

Briefing Note

Realising SDG Commitments to Gender Equality in Education: Pathways and Priority Actions

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Overview

Education is a human right, recognized and affirmed as such by the global community nearly seventy years ago in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in many subsequent declarations, conventions, and treaties. Yet worldwide, 263 million children and youth are not in school, and girls are more likely than boys to be excluded from education (UNESCO 2016a). A rights-based approach to education means not only that primary education should be free and compulsory for all children— girls and boys— but that children have a right to equitable access to a quality education, and to respect within the learning environment. Effectively addressing issues of access, quality, and respect requires attention to gender-based barriers to education, as well as the ways in which gender intersects with geography, wealth, disability, and other factors to impact the ability of girls and boys to exercise their right to education.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a unique opportunity to achieve real progress toward gender equality at all levels of education. The SDG education targets are comprehensive, high-reaching, and have the potential to drive changes to education that could be transformative for individuals, societies, and economies. They are based on the founding principle of “leaving no one behind,” which requires action to promote gender equality at every level and in all targets. The SDGs and the pledges in the Education 2030 Framework for Action build on in-depth regional and international consultative processes that have generated ownership of the goals and ensured those governments’ priorities, and those of many civil society and private sector stakeholders, are enshrined in the targets. All 193 United Nations (UN) member states have pledged to implement the SDGs and many positive initiatives aimed at fulfilling the commitments on education and gender equality have generated strong momentum.

This note outlines global commitments to gender equality in education in the SDGs and the Education 2030 Framework for Action and highlights subsequent policy initiatives, such as the Education Commission’s report *The Learning Generation: Investing in education for a changing world*, The Global Partnership for Education’s (GPE’s) *Gender Equality and Policy Strategy (2016-2020)* and the Girls’ Education Forum: *Statement of Action to Accelerate Marginalised Girls’ Education Outcomes and Gender Equality (GEF Statement of Action)*, aimed at accelerating progress toward gender equality in education.

‘Realising SDG Commitments to Gender Equality in Education’ synthesises the key policy recommendations found in these initiatives to describe what is required to move from commitments to implementation, including leadership and political will, gender-responsive education systems, financial resources, data and evidence on what works, and special attention to dismantling barriers faced by marginalised groups. This briefing note also highlights some gaps, discusses the SDG accountability framework, and points to areas where the international community needs to step up action rapidly to achieve its goals.

The SDG vision and commitments: girls' education and gender equality

Building on and going beyond MDG commitments

The SDGs express a substantially more ambitious agenda for girls' education than did the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs aimed to achieve universal primary education for all girls and boys (Global Campaign for Education 2015) and to eliminate gender disparity in all levels of education by 2015. Though considerable progress was made over the period from 2000-2015 in increasing girls' and boys' enrolment in primary and secondary education and in reducing gendered enrolment gaps, the MDG education goals remain unmet with 61 million children— an estimated 53 percent of them girls— of primary school age (6-11 years old) out of school (UNESCO 2016a).

Sixty million children of lower secondary school age (12-14 years old) and 142 million children of upper secondary school age (15-17 years old) were out of school for the school year ending in 2014 (UNESCO 2016a). Slightly more than half of these children (52 percent of lower secondary age and 51 percent of upper secondary age) are boys, though gender disparities vary by region and country. Overall, out-of-school girls are more likely never to enter school, while boys have a better chance of going to school at some point (UNESCO 2016a). If past trends continue, the MDG commitments to universal primary education will still be unmet in 2030 (UNESCO 2016b).

SDG 4 expresses a commitment to universalising access to education at all levels (pre-primary through to tertiary education and life-long learning), a specific mandate to promote gender equality in access to education, and broader commitments to redress a range of social inequalities that intersect with gender and undermine access to educational opportunities. These commitments are supported by SDG 5, which outlines a set of measures that create a broader enabling environment for women's and girls' empowerment.

Framework for gender equality in the current education agenda

Transforming Our World, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development lays out the goals and targets that UN member states have adopted, with Goal 4 outlining seven targets and three means of implementation for achieving high quality universal education by 2030. The Incheon Declaration, adopted at the 2015 World Education Forum in Incheon, Republic of Korea, identifies a core set of principles to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” and articulates the global community's commitment to achieving these education goals over the next fifteen years. *The Education 2030 Framework for Action*, adopted by 184 UNESCO member states in November 2015, provides a detailed vision and guidance for translating the principles and aspirations of the Incheon Declaration into action at national, regional, and global levels. It proposes ways of implementing, coordinating, financing, and monitoring SDG 4.

