

Forum: Sustainable Development Commission (SDC)

Issue: Educating women and girls as a tool for sustainable development [SDG4]

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Introduction

Ever since the first form of schooling, in ancient civilizations in 3000BC, girls were overwhelmingly excluded. (Lambert, 2026). As school became compulsory throughout the 18th, 19th and 20th century, many countries omitted girls at first or did not prioritise their education in the same manner they did for boys. This included limited implementation of mandatory schooling for females, as well as differences in studied subjects or schedules.

Nowadays, gender inequalities remain in education and obstacles such as cultural expectations, financial difficulties or early marriage and pregnancy render access to school for girls more complicated. Indeed, according to UNICEF, (2022), 119 million girls worldwide do not attend school, and only 49% of countries have managed parity in primary school, a percentage that lowers even more for secondary education. However, in tertiary education, parity is achieved worldwide, except in regions most affected by difficult access to education for girls, such as Sub-Saharan Africa and Arab countries (Anna Bonfert & Divyanshi Wadhwa, 2024).

Educating girls and women is crucial for sustainable development, as it gives them tools on how to navigate life, contribute to society and promotes inclusivity and participation in communities. Their contributions can be economic, through job opportunities and investments in the workfield, but also social, by being innovative leaders, supportive peers and by shifting cultural biases, slowly closing gender gaps (since gender disparities in education are an extension of gender inequalities as a whole) and lowering maternal and infant mortality rates. The UN (2025) has stated that for every \$1 invested in girls' education, \$2.8 are returned.

Definition of Key Terms

Education

Education is “the process of teaching or learning, especially in a school or college, or the knowledge that you get from this” (Oxford, n.d.). This definition underlines the importance of a learning establishment (school, college) but reminds us that education is a process that can occur outside of such an establishment as long as the appropriate skills are taught.

Sustainable development

According to the United Nations Website (1987), sustainable development refers to “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

Sustainable Development Goal 4 [SDG4]

The fourth sustainable development goal established by the UN (2016) corresponds to quality education and includes reducing inequalities (both gender and socioeconomic based).

Background Information

Causes of lack of education:

The causes of poor education for girls are varied. Societal norms can play a role, by influencing young women to believe they should or can not pursue studies, as traditions sometimes place women as housewives that must cook, clean and take care of children. In countries where early marriages are still practiced, family responsibilities, early pregnancies, husbands' opposition, stigma or even prohibitions might lead to young girls stopping their studies. In poorer regions, families struggling with poverty might not have enough resources to send their daughters to school. Families might also wish to prioritise their sons' education, as, in some countries like Afghanistan or China, boys are preferred to girls. This can be influenced by traditional religious views (especially interpretations of Islamic values in Arab states) or cultural beliefs that men are superior to women. Girls can also be kept at home, to help parents with chores or sent to work to earn an income. In low-income regions, another obstacle to education is the lack of infrastructures, such as appropriate schools, bathrooms and medical resources, transport, or personnel. This barrier affects girls more intensely than boys, as, especially during menstruations, adolescents can require medical help or, at the very least, clean water and toilets. Likewise, workers' biases, lack of support or gender-based violence might discourage young women from pursuing their education.

