

# Busting myths on girls' education and gender equality

This document busts 8 myths on girls' education and gender equality. It has been developed jointly by the UN Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) and the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC).

We believe these myths have a significant and persistent negative impact on girls and women around the world. Conversations and debates around gender equality need to drive action and one way to do this is to challenge and bust myths around girls' education and gender equality. Bringing evidence and data to the fore is an essential step in taking action to achieve gender equality.

*"In most countries, gender parity in education has been achieved. Why are we still talking about girls' education?"*

*"Girls are always more disadvantaged than boys in education."*

*"Working for boys' education is not part of gender equality."*

*"School-related, gender-based violence only involves a minority of teachers and learners."*

*"Primary school teachers are usually female."*

*"Climate change is not an education issue."*

*"Education systems should just focus on learning because that is what they are good at."*

*"Teaching sexuality education in schools promotes unsafe behaviour in young people."*



# Myth #1

“In most countries, gender parity in education has been achieved. Why are we still talking about girls’ education?”

## **BUSTED:**

According to UNICEF data, only 19% of low-income countries and 17% of low and middle-income countries have achieved gender parity.

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics estimates that girls are one and a half times more likely than boys to be excluded from primary school. That is 15 million girls of primary school age who will never have the opportunity to learn how to read and write in primary school, compared with about 10 million boys.

We need cross-sectoral strategies which aim to eradicate harmful gender norms that serve as barriers to girls’ enrollment and attainment in education.



## **FIND OUT MORE:**

<https://www.unicef.org/media/59856/file/UNICEF-education-strategy-2019-2030.pdf>

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## Myth #2

“Girls are always more disadvantaged than boys in education.”

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### **BUSTED:**

According to UNICEF data, girls are disadvantaged in 62% of low-income countries. Boys are disadvantaged in 63% of lower-middle-income countries. Boys are also more likely to be disadvantaged in upper-middle-income countries and high-income countries.

Gender barriers to education differ from place to place. They are also affected by factors such as income, age, ethnicity, race and disability. This is a reminder that eradicating harmful gender norms in education will benefit boys AND girls, leading to greater gender equality in society more broadly.



### **FIND OUT MORE:**

<https://www.unicef.org/media/59856/file/UNICEF-education-strategy-2019-2030.pdf>

## Myth #3

“Working for boys’ education is not part of gender equality.”

### **BUSTED:**

Gender equality is for every child. There are countries, such as Eswatini and Jamaica, where boys have been out of school more than girls for many years. This is against their rights.

It is gender barriers that keep boys out of school, whether it is gangs, livelihoods or being trafficked for work.



### **FIND OUT MORE:**

<https://www.ungei.org/sites/default/files/Achieving-gender-equality-in-education-dont-forget-the-boys-2018-eng.pdf>

## Myth #4

“School-related, gender-based violence only involves a minority of teachers and learners.”

### BUSTED:

School-related, gender-based violence is a global and prolific issue, which includes bullying, corporal punishment and sexual violence. Globally, an estimated 246 million children and adolescents experience school violence and bullying in some form every year.

School-related, gender-based violence remains a pervasive and persistent threat to the rights, ability to learn, safety, physical health and emotional wellbeing of learners across the globe. Putting an end to gender-based violence in and around schools requires a whole school approach to shift gender attitudes and beliefs which underpin this violence.

- Approximately **one in three girls** between the ages of 13 and 15 worldwide experience bullying regularly.
- In Kenya, **one in five women and men** who experienced sexual violence before the age of 18 reported that the first incident occurred at school.
- In a Ministry of Education study in Mozambique, **70% of girl respondents** reported knowing that some teachers use sexual intercourse as a condition for promotion between grades.
- Boys and children from poorer families and lower castes experience the highest rates of corporal punishment. A study carried out by Young Lives in Andhra Pradesh, India, found that **82% of boys** and **72% of girls** between the ages of 7 and 8 had experienced physical punishment in school in the past week.



### FIND OUT MORE:

<https://www.ungei.org/sites/default/files/Education-data-brief-Global-prevalence-of-school-related-gender-based-violence-SRGBV-2018-eng.pdf>

*UNGEI has recently published a policy note documenting the findings of a pilot project to prevent school-related, gender-based violence in Zimbabwe.*

<https://www.ungei.org/publication/applying-whole-school-approach-prevent-SRGBV-lessons-from-Zimbabwe>

## Myth #5

“Primary school teachers are usually female.”

### **BUSTED:**

In some countries, less than 25% of primary teachers are female.

This is a huge loss, as countries with more female primary teachers are more likely to have higher enrollment rates for girls in secondary schools. Focusing on the enrolment of female teachers,

school leaders and school support staff will provide role models for girls and communities. This is one way to get more girls into school, keep them there and support them while they are there. This is especially true in parts of the world where cultural barriers make it challenging to send girls to school.