SDG 4 entails a commitment to universalising access at all levels, with 12 years of free, publicly-funded primary and secondary education, a year of pre-primary education, and specific mention of gender inequality as a key barrier to girls' and women's education. The emphasis on access for all, which is core to the SDG agenda, is reflected in pledges to ensure inclusive education and address intersecting inequalities such as the combined effects of gender and disability, poverty, and racial discrimination.

Operationalizing commitments, Education 2030 delineates key actions for governments, civil society, donors, and partners to promote gender-responsive education systems, including:

- Eliminating gender bias and discrimination resulting from social and cultural attitudes and practices and economic status;
- Putting in place gender-sensitive policies, planning, and learning environments;
- Mainstreaming gender issues in teacher training and curricula; and

- Eliminating gender-based discrimination and violence in schools to ensure that teaching and learning have an equal impact on girls and boys, women and men, and to eliminate gender stereotypes and advance gender equality; and
- Taking special measures to ensure the personal security of girls and women in education institutions and on the journey to and from them, in all situations but in particular during conflict and crises (Education 2030 Framework for Action, para. 20)

There is also a commitment to ensuring that education empowers girls and women, boys and men to reach their full potential: “Achieving gender equality requires a rights-based approach that ensures that girls and boys, women and men not only gain access to and complete education cycles, but are empowered equally in and through education” (Education 2030 Framework for Action, para. 10).

The status of gender equality in education

Realistically assessing the current status of gender equality in education in relation to SDG targets (see Annex 2 for detailed analysis of each target) provides a picture of what is needed, as well as a basis for making pragmatic and strategic investments with limited resources. For young people in low- and middle-income countries and within low-income groups, achieving a secondary education remains a challenge. Only half of 15 to 19-year-old boys and girls in 2030 will complete lower secondary education and only 33 percent of boys and 25 percent of girls in low-income countries will complete upper secondary education (UNESCO 2016b). Girls, particularly in low-resourced and conflict settings, face multiple barriers to completion and constitute 53 percent of out-of-school children at the primary level. Girls are also not completing secondary education at the same rate as boys in many developing countries, with particular challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of South Asia.

Educational experiences and outcomes can vary widely within regions based on gender, age, ethnicity, and other factors. For example, financial pressures, gender norms around dominant masculinities, and a disconnect between the labour market and education contribute to massive dropout rates for adolescent boys in Latin America and the Caribbean (Peppen-Vaughan 2016) while indigenous women in Latin America struggle with illiteracy rates that are more than double those of non-indigenous women (ILO 2012). This highlights the need for policies and practices to tackle gender-specific factors that undermine enrolment, participation, and learning (UNESCO 2015c). Achieving universal secondary completion requires an “unprecedented and immediate break with past trends” (Nicolai et al. 2015).

While patterns of gender disparity in learning outcomes and quality of education are complex and vary across countries, some problems are near universal. Girls underperform in mathematics compared to boys in the majority of countries for which evidence is available (UNESCO 2016b) and in most regions women continue to be under-represented in scientific and technical fields of study and skills training (UNESCO 2016b). In low-income countries in 2014, the adult illiteracy rate was 43 percent and the youth illiteracy rate 32 percent. Globally, women make up 63 percent of the 758 million adult population who are illiterate (GEMR Gender Review 2016). Gender disparities are highest in the poorest countries and among low-income groups, and mostly favour men.

The advantages of educating girls and women are manifold, including enhanced personal agency and empowerment. However, greater equality in educational outcomes such as literacy, numeracy, and work-related training does not necessarily lead to equality in opportunities for employment (Peppen Vaughan 2016). Outcomes in girls’ education and women’s employment vary by region, and despite increasing numbers of girls in school, more women than men enter low paid, insecure jobs (ILO 2012).

Achieving the ambitious targets for gender equality in education by 2030 will become progressively harder the longer governments wait to begin. For example, meeting the overall education targets in Sub-Saharan Africa currently requires an annual rate of progress of 14.8 percent, an already challenging pace for countries in this region to attain and maintain.

Some of the education targets are also path-dependent— success in universalising good quality primary and secondary education will greatly contribute to achieving targets 4.3, 4.4, and 4.6 on post-school education, skills development, and adult literacy. Given the scale of the challenge and the consequences of not acting, it is vital to fast-track and front-load investments in education.

