

## UNESCO

### United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organizations Female Access to Education

#### Overview

Women make up two-thirds of the 763 million adults who do not have basic literacy skills. There are many reasons for this disparity, namely poverty, disability, child marriage and pregnancy, gender-based violence, and views on the roles of women. While the right to quality education should be seen as a basic human right, education is a large determinant of the life a child will live. Education can open up numerous career paths and life courses, it can help children rise from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and ensure a high life expectancy. Girls face significant barriers to proper education and often, because of poor education and a lack of literacy skills, they are forced into marriages, they lack proper sexual education and often fall pregnant very young. Many of these girls do not survive during pregnancy or childbirth. Girls who do live must survive at a significant disadvantage if they have not attended secondary or post-secondary schools. They struggle to find work, and if they manage to do so, they are not paid fairly. Often they are forced into unsafe work conditions leaving them subject to sexual abuse, physical dangers, and death. As education is such an important part of a child's life and development, many countries have started to implement legislation and policies criminalising child marriages. Many organisations have introduced programs that allow access to online learning resources and increased access to education for children with disabilities.<sup>1</sup>

#### The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organizations

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was designed to promote peace and security by encouraging international cooperation in education, sciences, culture, communication, and information. UNESCO believes that governments are not enough to ensure the support of citizens, this must be built upon the intellectual and moral

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<sup>1</sup> "What you Need to Know About how UNESCO Advances Education and Gender Equality," *UNESCO*, [www.unesco.org/en/gender-equality/education/need-know](http://www.unesco.org/en/gender-equality/education/need-know).

solidarity of humanity. To develop these human bonds, UNESCO works to ensure that every citizen has equal access to education. Included in this definition of education, is learning about cultural heritage and freedom from hatred and intolerance. By promoting education on cultural heritage, freedom of expression, development and cooperation, and democracy, UNESCO strengthens the bonds between nations.<sup>2</sup>

UNESCO'S goal is to reimagine how education will be implemented in the future. In March 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic forced schools to close worldwide and millions of children were cut off from any form of education, UNESCO formed the Global Education Coalition which brought together government organizations, non-governmental organizations, private sector members, civil society workers, and international media groups to achieve four objectives. The Coalition supports the education of 5 million girls in 20 countries with the greatest gender disparities in education. In 2022, a subgroup of the coalition was formed and named the Digital Transformation Collaborative. This group will work directly with countries to create sustainable and online education opportunities<sup>3</sup>.

### **Source Of The Issue**

#### *Underage Marriage and Pregnancy*

Across lesser-developed countries, once girls reach post-primary education, they often drop out for reasons such as early marriage, pregnancy, violence in or around school, poverty, traditions, and a lack of gender-sensitive environments. Parents are more likely to pull their daughters out of elementary and high schools for marriage, chasing financial incentives like dowries, or payments of cash, livestock, commodities, or anything of value, often paid to the bride or the family of the bride. This is commonly referred to as a “bride price”. Families who struggle financially may force their daughters into marriage for these payments. As dowries are common practice in 75% of countries globally, parents may expect their daughters to marry young and therefore prioritize the education of their sons<sup>4</sup>.

Today, an estimated 650 million girls were married before they were 18. By 2030, another 150 million girls are expected to be married before they turn 18 years old. This issue

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<sup>2</sup> “UNESCO,” *UNESCO*, [www.unesco.org/en/brief](http://www.unesco.org/en/brief).

<sup>3</sup> “UNESCO’s Action in Education,” *UNESCO*, [www.unesco.org/en/global-education-coalition](http://www.unesco.org/en/global-education-coalition).

<sup>4</sup> Nyyssölä, Milla. “Bride Price or Dowry?” *UNU Wider*. March 2022. [www.wider.unu.edu/publication/bride-price-or-dowry](http://www.wider.unu.edu/publication/bride-price-or-dowry).

affects many countries with the leading percentage of child brides (44% or 285 million) being in South Asia, followed by Sub-Saharan Africa with 18% or 115 million child marriages. Progress has been made in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, with a reduction from 25% to 21% of marriages being child marriages, but progress has been much slower in Latin America and the Caribbean as child marriage rates have largely stayed the same<sup>5</sup>. Young, uneducated and inexperienced brides are often the victims of sexual abuse and many of them are subject to unwanted pregnancies, nearly 121 million every year. They have no access to contraceptives and may be so young that they are not aware of how pregnancies occur<sup>6</sup>. Girls are then often forced to carry out a pregnancy, resulting in over 20,000 annual deaths of minors in childbirth<sup>7</sup>.

