



## PROTECTING WOMEN AND GIRLS' ACCESS TO EDUCATION

*“There is no justification – be it cultural, economic or social – for denying girls and women an education. It is a basic right and an absolute condition for reaching all the [sustainable development goals]. It is through education that girls and women can gain the freedom to make choices, to shape their future, and to build more inclusive and just societies.”*  
- *Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO, 2009 - Present*

### Statement of the Problem

Education is a basic human right that empowers people to survive and thrive. Although both the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)** and the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child (CRC)** state that “everyone has the right to education,” it is not a priority in many places in the world and in some countries your **gender** determines whether or not you get an education at all. It is noted that 62 million girls around the world are not allowed to attend school or are forced to leave school at an earlier age than boys while millions more are fighting just to stay in the classroom.<sup>1</sup> In many regions where this is still a major issue, there is often a strong cultural, religious, and social link to why girls do not receive equal access to education.

Widely considered to be the most effective weapon against poverty, education can provide future generations with the tools necessary to create peaceful communities, increase civic engagement, and prevent disease. Educated girls are more likely to marry later and have fewer children, who will be more likely to survive and be better nourished and informed. An educated female population also enables women to be more productive at home and better paid in the workplace, which can increase a country's productivity and fuel economic growth. It is estimated that some countries lose more than \$1 billion (USD) a year by failing to educate girls to the same level as boys.<sup>2</sup>



Girls in Cambodia participate in a school mentoring program. (Photo: HerStory Cambodia)

While the world has achieved progress toward equal access to **primary education** for girls and boys under the United Nations' (UN) former **Millennium Development Goals**, there is much work to be done under the UN's current agenda. Women and girls are among the most vulnerable and **marginalized** groups, and continue to suffer **discrimination** and violence in every part of the world. Providing women and girls with equal **access to education**, employment, and representation in social, economic, and political decision-making processes will fuel many of the current **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** and benefit societies and humanity at large.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Global Partnership for Education. 2016. *Factsheet – Girls' Education and Gender Equality*.

<sup>2</sup> Plan International. 2013. *Paying the Price: The Economic Cost of Failing to Educate Girls*.

<sup>3</sup> World Affairs Council of Seattle. 2017. *Sustainable Development Goals: Girls at the Center of Development*.

## History of the Problem

Historically, many regions of the world, at some point in time, have devalued women as members of society and discriminated against them. Traditional misunderstandings have meant that women in some societies have been wrongfully considered weak and less intelligent, thought of as tradeable objects, subjected to unequal treatment, and given both **subservient** and passive roles. This resulted in women not having access to the same educational opportunities as their male counterparts. Eventually, as some nations became more industrialized and women were required to leave home to find employment, the educational environment changed. Consequently, women and girls' access to education became more of a priority on both national and international levels.

The cause of women's rights did not take its rightful place in the modern international agenda until the 1970s. In 1975, a group of women formally met in Mexico City for a conference and eventually formed a special commission dedicated to the women's rights cause. To help women become equal with men, the commission created the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)**. This Convention, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979 and coupled with the CRC, provides a legal framework and a set of measures for the promotion and protection of **human rights** throughout a woman's lifetime.



Girls celebrate the release of *Girl Rising* (2013), a documentary that showcased the stories of nine girls around the world. (Photo: Ten Times Ten LLC)

To complement the CEDAW, the same commission for women passed the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995. The Platform for Action focused on the establishment of shared power and responsibility between women and men at home, in the workplace, and in the wider national and international communities. It defined objectives and actions to be taken by governments, the international community, **non-governmental organizations**, and the **private sector** to remove the barriers to education that prevent women from having access to education, training, and employment. Governments made a commitment to provide universal access to basic education which included: 1) closing the **gender gap** in primary and **secondary school** education by 2005; 2) providing universal primary education in all countries before 2015, and 3) eliminating **gender inequality** in access to all areas of higher education.

Since 2000, there has been remarkable progress made on access to primary education for all. Urged by the UN's Millennium Development Goals and the Education for All Goals, governments worldwide expanded their education systems, built more schools with more teachers, and cut costs associated with schooling in an attempt to ensure that all children complete primary education. Between 2000 and 2015, the number of out-of-school girls was nearly cut in half with women spending more time in school than ever before, an average of 7 years.<sup>4</sup> However the goals were not all fully reached by 2015 and so continued action was needed with an extended deadline of 2030. Recognizing the important role of education, the Sustainable Development Goals now highlight education as a stand-alone goal (SDG 4) and also include specific targets on women and girls' access to education under several other SDGs (SDG 5 and SDG 10).

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<sup>4</sup> Malala Fund and Brookings. 2015. *The World's Best Investment: Girls' Education: Factsheet 1*.