### **FIND OUT MORE:**

<https://elearninginfographics.com/tag/unesco-atlas-of-teachers/>

[The importance of female teachers for girls' education, Blog, Global Partnership for Education](#)

# Myth #6

“Climate change is not an education issue.”

## **BUSTED:**

Nearly 40 million children a year have their education interrupted by natural disasters and subsequent disease outbreaks following extreme weather events.

In 2021, climate-related events will prevent at least 4 million girls in low- and lower-middle-income countries from completing their education. If current trends continue, by 2025, climate change will be a contributing factor in preventing at least 12.5 million girls from completing their education each year.

Even though natural disasters do not ‘pick their victims’ based on ethnicity or gender, research consistently shows that women and girls disproportionately suffer as they tend to have access to and control fewer resources that can cope with and support recovery from hazardous events.



## **FIND OUT MORE:**

<https://www.educationcannotwait.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/ECW-Gender-Policy-and-Accountability-Framework.pdf>

# Myth #7

“Education systems should just focus on learning because that is what they are good at.”

## BUSTED:

Strategies to eradicate harmful gender norms – both within education systems and in collaboration with parents, children and youth, teachers, communities and religious leaders – have the power to increase gender equality in education and reduce harmful practices such as child marriage. There are 650 million child brides in the world today, 285 million in South Asia and 215 million in sub-Saharan Africa. Each year of secondary education reduces the likelihood of marriage before the age of 18 by at least five percentage or more in many countries.

Also, did you know textbooks entrench gender norms in some countries, depicting

women in the kitchen or girls carrying water on their heads and men in the office or as doctors in a hospital? Research also shows that verbal and physical spaces in school are gendered, such as boys taking charge of the playground or girls being called on to clean up classrooms. So even when children are learning about mathematics, science and history, they are also subconsciously learning gender stereotypes. Vocational training can also continue to entrench gender norms through the subjects offered to female and male students.

Gender norms reinforce stereotypes of what girls and boys are expected to become – and how they are expected to

behave and define themselves. Leveraging the power of gender-transformative education has enormous social, political and environmental benefits.

And that is not all! Economically, educating girls at the same level as boys could benefit developing countries to the tune of at least \$112 billion a year. Furthermore, advancing gender equality more broadly could contribute \$12 trillion to global growth.

In other words, prioritising gender equality in and through education can transform societies and bring about gender justice, economic justice and social justice.



## FIND OUT MORE:

<https://www.unicef.org/media/59856/file/UNICEF-education-strategy-2019-2030.pdf>

[http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/publication/wcms\\_575499.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_575499.pdf)

<https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/violence/violent-deaths/>

<https://data.unicef.org/resources/child-marriage-latest-trends-and-future-prospects/>

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/immersive-story/2017/08/22/educating-girls-ending-child-marriage>

[https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/featured%20insights/employment%20and%20growth/how%20advancing%20womens%20equality%20can%20add%2012%20trillion%20to%20global%20growth/mgi%20power%20of%20parity\\_full%20report\\_september%202015.pdf](https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/featured%20insights/employment%20and%20growth/how%20advancing%20womens%20equality%20can%20add%2012%20trillion%20to%20global%20growth/mgi%20power%20of%20parity_full%20report_september%202015.pdf)

# Myth #8

“Teaching sexuality education in schools promotes unsafe behaviour in young people.”

## BUSTED:

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) gives young people the knowledge to make informed decisions about relationships and sexuality. It helps them understand and manage their risks concerning sex and relationships. International research has shown that CSE:

- delays initiation of sexual activity
- increases use of condoms and other contraceptives
- decreases risk-taking
- decreases the frequency of unprotected sex

According to UNESCO, only 34% of young people worldwide can demonstrate accurate knowledge of HIV prevention and transmission. A lack of quality, CSE can leave children and young people vulnerable to harmful sexual behaviours and sexual exploitation.

Research also shows that LGBTQ+ young people report disproportionate experiences of depression, bullying, and feelings of unsafety at school. CSE follows the principle that all people should be able to love who they want and gives young people accurate and relevant information to understand and question social norms and

practices concerning sexuality, CSE also contributes to changes beyond health outcomes, including:

- preventing and reducing gender-based and intimate partner violence
- reducing discrimination
- increasing gender-equitable norms
- increasing self-efficacy and confidence
- building stronger and healthier relationships
- improving educational outcomes



## FIND OUT MORE:

[https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000183281\\_eng](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000183281_eng)

<https://en.unesco.org/news/why-comprehensive-sexuality-education-important>

[https://issuu.com/iglyo/docs/iglyo\\_educational-guidelines](https://issuu.com/iglyo/docs/iglyo_educational-guidelines)

[https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260770\\_eng](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260770_eng)

<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000376721>