Not only do child pregnancies physically stop girls from going to school, but many countries (such as Tanzania) have policies in place that prohibit pregnant girls from attending school. While similar policies have been lifted or reformed in countries such as Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone, and Uganda, there is still much progress to be made<sup>8</sup>. If these young girls survive pregnancy, they are left with a child that they have to care for. These girls must support a child financially and devote time to care for them, often forcing them to drop out of school completely.

### *Discrimination and Economic Issues*

Girls born with mental and physical disabilities are often barred from education. If they do manage to enroll in a school, they rarely finish because of a lack of inclusive teaching practices, and a lack of infrastructure to increase accessibility, discrimination, and abuse. While all students with disabilities suffer in this manner, nearly 20% more disabled girls are unable to complete primary education than their male counterparts.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “10 Facts Illustrating why we Must End Child Marriage,” *UNICEF*, [www.unicef.org/press-releases/fast-facts-10-facts-illustrating-why-we-must-endchildmarriage](http://www.unicef.org/press-releases/fast-facts-10-facts-illustrating-why-we-must-endchildmarriage).

<sup>6</sup> “Nearly Half of all Pregnancies are Unwanted,” *UNFPA*, March 30, 2022, [www.unfpa.org/press/nearly-half-all-pregnancies-are-unintended-global-crisis-says-new-unfpa-report](http://www.unfpa.org/press/nearly-half-all-pregnancies-are-unintended-global-crisis-says-new-unfpa-report).

<sup>7</sup> Faso, Burkina. “Child Marriage Kills More Than 60 Girls a Day,” *Save The Children*, October 11, 2021, [www.savethechildren.net/news/child-marriage-kills-more-60-girls-day](http://www.savethechildren.net/news/child-marriage-kills-more-60-girls-day).

<sup>8</sup> “Africa: Rights Progress for Pregnant Students,” *Human Rights Watch*, [www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/29/africa-rights-progress-pregnant-students](http://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/29/africa-rights-progress-pregnant-students).

<sup>9</sup> “Children with disabilities still excluded from school.” *Hi*, November 17, 2022, <https://www.hi.org/en/news/children-with-disabilities-still---excluded-from-school>

Girls may drop out to work and earn a living. Often if a family does not have the financial means to send all of their children to school, girls are left behind.<sup>10</sup> Young girls may also be expected to help out around the house more: caring for their younger siblings, cooking for their families, cleaning up, collecting water. Parents may pull young girls out of school (either for short periods of time or permanently) to help with domestic tasks. In extreme cases like Sudan or Myanmar, nearly half of all children are put to work instead of sent to school, with young girls often being forced into labour or sex slavery.<sup>11</sup>

In 2014, Boko Haram, an extremist group, kidnapped thousands, including hundreds of girls out of schoolhouses in Nigeria, in an attempt to build an extremist Islamic regime. In Afghanistan, the Taliban, a Sunni Islamic militant group, believes that women's education goes against core Islamic beliefs. In 2021 the Taliban took control of Afghanistan and has been closing down schools around Afghanistan since then, further reducing women's access to education in the country.<sup>12</sup>

## **Impact and Benefits of Women's Education**

### *Underage Marriage and Pregnancy*

The direct and indirect impacts of increasing access to education for women and young girls cannot be ignored. A more educated female population leads to lower rates of child marriages, and child pregnancies, and a reduction in the maternal and childbirth death rates. Educated girls are more likely to join the workforce. They're more likely to develop social, emotional, and cognitive skills. Girls who receive an education are more likely to control the number of children they have. A study conducted in Mali found that women who had a secondary education or higher education had an average of three children while women with an elementary education or less had an average of seven children<sup>13</sup>. A study in Guatemala found that every year a girl spent in school, the year that she had her first child was delayed by six to ten

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<sup>10</sup> "What are Barriers to Girls' Educations," *The Wellspring Foundation*, [thewellspringfoundation.org/resources/barriers-to-girls-education/](http://thewellspringfoundation.org/resources/barriers-to-girls-education/).

<sup>11</sup> McKenna, Luke. "Child Labour Is Making A Disturbing Resurgence Around The World." *Business Insider*, January 6, 2012, <https://www.businessinsider.com/countries-worst-child-labor-risks-2012->.

<sup>12</sup> "The Girls who Risk Everything to Get an Education," *Global Citizen*, [www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/girls-education-risks-poverty-crisis/](http://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/girls-education-risks-poverty-crisis/).

