educational inclusion.
- Governments and relevant actors should provide low-income households with resources to remove financial barriers to girls' education, address gender-based violence and ensure the return to school for the most marginalised girls, including

pregnant girls and young mothers, when it is safe to do so. For instance, this may include cash transfers/vouchers, stipends, bursaries, livelihood support at household level, and/or access to child sensitive social protection systems. Care must be taken to mitigate risks to girls and eligibility criteria need to be carefully considered to avoid, for example, tensions between recipients and non-recipients or stigma and discrimination from boys. Recognising the role social networks can play in conditioning access to good-quality education and learning outcomes, particularly during conflict and violence, governments should embed social protection approaches that seek to bolster the connectivity of households and increase access to finance, for instance, through savings and loans groups.

- School authorities should support female leadership within the school and community so that girls encounter strong female leaders and role models, helping disrupt gender stereotypes and norms about women. Peer educators can help to strengthen girls' peer support networks, and improve retention, learning, economic, social and health outcomes.

4. STRENGTHEN GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION POLICIES AND SYSTEMS

- Governments and donors should take steps to build the capacity of education systems to promote gender equality, including through the development of gender-transformative education sector plans. To promote gender equality, education sector plans must be informed by gender analysis and participatory stakeholder consultation; promote gender-targeted actions, gender integration and gender-sensitive monitoring and evaluation; and be supported by adequate financial resources, institutional capacity, and political will. Governments and donors should aim to foster an enabling policy environment for girls' access to good-quality education.
- Governments should provide safe spaces for girls to participate in a meaningful way in decisions about their education, to exercise their agency and to make their voices heard. This should include supporting women in leadership roles within education systems at all levels and



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A girl drawing inside the tent she lives in with her family in Afghanistan

supporting girl-led networks to ensure their views are represented and incorporated into national policy and planning processes, including in the development and review of education sector plans and humanitarian education strategies and response plans.

- Donor governments should provide more and better financing for girls' education at national and global level through bilateral and multilateral channels, including through the Global Partnership for Education and Education Cannot Wait. Governments should seek to spend at least 15–20% of total public expenditure on education, with targeted investment in the most marginalised learners, such as adolescent girls affected by humanitarian crises.
- Governments should introduce and fund multisectoral action plans to end child marriage that engage ministries of education, as well as other departments typically responsible for this work, and ensure the integration of education and child protection interventions in these plans.
- Governments must ensure that every girl receives gender-transformative, green learning as a key climate change strategy as part of Nationally Determined Contributions and national policies

on climate change and invest in girls' education and skills through climate financing. For instance, governments should create an enabling classroom environment for climate justice and invest further resources to ensure girls are connected to green-sector training opportunities and green skills development through tailored girls' education and girls in STEM programming.

- Education systems must be made more resilient and prepared to support all children, especially girls, during and after climate displacement to prevent lost learning.
- Governments and other relevant actors should use evidence of effective girls' education interventions to inform policy change and generate their own evidence through investing in research, monitoring and evaluation. Research and evidence generation must consider methodologies that enable girls to meaningfully participate and create knowledge and practice in their own interests. Governments should develop open education-management information systems to collect, use and analyse gender-disaggregated data, including on girls' attendance, that informs gender-sensitive approaches at school, local and national level.

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