



**PLAN**  
INTERNATIONAL

# Girls' Education Policy Briefing

## Girls' education

*"Not enough has been done to counter the challenges of access to education by girls. This includes campaigns to end FGM and child marriage, and sexual harassment/abuse of girls in schools... If this is addressed, it will ensure girls' transition in education so that they don't drop out of school or miss out on quality education."*

Young woman, aged 25-30, Kenya

There are 63 million girls out of school around the world. Less than 50 per cent of countries – and none in sub-Saharan Africa – have achieved the goal of gender parity in both primary and secondary education.<sup>1</sup>

On a daily basis, girls are denied their right to education. Those that are in school often face discrimination and violence, which negatively impacts their learning. The reasons for this treatment are complex, but they are rooted in the gender inequality and the imbalance in power relations that directly affect girls' lives.

Plan International UK's 'Because I am a Girl' campaign recognises that education is at the core of ensuring all girls can learn, lead, decide and thrive. It is a fundamental human right and enables the realisation of many others. The right to education is reinforced through Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 – a global commitment to ensure inclusive and quality education for all and to promote lifelong learning.

Now is the time for global leaders to take action for girls' right to education. Policies must focus on equity and on the most marginalised girls – whose daily lives are affected by gender inequality – to ensure they can access their right to education. As well as marginalisation on the basis of gender, girls are excluded because they are living in poverty, have a disability, or live in rural areas or conflict-affected and fragile states. Furthermore, they often face marginalisation because of their ethnicity, the language they speak, or their class.

The benefits of education for girls, for their families, and for their communities are clear. We know that girls who have completed their education are more empowered, understand their rights, and are more likely to be active citizens. Girls with no education are three times more likely to marry before 18 years of age than those with a secondary or higher education.<sup>2</sup> Education has the potential to transform

gender relations, and to help achieve gender equality.

This paper sets out the challenge for girls' education, shares Plan International UK's work to ensure all girls have access to quality education, and puts forward recommendations to global leaders to ensure no girls are left behind.

## Girls are missing out on education

Despite progress in gender parity in education, many of the most marginalised girls are still left behind, especially at secondary level.

In many countries, gender discrimination negatively affects girls' learning, and causes gender gaps in girls' enrolment and completion of education.

- 48 per cent of out-of-school girls are likely never to enrol in school, compared with 37 per cent of boys.<sup>3</sup>
- If recent trends continue, universal primary completion in sub-Saharan Africa will only be achieved in 2069 for the poorest boys, and in 2086 for the poorest girls.<sup>4</sup>
- In the Arab States, it is estimated that half of out-of-school girls will never enrol, compared with just over one-quarter of boys.<sup>5</sup>
- In Afghanistan in 2010, 54 per cent of boys completed primary school, compared with 27 per cent of girls.<sup>6</sup>

Often, national and regional figures hide local or group-level inequalities and discrimination against girls. For example, according to UNESCO, girls living in the richest households in Namibia have been completing primary school since 1996. By contrast, those living in the poorest households will only all complete primary education by 2044.<sup>7</sup> Even when girls stay in school, their education often fails to equip them with the knowledge they need. For example, at least 250 million children of primary-school age are failing to learn the basics of literacy and numeracy.<sup>8</sup>

Some of the gendered issues that prevent girls from learning include:

### • **School-related gender-based violence**

In most societies, unequal power relations between adults and children, and the gender stereotypes and roles attributed to girls and boys, leave schoolgirls especially vulnerable to sexual harassment, rape, coercion, exploitation and discrimination from teachers, staff and peers. Boys and girls who do not conform to dominant notions of heterosexual masculinity or femininity are also vulnerable to sexual violence and bullying.<sup>9</sup>

*"Fear is also felt in the school, especially when any girl comes too early or goes back too late."*

Adolescent girl, Pakistan<sup>10</sup>

- **Lack of comprehensive sexuality education**  
Many girls and boys do not have access to comprehensive sexuality education, which is proven to help them understand their sexual health and reproductive rights, and to prevent early pregnancy.<sup>11,12</sup>

*"We do not know how to avoid pregnancy. Nobody speaks to us of that."*

Adolescent girl, Paraguay<sup>13</sup>

- **Child marriage and FGM**  
Both child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM) are reasons for girls missing out on school. If child marriage and early pregnancies could be eliminated, the gender gap in education could potentially be reduced by about half because child marriage often leads to girls dropping out of school permanently.<sup>14</sup>

*"Some parents use their girl children to settle debts, thereby forcing them to get married to people they don't love."*

Adolescent girl, Cameroon<sup>15</sup>

- **Discriminatory social norms and unequal attitudes to girls' education, including prioritising investments in boys' education**  
This drives families to prioritise a future male breadwinner, and also leaves girls with less time to study or attend school, because they have to help with unpaid care work.