<sup>13</sup> "Education Counts: Towards the Millennium Development Goals," *UNESCO*, [unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000190214](http://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000190214).

months.<sup>14</sup> Studies have also found that more educated women are more likely to give birth to healthy children in safe environments. A child born to a literate woman is 50% more likely to survive past the age of five than a child born to an illiterate woman<sup>11</sup>. It is impossible to ignore the slight bias these studies present: women from economically higher backgrounds are more likely to be educated and give birth to healthy children. But the point remains, the simple act of providing schooling for girls from socioeconomically lower backgrounds can drastically improve their standard of living.<sup>15</sup>

Further education can also educate women about their own physical and sexual health and safety. Often women who leave school young are forced into early marriages, and with little knowledge or sexual health or contraception, they are the victims of sexual abuse, are more likely to contract sexually transmitted diseases, and are more likely to become pregnant and die during pregnancy or childbirth. Studies conducted in 32 countries found that women who stayed in school past primary school were more likely to know basic facts about contracting and avoiding HIV. A study conducted in Zambia found that illiterate girls are twice as likely to contract or spread HIV than literate girls.<sup>16</sup> A study in Uganda found that for every additional year a girl remains in school, her chances of catching HIV are reduced by almost 7%.<sup>17</sup> Not only does HIV drastically decrease these girls' standard of living and life expectancy, but they can also transmit HIV to their unborn children unintentionally. Babies born to young, uneducated girls run the risk of dying young, not receiving an education, and spending their lives in poverty.<sup>18</sup>

### *Economic Impact*

The growth rate of an entire country's economy can rise when its women have received proper education. Since the Industrial Revolution, common jobs have become more common than physical labour, opening up a window for women to join the workforce in ways they never

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<sup>14</sup> Behrman, Jere et al. "What Determines Adult Cognitive Skills? Influences of Pre-School, School, and Post-School Experiences in Guatemala," *National Library of Medicine*, December 2014, [pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26550556/](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26550556/).

<sup>15</sup> "The Effect of Girls' Educations on Health Outcomes," *Population Reference Bureau*, [www.prb.org/resources/the-effect-of-girls-education-on-health-outcomes-fact-sheet/](https://www.prb.org/resources/the-effect-of-girls-education-on-health-outcomes-fact-sheet/).

<sup>16</sup> "The Education Vaccine Against HIV/AIDS," *Columbia University*, *The "Education Vaccine" Against HIV Jan Vandemoortele ...Teachers College - Columbia University*<https://www.tc.columbia.edu/cice/pdf/256...>.

<sup>17</sup> De Walque, Damien. "How Does the Impact of an HIV/AIDS Information Campaign Vary with Educational Attainment? Evidence from Rural Uganda," *World Bank*, [openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/2746b5cc-0e8e-58ac-bbc0-8cc017f80ad7](https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/2746b5cc-0e8e-58ac-bbc0-8cc017f80ad7).

<sup>18</sup> "The Effect of Girls' Educations on Health Outcomes," *Population Reference Bureau*, August 15, 2011, [www.prb.org/resources/the-effect-of-girls-education-on-health-outcomes-fact-sheet/](https://www.prb.org/resources/the-effect-of-girls-education-on-health-outcomes-fact-sheet/).

had. Facilitating women's participation in the labour force can increase a country's GDP by up to 35%. In Pakistan, a UNESCO study found that literate women earned 95% more than illiterate women in the workforce. Not only does a stable and sufficient income mean more safety, security, and a higher standard of living for women and their families, it also means that governments can collect more tax money, there is more money circulating in the economy, and GDP rises.<sup>19</sup>

Projects that aid in chores like water collection, a job typically assigned to girls and women, allow for faster work and therefore more time to stay in school. Water projects in Ghana are an example of this. In Ghana, many young girls have to spend hours walking kilometres just to get clean water, creating an accessible source of clean water closer to villages means that instead of embarking on dangerous, long treks for water, young girls could instead attend school lessons.<sup>20</sup>

### **Advancements**

UNESCO funds many different initiatives and funds that help support funding for different programs designed to facilitate women's access to education including Malala's Fund for Girls' Right to Education, UNESCO/UNFPA/UN Women Joint Programme on Empowering Adolescent Girls and Young Women Through Education, UNESCO/HNA Partnership, and UNESCO-CJ Strategic Partnership for Girls' Education.<sup>21</sup> Many countries have their own initiatives to help, the United States has Let Girls Learn, and Canada works with organizations such as the Commonwealth, la Francophonie, and the African Union to help end child marriages.<sup>22</sup>

Though the numbers and statistics on women's access to education may be discouraging, women today have more access to education and the labour force than they have ever had in

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<sup>19</sup> Homden, Barni. "How Educating Girls can Transform an Economy." Kaplan International Pathways. December 9, 2020. [www.kaplanpathways.com/blog/how-educating-girls-can-transform-an-economy/](http://www.kaplanpathways.com/blog/how-educating-girls-can-transform-an-economy/).