Current status

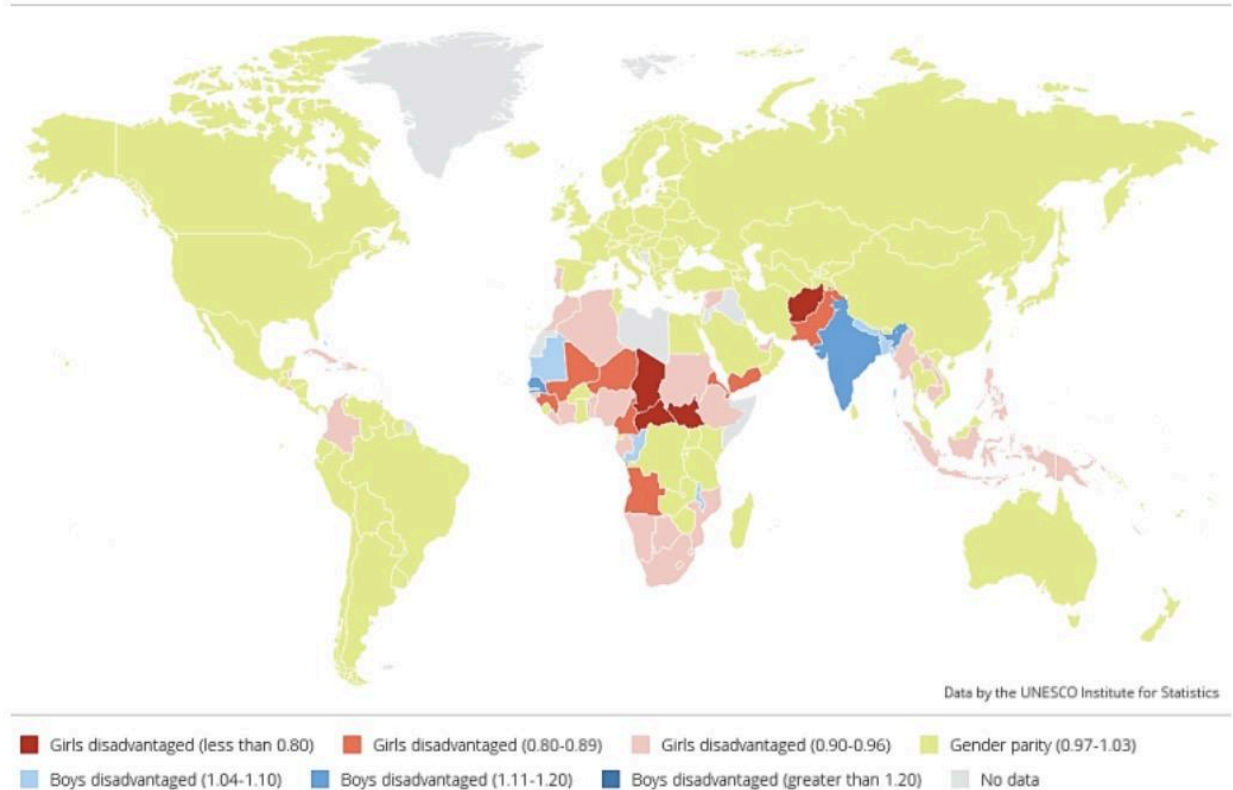


Graph from World Bank Group Data showing the worldwide percentage of female secondary school enrolment

Global female primary school completion rates were 89% in 2024, whilst these rates dropped to 79% for lower secondary and 61% for upper secondary (UNESCO, 2026). Though a margin for progression obviously remains, there has been an increasing trend of women participation in school, especially since 2015, according to UNESCO (2026).

Figure 2: Gender parity in primary education

Can girls expect the same number of years of primary education as boys? (gender parity index) (2018)



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics. 2019.

Map showing gender disparities in primary school enrolment worldwide (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019)

Worldwide, African countries (in particular Western, Central and Eastern Africa) like South Sudan, Niger, the Central African Republic, Chad, Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Liberia and Ethiopia, have the lowest female school attendance rates (Hodal, 2017), highlighting the role of poverty and conflict as barriers in education. In some of these countries, boys are as likely to miss out of school, however, in others like the Central African Republic, the gap

between genders is wider, with nearly twice as many girls unable to attend.

Furthermore, in most of the listed countries, half of all 18 year old girls are married, and a quarter have children before that age. This already renders going to school a challenge, in addition to some of these countries having some of the lowest GDP per capita rates and being zones of conflicts (like South Sudan and Central African Republic), which puts forth poverty and lack of infrastructure as yet another major obstacle to education.

Arab states as well as Southern and Western Asia are, after sub saharan Africa, the regions in which girls have least access to education. Countries like Afghanistan and Cambodia are characterized by low numbers of young women finishing their primary or secondary school years. For example, more than 60% of young girls do not attend primary school and more than 74% for secondary in Afghanistan, compared to 46% and 50% of boys (UNICEF, n.d.). This well-defined gender gap illustrates the need for proper support of young women throughout their education.