*"We are burdened with all household tasks. After marriage, we work even more."*

Adolescent girl, Egypt<sup>16</sup>

- **Poverty and the direct or hidden costs of education**  
Poverty and costs such as uniforms or school fees can disadvantage girls. Often when families' resources are limited they will prioritise funding boys' education.
- **Long distances to travel to access education, and related safety concerns**  
Families often don't send girls to school when they are concerned about their safety on long journeys.

- **School environments that are not gender sensitive**

For example, schools which lack private and separate sanitation facilities, or which reinforce gender stereotypes, inequality and discrimination.

*"Girls never feel comfortable using the existing latrines, because they are cracked and in poor condition, so they are afraid to use them. They also worry that boys will walk in on them, because the latrines are shared."*

Adolescent girl, Benin<sup>17</sup>

- **Emergencies**  
Natural disasters, conflict and protracted crises can deepen gender inequities. Four of the five countries that currently have the largest gender gaps in education are affected by conflict.<sup>18</sup>
- **Curricula that do not support girls' futures**  
Life skills, employability and entrepreneurial skills, and sex education are often missing from the curriculum. Yet these areas are essential to provide girls with the knowledge they need to make informed decisions about their lives, and to find good jobs as they become adults.
- **Girls' voices aren't heard in decision making**  
Often policy makers and education leaders do not understand the barriers facing adolescent girls, and policies do not reflect their needs and rights. Plan's recent youth survey found that, globally, girls wanted their voices to be heard, to influence their education.<sup>19</sup>

## Why does it matter?

Education is a right, and in schools children can develop their critical thinking and acquire life skills that enable them to live with dignity as engaged citizens. Education also fuels the social and economic development of families and societies as a whole.

Adolescent girls themselves have much to gain from education. Those who complete primary and secondary education are likely to break the cycle of poverty within their families and communities by earning a greater income over their lifetimes, having fewer unwanted pregnancies and marrying later. Their children will also be healthier.<sup>20,21</sup>

In particular, comprehensive sexuality education is a key part of a quality education for girls and boys. Access to quality, appropriate information on sexuality and reproduction can empower young



people to make informed, autonomous decisions regarding their current and future relationships, shift social norms and contribute to preventing violence against women and girls (VAWG).<sup>22</sup>

Gender-sensitive schools and safe education spaces can offer increased protection from exploitation and harm in an emergency, especially for girls, who are often at greater risk of gender-based violence – including rape, sexual exploitation or abuse, prostitution and transactional sex, and trafficking.<sup>23</sup>

Education is also vital to other areas of social development, including health, economic empowerment, ending violence, understanding human rights, preventing climate change and ensuring learners are active citizens who can hold their government accountable.

## **Our work – Girls' Education Challenge**

In Sierra Leone, Plan International UK's Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) project has been working in five rural districts since 2013 to reach 21,600 marginalised girls and children with disabilities. Through an integrated development approach, we are directly supporting these two vulnerable groups to stay in school through the full education cycle, until they can sit the examinations at the end of Junior Secondary School. So far, the GEC has had a positive effect on creating a girl-friendly environment for learning.

The project adapted and changed its activities during the Ebola outbreak by providing increased support to remote learning via radio, but has now returned to in-school activities such as after-school study groups, and the provision of textbooks, school fees, school uniforms and learning materials. The GEC programme also provides teacher training on gender and disability-sensitive education, ensuring education spaces are gender and disability inclusive.

Today, Plan International UK, in partnership with the Open University and implementers FAWE, are supporting female learning assistants. This part of the programme seeks to mitigate the effect of low levels of female teachers in schools. Learning assistants undertake practical learning in GEC-supported schools, are given academic support to ensure they pass the entrance examinations to the Teacher Training Colleges, and subsequently supported with three years of fees. This aspect of the programme has increased the motivation of girls to attend and remain in school.

The consortium also shared information on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) via radio. Peer-to-peer coaching sessions supported

teachers to reflect on the use of girl-friendly teaching methods, and as a result of these activities teachers demonstrated an increased awareness of SRHR, and GEC participants reported a lower level of sexual abuse from teachers.