<sup>20</sup> "How Female Education can Transform the Global Economy," Children Believe, *Maclean's*. October 10, 2023. [macleans.ca/sponsored/how-female-education-can-transform-the-global-economy/#:~:text=According%20to%20a%20recent%20report,as%20%2415%20to%20%2430%20trillion.](http://macleans.ca/sponsored/how-female-education-can-transform-the-global-economy/#:~:text=According%20to%20a%20recent%20report,as%20%2415%20to%20%2430%20trillion.)

<sup>21</sup> "Programmes and Projects on Women's and Girls' Education," *UNESCO*, [en.unesco.org/themes/women-s-and-girls-education/projects](http://en.unesco.org/themes/women-s-and-girls-education/projects).

<sup>22</sup> "Child, Early and Forced Marriage," *Government of Canada*, [www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues\\_development-enjeux\\_developpement/human\\_rights-droits\\_homme/child\\_marriage-mariages\\_enfants.aspx?lang=eng](http://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/human_rights-droits_homme/child_marriage-mariages_enfants.aspx?lang=eng).

history. Advancements are being made at unprecedented rates. In 2021, South Africa's Department of Basic Education adopted a policy on the Prevention and Management of Pregnancy in Schools. This new policy ensures girls can stay in school throughout and after their pregnancies. In 2021, Tanzania's Ministry of Education adopted a policy on the reinstatement of students who dropped out of secondary education. The policy states that it is a young mother's right to return to public schools after pregnancy and be accommodated properly. This decision ended Tanzania's decades-long ban on adolescent mothers at public schools. Sierra Leone reversed its policy that banned both pregnant teenagers and young mothers from attending high school. Additionally, Sierra Leone adopted a policy that reaffirms teenagers during and after pregnancy's right to stay in school, it also imposed a mandatory maternity leave.

Uganda has also revised its guidelines on pregnancy prevention and management in schools. Their new policy affirms the right of pregnant students and students who are parents to attend school, although it places many restrictions on their return. It also outlines guidelines to deal with negative stigmas, discrimination, and violence against students during or after pregnancy. A major problem with Uganda's policy is because it is so strictly enforced, schools are periodically testing students which violates their privacy and autonomy. Zimbabwe and Mozambique repealed laws preventing pregnant teenagers from attending schools. Kenya already had policies ensuring the reentry of teenage parents into school and in 2020, the government outlined new guidelines ensuring that pregnant students stay in school for as long as possible and re-enroll in school at least 6 months after delivery.<sup>23</sup>

Advancements on ending child marriages are still slow; UNICEF predicts that at the rate child marriages are currently declining, it would take 300 years to end them completely. That being said, advancements are being made. South Asia has made significant progress in reducing child marriage with a 20% decrease in the last decade. Sub-Saharan Africa has seen slight reductions in child marriages but it is still very common. Latin America and the Caribbean have seen almost no progress in reducing child marriages.<sup>24</sup> The criminalization of child marriages is slightly complicated by the fact that this type of legislation may punish young girls who have

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<sup>23</sup> "Africa: Rights Progress for Pregnant Students." *Human Rights Watch*, September 29, 2021, [www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/29/africa-rights-progress-pregnant-students](http://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/29/africa-rights-progress-pregnant-students).

<sup>24</sup> "Despite Significant Progress, we Need to go 20 Times fFster to end Child Marriage by 2030, Shows new Data" *Girls not Brides*, [www.girlsnotbrides.org/articles/despite-significant-progress-we-need-to-go-20-times-faster-to-end-child-marriage-by-2030-shows-new-data/](http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/articles/despite-significant-progress-we-need-to-go-20-times-faster-to-end-child-marriage-by-2030-shows-new-data/).

been forced into marriages, girls may be reprimanded for decisions they did not make, and children and families of those already in a child marriage may face ostracization. Though the positive effects of a strict criminalization of child marriages would require both parties involved in a marriage to consent to the marriage, it would prevent young girls from being subject to the same levels of sexual violence and teenage pregnancies. In any case, enforcement of anti-child marriage legislation and approaching every situation individually is critical for this legislation to work.<sup>25</sup>

Many organizations have started to tackle the issue of “period poverty”, defined as inadequate access to menstrual hygiene information or products, to help girls on their period go to school. The cost of menstruation products has been on a steady incline in recent years; in Ghana, an already impoverished nation, they have doubled. Because of this, many girls are forced to use alternatives that are largely unsanitary or stay home from school entirely. This time spent missing school can account for almost 20% of the academic year.<sup>26</sup> Arisa Africa is a South Sudanese youth-led nonprofit that helps provide girls with menstruation products.<sup>27</sup> FemConnect is a South African nonprofit with the goal of addressing period poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>28</sup> Many organizations such as these are currently working hard to spread awareness of the issue of period poverty and help eradicate it.