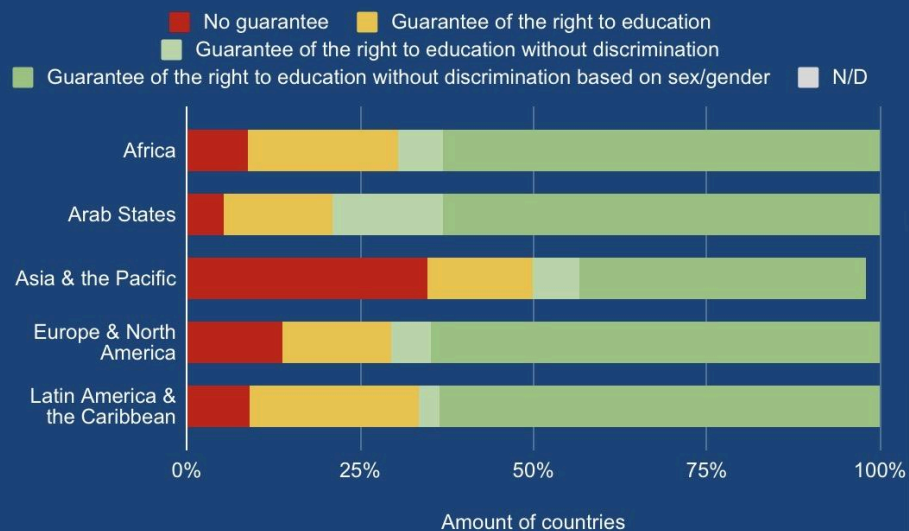
As a whole, in these countries, gender disparities in school can be correlated with more general inequalities between men and women.

In addition to school completion rates, women represent two thirds of all illiterate populations, with countries like Chad, Niger and Afghanistan particularly impacted (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2017). Literacy being a key factor to successful careers, lack thereof limits chances for women to access tertiary sector jobs and opportunities.

Right to education



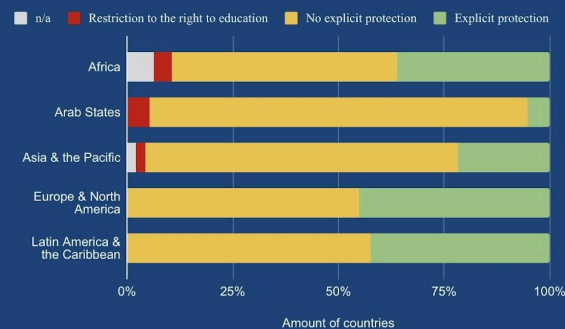
Legal protection of right to education per region



UNESCO (2023) graph showing the legal protection of right to education per region

When studying education rates in secondary school, the importance of early marriage and pregnancy intensifies. The following graph illustrates the varying nations' regulations in different regions regarding pregnant or married girls' access to education. Some countries clearly prohibit it, some do not have specific regulations whilst others have clear laws to facilitate their education.

Protection of right to education of married, pregnant and parenting girls in legislation per region



UNESCO (2023) Graph showing the different regulations regarding married, pregnant and parenting girls' access to school

We see that Europe and North America are the regions protecting girls the most, which corresponds to the regions with the highest education rates as well. And likewise, Africa and Arab States closely followed by Asia suffer from prohibition or lack of protection (especially in Arab States). This directly impacts women's confidence and right to access education.

Previous attempts to solve issue:

UNESCO has been implementing programs to improve access to education and limit gender disparities in this field. In addition, international frameworks such as the SDGs (both number 4 and 5), as well as international rights to education and gender equality already promote this.

Organisations and Major Countries Involved

Afghanistan

Afghanistan remains the only country to outlaw school for girls. Indeed, girls above the age of 12 are outright prohibited from attending any school or university, posing a critical challenge to worldwide improvement of education rates for women.

South Sudan

According to the Guardian (Hodal, 2017), 73% of South Sudanese girls do not attend

school, placing it as one of the countries in which difficult access to education for girls is a priority.

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization):

As a UN branch focusing on improving education for all, UNESCO shares and collects key information and statistics regarding the current status of women's education rates. UNESCO promotes schooling and gender equality through coordination of initiatives (such as "Her education, Our future"), policy crafting assistance and community based actions (building infrastructures, distributing material and helping individuals and families overcome obstacles to their daughters' education).

Possible Solutions

To improve access to education, several solutions can be implemented. Investments from UN branches, NGOs or governments can target lack of infrastructure or personnel by building and renovating schools in poorer regions, investing in transport systems between isolated communities and schools and offering partnerships between schools in developing and developed countries that could include training local teachers and organizing conferences, exchange programmes or mentorships for young girls.

Limiting social biases as an obstacle to education could be achieved by new regulations. Not enough countries already protect rights to education as a whole, especially for women and for married/pregnant/childbearing students. Policies could be crafted to shield women, and specific support (mentors, flexible schedules) could be attributed to women in complicated situations (like early pregnancies), to help them overcome difficult access to school.

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