The GEC project has given girls the opportunity to study after school through the free after-school lessons programme.

*"The project is good. We learn new things in the study groups and we love attending the after-school sessions because we learn more and the study-group teachers explain things we do not understand in the classes."*

Fatmata, Port Loko

## **PPA programme – Building Skills for Life**

Over the past five years, Plan International UK's DFID-funded Programme Partnership Arrangement (PPA) has helped 45,620 girls to access lower-secondary education. We've worked to break down the barriers girls face to access education, develop their life skills and improve their experience at school. Thanks to DFID support:

- 45,620 girls have benefited from an improved educational experience in target schools.
- 23,918 girls and boys have been trained on sexual health and reproductive rights.
- 6,981 girls and boys have engaged in school governance or decision-making processes at a school, local or national level, through school monitoring tools, school council, speak-out clubs and girls' and boys' clubs.
- 20,392 government officials and local leaders are now more aware of their obligations on girls' rights and gender equality.
- In Kenya, youth advocates have supported the development of child-friendly guidelines for the reporting and management of child sexual exploitation cases, working with the national government Department of Children's Services and NGO taskforce.
- In Malawi, youth advocates were actively engaged in the process leading to the passing of the Marriage Bill in 2015, which raised the age of marriage to 18. They have continued their advocacy by pressuring lawmakers to support a constitutional amendment to change the law which allows marriage at 15 with parental consent.
- In Pakistan, youth advocates have supported the development of the implementation plan for the Sindh Right to Education Act.



## Action is needed by global leaders

Leaders must fulfil their promises on SDG 4 and SDG 5 – ensuring all girls can access quality, inclusive education – and achieving gender equality.

The following recommendations set out the actions Plan International UK believe the UK government and national governments must take to ensure all girls can access their right to education. These actions must be part of integrated, cross-sectoral approaches to achieving gender equality.

### The UK government should:

Continue its global leadership on girls' education and gender equality by supporting partner governments to achieve the SDGs.

This requires specific action to ensure that gender equality is achieved through education systems and the most marginalised girls complete a quality education.

DFID should:

- Support partner governments and the Global Partnership for Education's work to carry out gender reviews of education sector plans, ensuring these plans mainstream gender equality to reach the most marginalised girls.
- Provide technical support and funding to partner governments to incorporate comprehensive sexuality education into curricula, as a key part of multi-sectoral responses to VAWG.
- As recommended by ICAI, DFID should integrate VAWG prevention into education programmes.<sup>24</sup> This means ensuring support is provided to make sure all schools are safe and gender and disability sensitive, including mechanisms to prevent and

respond to violence.

- Ensure all education programmes collect and share data on marginalised girls' experiences of education, including their learning outcomes and the content of their curricula. This data must be disaggregated by gender, age and disability at a minimum.
- Continue to be a global leader in funding and providing technical support to key multilateral donors, including the Global Partnership for Education and the Education Cannot Wait fund.

## Action is needed by national governments to:

- Undertake gender reviews of education sector plans, and mainstream gender equality into these plans.
- Increase domestic funding to education by increasing the tax base. Work towards the accepted spending target of six per cent of GDP and at least 20 per cent of national budgets on education.
- Implement comprehensive sexuality education programmes as a key part of quality education and preventing VAWG.
- Create an enabling environment for gender equality and transforming discriminatory social norms that affect girls. Governments must support approaches to changing power relations between men and women, girls and boys – at the community, local, institutional, national and global levels.
- Collect and disaggregate by gender, disability and age (at a minimum) data on girls' and boys' attendance and learning to ensure education policy reflects girls' experiences of education.
- Engage girls and boys, their families and communities, in education decision making at local and national levels, and ensure transparency and accountability of education budgets to civil society and young people.

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- 10 [http://www.plan-uk.org/assets/Documents/pdf/Hear\\_Our\\_Voices\\_Technical\\_Report.pdf](http://www.plan-uk.org/assets/Documents/pdf/Hear_Our_Voices_Technical_Report.pdf)
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Plan International UK is a global charity helping children and young people in the world's poorest countries to move themselves from a life of poverty to a future with opportunity. For over 75 years we've been taking action and standing up for every child's right to fulfil their potential by:

- giving children a healthy start in life, including access to safe drinking water
- securing the education of girls and boys
- working with communities to prepare for and survive disasters
- inspiring children to take a lead in decisions that affect their lives
- enabling families to earn a living and plan for their children's future

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