### *Case Study: Iran*

People with disabilities face significant challenges, discrimination, and negative stigmas. In Iran, disability is the most common reason for a child to be out of school. People in Iran can even be deemed “uneducable” and be denied access to regular schools entirely. In the last couple of years, Iran has begun to implement measures to improve access to education for children with disabilities by increasing their education budget, creating physical accessibility requirements for schools, and offering accessible educational material such as braille or audio presentations of information. The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has found that

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<sup>25</sup> “Child Marriage and the Law.” *UNICEF*, November 2020, [www.unicef.org/media/86311/file/Child-marriage-the-law-2020.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/media/86311/file/Child-marriage-the-law-2020.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> “Period Pas Prices Push Girls Out of School in Africa,” *UNICEF*, [www.unicef.org/media/86311/file/Child-marriage-the-law-2020.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/media/86311/file/Child-marriage-the-law-2020.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> “African Organization Tackle ‘Period Poverty,’” *VOA Africa*, [www.voaafrica.com/a/african-organizations-tackle-period-poverty-/7007027.html](http://www.voaafrica.com/a/african-organizations-tackle-period-poverty-/7007027.html).

<sup>28</sup> “Ending Period Poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *The Borgen Project*, February 3, 2023, [borgenproject.org/period-poverty-in-sub-saharan-africa/#:~:text=With%20platforms%20such%20as%20FemConnect.more%20girls%20gain%20an%20education..](http://borgenproject.org/period-poverty-in-sub-saharan-africa/#:~:text=With%20platforms%20such%20as%20FemConnect.more%20girls%20gain%20an%20education..)



despite the efforts put forth by the Iranian government, there is still much room for progress and growth. The committee recommended a complete transformation of the educational system, ridding systems of segregation based on level of ability, making the right to education clear for every individual, and repealing regulations that children may be determined “uneducable”, among other recommendations.<sup>29</sup>

The country still has many improvements to make surrounding women's access to education. The 2023 Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report found that different measures, such as the use of technology and assistive devices in a classroom setting, can be used to further enhance learning for students with disabilities. GEM and Inclusion International have organized an event to present the key findings of this report and make different recommendations to help students with disabilities maintain the proper level of access to education.<sup>30</sup> Further work must still be done to combat negative stigmas and bullying faced by children with disabilities in learning environments.

Given how slow global efforts have been at improving access to education for women, it is up to individual countries to create and enforce legislation to make real changes on this issue. However, all nations must cooperate to ensure that their fellow countries are putting in the necessary work to guarantee proper progress. As such, UNESCO strives to unite the world in its efforts to improve female access to education.

### Questions to Consider

1. What means (policies, laws, intervention, etc.) would be most effective for facilitating women's access to education?
  - a. How does your country view this issue?
  - b. What policies in place in your countries help or hinder women's education?
2. How do the culture and norms in your country affect the way women's education is viewed and approached?

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<sup>29</sup> “Just Like Other Kids,” *Human Rights Watch*, October 2, 2019,

[www.hrw.org/report/2019/10/02/just-other-kids/lack-access-inclusive-quality-education-children-disabilities](http://www.hrw.org/report/2019/10/02/just-other-kids/lack-access-inclusive-quality-education-children-disabilities).

<sup>30</sup> “Promoting Access to Education for Students With Disabilities Through Inclusive Technologies,” *UNESCO*, September 26, 2023,

[www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/articles/promoting-access-education-students-disabilities-through-inclusive-technologies?](http://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/articles/promoting-access-education-students-disabilities-through-inclusive-technologies?)

- a. Would you consider these views positive or negative? Would they be considered positive or negative by the rest of the world?
- b. Would your country be open to reforming certain cultural norms to fix this issue?

**Useful Delegate Resources**

[UNESCO](#)

[Gender Equality in Education | UNESCO UIS](#)

[Gender equality and education | UNESCO](#)

[From access to empowerment: UNESCO strategy for gender equality in and through education 2019-2025](#)

[#HerEducationOurFuture: fact sheet on girls' education](#)

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