## Key Challenges

Despite the calls for increased commitments in various **international treaties** and other related declarations, recent events and trends show that it is very difficult for many countries in the world to successfully protect women and girls' access to education. The enslavement of Yazidi girls in Iraq, the kidnapping of Chibok girls in northern Nigeria, and the **trafficking** of girls across the Mediterranean Sea are a handful of recent examples that highlight the terrible danger facing girls when they are thought of as tradeable commodities and are not free to learn or make decisions about their lives. Malala Yousafzai is a brave young girl who survived an assassination attempt from the Taliban for blogging and engaging in other high-profile activities that promoted girls' education in Pakistan. After the Taliban outlawed schools for girls in her native Swat Valley, Malala made it her mission to confront some of the many challenges that women and girls face. Cultural, religious, and long-standing social **norms** are key challenges that contribute to the complexity of this issue.

Currently, about one-third of countries in **developing regions** have not achieved **gender equality** in primary education. Being a poor, rural girl is actually a *triple* disadvantage. For example in **sub-Saharan Africa**, it is predicted that all of the richest boys will be completing primary school by 2021, all of the richest girls by 2029, all of the poorest boys by 2069, but the poorest girls on the continent will not complete their primary education until 2086.<sup>5</sup> In sub-Saharan Africa, **Oceania**, and Western Asia, girls still face barriers to enter both primary and secondary school. These disadvantages in education also translate into lack of access to skills and give young women limited opportunities in the work place.



Malala delivers a speech to the UN on her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday.  
(Photo: Stan Honda/AFP/Getty Images)

While many countries have made some progress, millions of girls live in countries where progress has stalled. A recent global study found 80 countries at various levels of economic development where progress on girls' education is severely lagging behind.<sup>6</sup> Two **multilateral** initiatives, the *Global Partnership for Education* and *Education Cannot Wait*, target countries most in need of funding from the **developed countries**. However, funding for both initiatives continues to fall short of targets. Just over half (11) of **G20 members** contribute to the *Global Partnership for Education*. Of those that do contribute, the United Kingdom is the largest single donor while Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, and South Korea



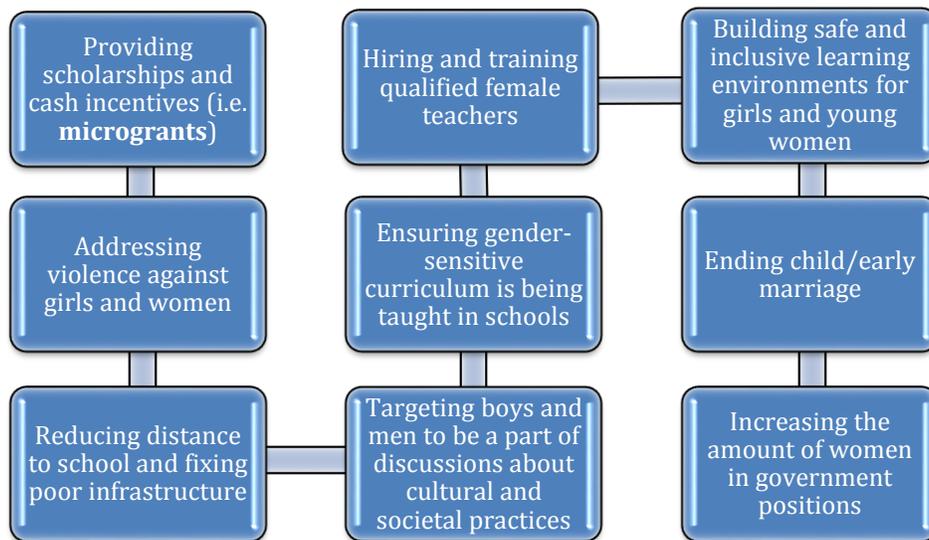
<sup>5</sup> UNESCO. 2014c. *Teaching and Learning: Achieving Quality for All—EFA Global Monitoring Report 2013/4*. Paris: UNESCO.

<sup>6</sup> King, Elizabeth, and Rebecca Winthrop. 2015. *Today's Challenges for Girls' Education*. Washington: Brookings Institution.

have each committed less than 2% of total contributions since 2003. To date, the Education Cannot Wait Fund, which supports education in emergencies, has received contributions from only five of the G20 countries.<sup>7</sup>

### Possible Solutions

Protecting access to education for women and girls includes tackling the root causes of discrimination and breaking the barriers that they face on a daily basis. Some of these barriers are caused by poverty, cultural norms and practices, poor **infrastructure**, and violence. Solving this difficult issue means countries would need to collaborate with governments, non-governmental and international organizations, the private sector, and others to overcome these challenges. The chart below lists just a few examples of the many important areas that delegates could consider when thinking about concrete solutions:



Source: World Bank

### Conclusion

Women and girls represent half the world’s population, so empowering those means empowering societies as a whole. Education is one of the most important investments a country can make in its people and its future. Although various religious, social, and cultural traditions make the issue increasingly complex and there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution for countries to consider, protecting women and girls’ access to education is essential in order to ensure economic security. With a quality education, women and girls can break the vicious cycle of poverty, and help shape the world according to their aspirations. They can make informed choices, improving the lives of their families and communities, and promoting the health and welfare of the next generation. It is critical that **member states** act quickly and cooperatively to address the issues surrounding the protection of women and girls’ access to education. In this committee, delegates will come together to discuss this issue and debate the responsibilities that individual countries have with respect to this global concern.

<sup>7</sup> Malala Fund. 2017. *Safer, Healthier, Wealthier: How G20 Investments Can Improve Our World*.

## Questions to Consider

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- 1) What is the perceived role of women and girls in your assigned country? How does this affect their decision to attend school and find work?

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- 2) How many women and girls are attending schools (primary, secondary, higher education) and entering the workforce in your assigned country? What (if any) workforce inequalities (i.e. pay, mobility, leadership) exist?

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- 3) Are there cultural, social, and/or religious traditions in your assigned country that promote gender inequality? If so, what are they?

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- 4) Are there laws that guarantee equality in your assigned country? If so, what are some examples?

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5) Where does your assigned country rank on the *Girls' Opportunity Index* (see 'Helpful Resources' section) in relation to similar countries (either economically or regionally) and what indicators contribute to its ranking? You can use the *United Nations' Human Development Digital Resource* for help in determining which countries are similar to yours.

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6) Which of the ten barriers to education, listed on page 3, are important to your assigned country and how (on a national or international level) should these be addressed? Are there any other barriers that are not listed that are relevant to your assigned country? What (if anything) is working to address girls' education in your assigned country?

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7) How can girls in your assigned country have more accessible, safer, and longer-lasting opportunities to attend school? Consider some of the solutions on page 4 and any others you come across in your research.

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8) Has your assigned country struggled with poverty? If so, how does access to education relate to poverty issues in your country? How does solving this problem help to solve other issues (i.e gender violence, health, etc.)?

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9) Considering the short and long term impacts, how can protecting women and girls' access to education enhance the overall lives of children, women, and communities as a whole?

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10) Are there any international organizations or regional alliances (with neighboring countries) from which you could seek support in order to achieve your assigned country's goals?

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## Quick Facts

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- Globally, 62 million girls do not attend school.  
*Source: UNESCO Education for All Global Monitoring Report, 2015.*
- It costs on average \$1.25 (USD) a day, per child in developing countries to provide a full cycle of pre-primary through secondary education (13 years). The largest share of this cost, 88%, is endured by the developing countries themselves.  
*Source: Education Costs per Child, Global Partnership for Education, 2017.*
- Two-thirds of the 750 million adults in the world without basic literacy skills are female. Half of adult women in South and West Asia and sub-Saharan Africa cannot read or write.  
*Sources: The World's Women: Trends and Statistics, United Nations, 2015; Education for All Global Monitoring Report, UNESCO, 2015.*
- In sub-Saharan Africa, 75 percent of girls start primary school but only 8 percent finish secondary school.  
*Source: Top Ten List You Don't Want to Be On: Dangerous Places for Girls' Education, Brookings Institution, 2014.*
- Child marriage is among the many barriers to girls' education. More than 700 million women in the world today were married before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and one in three of those women was married before age 15.  
*Source: Every Last Girl, Save the Children, 2016.*
- Long distances to school and the lack of good water and sanitation in schools greatly impact girls' chances of staying and completing their education.  
*Source: Education for All Global Monitoring Report, UNESCO, 2015.*
- As of October 2013, women held only 21.8% of parliamentary positions in single or lower houses and 19.4% of Senate or upper houses.  
*Source: Sustainable Development Goals: Girls at the Center of Development, World Affairs Council of Seattle, 2017.*

## Helpful Resources

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- [CIA World Factbook \(Online Resource for Country Statistics\)](#)  
*A helpful resource that provides information and statistics on a country's history, people, government, economy, geography, and more.*
- [United Nations Human Development Report \(Interactive Map for Country Statistics\)](#)  
*An interactive map that explores human development data around the world.*
- [The Evidence in Girls' Education \(Interactive Map\)](#)  
*An interactive map where you can click on a country to explore case studies and corresponding progress made on girls' education around the world.*
- [Breaking Down the Barriers to Girls' Education \(Infographic\)](#)  
*This infographic lists the top ten barriers to education as identified by the Global Partnership for Education in 2016. Also included are helpful facts and statistics about protecting women and girls access to education.*
- [Girls' Opportunity Index \(Chart\)](#)  
*A snapshot and global ranking of the situation of girls for 144 countries across all income groups and geographical regions. Indicators include child marriage, youth pregnancy, maternal mortality, women in parliament, and lower-secondary school completion for girls.*
- [Global Partnership for Education \(Education Country Profiles – Developing Countries\)](#)  
*An online resource to view Education specific information for a select group of developing countries.*

## Glossary of Terms

Term	Description
<b>access to education</b>	When children are able to go to school, regardless of their gender, or where they come from and where they live. It also means having a safe journey to school, a safe learning environment, and not having to work.
<b>Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)</b>	Often described as an international bill of rights for women, the CEDAW defines what constitutes discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination.
<b>developing countries/regions</b>	Relatively poor, usually agricultural, countries that are seeking to become more advanced economically and socially; Geographical regions for developing countries are as follows: Africa, East Asia, South Asia, Western Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean.
<b>discrimination</b>	When certain groups or individuals are prevented from having the same rights and the same access to services and jobs that others enjoy.
<b>G20</b>	The world's 20 largest economies (19 countries and the European Union). They meet regularly to discuss global financial and economic affairs.
<b>gender</b>	The socially defined set of roles, rights, responsibilities, entitlements and obligations of girls and women and boys and men in societies. The social definitions of what it means to be girls and women or boys and men vary among cultures and change over time.
<b>gender gap</b>	The difference in opportunities between men and women or boys and girls.
<b>gender equality/inequality</b>	The ability to treat women and men equally and work with men and boys to bring about changes in attitudes, behaviors, and roles and responsibilities; When people do not have the same opportunities or do not have access to the same basic services or enjoy the same rights as the rest of the population.
<b>human rights</b>	The rights and freedoms that we are all entitled to including (but not limited to) the right to go to school and to work. Every person has every human right because we are all born equal and should be treated with equal dignity and respect.
<b>infrastructure</b>	The basic physical and organizational structures and facilities (i.e. buildings, roads) needed for a society to operate.
<b>international treaty</b>	A legally-binding written agreement between two or more countries that has been formally approved and signed by their leaders. International organizations such as the UN often lead the work on international treaties.
<b>marginalized</b>	Groups of people that are treated as insignificant or of lower status.
<b>member state</b>	The term used for a country that is a member of an international organization, such as the United Nations.
<b>microgrants</b>	A small sum of money distributed to an individual living on less than \$1 USD/day, or in extreme poverty, for the purpose of creating a sustainable livelihood or small business.
<b>multilateral</b>	Agreed upon or participated in by three or more parties, especially the governments of different countries.
<b>Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)</b>	Eight international goals aimed at eliminating global poverty and inequality that all 193 United Nations member states agreed to try to achieve by 2015.
<b>non-governmental organizations (NGOs)</b>	Non-profit, citizen-based groups or international organizations that are independent of governments. NGOs are typically active in humanitarian, educational, healthcare, public policy, social, human rights, environmental, and other areas to make changes according to their objectives.

<b>norms</b>	Something that is usual, typical, or standard social behavior of a particular group of people.
<b>Oceania</b>	The islands of the southern, western, and central Pacific Ocean, including Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia, Australia, and New Zealand.
<b>parliament</b>	A group of people who make the laws in some countries.
<b>primary school or education/ secondary school or education</b>	A school where children receive primary or elementary education from about the age of five to twelve; Primary school comes after preschool and before secondary school (typically high school) which is schooling between primary school and higher education (college or university).
<b>private sector</b>	All for-profit businesses that are not directly controlled by the government.
<b>sub-Saharan Africa</b>	The area of the continent of Africa that lies south of the Sahara desert. According to the UN, it consists of all African countries that are fully or partially located south of the Sahara.
<b>subservient</b>	Willing to do what other people want, or considering your wishes as less important than those of other people.
<b>Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)</b>	Also known as the Global Goals, the SDGs build on the success of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and aim to go further to end all forms of poverty. The new Goals are unique in that they call for action by all countries, poor, rich and middle-income to promote prosperity while protecting the planet. Goals 4, 5 and 10 pertain to the women and girls' access to education topic the most.
<b>trafficking</b>	To deal or trade in something illegal.
<b>UN Convention on the Rights of a Child (CRC)</b>	An international treaty that spells out the basic <b>human rights</b> that children everywhere have: the right to survival; to develop to the fullest; to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation; and to participate fully in family, cultural and social life. The CRC was adopted by the UN in 1989.
<b>Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)</b>	A famous document adopted by the UN in 1948 that established a common standard of rights that belong to all individuals and nations.