Translating aspirations into action

A number of important policy initiatives have taken place since the SDGs were launched to accelerate action toward gender equality in education. Highlights include:

- The Education Commission’s *Learning Generation Report*, which recommends four transformations— “performance,” “inclusion,” “innovation,” and “finance”— to achieve learning for all children, with a particular emphasis on the importance of girls’ education for healthier and wealthier populations;
- The GPE’s *Gender Equality Policy and Strategy (2016-2020)*, which prioritised four areas: gender equality in access, participation, and learning; gender equality in education systems; gender equality in education sector policy and planning; and integrating gender equality within the GPE; and
- The *GEF Statement of Action*, endorsed by donors, international organisations, and other stakeholders, which provides a framework of policy and program actions for meeting the SDG targets: leadership for girls’ education; targeted financing for girls’ education; data and evidence for gender equitable planning and programming; and reducing barriers to girls’ education.

The policy recommendations put forth by these initiatives can be organized into five general categories:

1. ***Promote effective leadership and political will;***
2. ***Strengthen education systems to be gender-responsive;***
3. ***Finance gender equality in education;***
4. ***Generate better data and evidence; and***
5. ***Eliminate barriers and reach the most marginalised.***

1. Promote effective leadership and political will for gender equality in education

Gender equality in education requires action and commitment by both male and female teachers, planners, and administrators (Unterhalter et al. 2014). Building a cadre of women as well as men in leadership and decision-making positions who are committed to promoting gender equality in education and beyond is vital for creating and sustaining the political will to achieve SDGs 4 and 5. An UNGEI consultation conducted in partnership with the Education Commission found that political will was the most commonly identified obstacle to sufficient levels of funding for achieving gender equality in education (UNGEI 2016).

Actions towards SDG 5 (and SDG 4) targets should work synergistically to increase women’s and girls’ full and effective participation in social, economic, and political life.

Capacity for leadership and gender expertise across the education supply chain, from the community level to national and sub-national departments of education, is a prerequisite to advancing gender equality within and through education. Along with promoting greater participation of women in parliament, building gender equality expertise within ministries of finance, justice, social welfare, health, and other allied sectors will enable cross-sectoral leadership for change.

Below are evidence-based strategies shown to have positive outcomes for girls’ education and gender equality:

Empowering teachers and school management for gender equality: Evidence suggests that the gender of a teacher has less effect on students' learning than does their competence (Sperling and Winthrop 2016), so ensuring that male teachers are both well-trained and gender-aware is equally important. Promoting gender-responsive approaches to education— to eradicate gender biases in classroom practices, pedagogy, and learning materials— should be an essential part of pre-and in-service training for both male and female teachers (Wanjana and Njuguna 2015).

Positive role models: Gender-equitable composition of teaching staff and of school senior management can have an important role model effect, as seeing women in positions of power can challenge both boys' and girls' assumptions about gender roles. Though the gender composition of the teaching force varies considerably, in secondary schools in Africa women comprise only about 31 percent of teachers, while data from 12 Southern and Eastern African countries indicate that only 20 percent of head teachers are women (UNESCO 2015). Proportionately fewer women than men achieve senior school management and leadership positions, serve on school boards, or take up education ministerial posts, even in countries where women make up the majority of teachers (UNESCO 2016b). Underrepresentation of men as primary school teachers can perpetuate “stereotypical notions of caring for young children as women’s work and contributes to children’s understandings of gender. More male principals or administrators than male teachers at the primary level also suggests that men may be promoted to management positions more often than women” (Kubacka 2014 in UNESCO 2016b).

Emerging evidence suggests that investing in mentors (such as teacher assistants or counsellors), extra-curricular life skills classes and clubs, and study groups are cost-effective ways to build girls' self-confidence as learners and as valuable members of society, and can lead to improved learning outcomes for both girls and boys. Mentors also act as role models, inspiring girls to continue with their education and study more (CAMFED 2016; Marcus and Page 2016). CAMFED's experience in Zimbabwe and Tanzania suggests that young women who graduate from secondary school can play a vital role in facilitating the next generation of girls' learning, through mentoring them as Learner Guides. Learner Guides are trained to provide life and learning skills, health information, and psycho-social support to help keep vulnerable children in school. In exchange for this volunteer work, Learner Guides have access to vocational training to expedite entry into teacher training college, interest-free loans for growing a business, and mobile phones for connectivity. Well-respected in their communities, Learner Guides frequently take on formal and informal leadership roles, including running for public office (CAMFED 2017).

The SDG emphasis on gender-sensitive, non-violent, and inclusive teaching and learning environments, as well as infrastructure, scholarships, and availability of trained teachers, seeks to address barriers to access and quality. The Education Commission's report *The Learning Generation: Investing in education for a changing world* notes that it is also critical to enhance teacher salaries and working conditions. Although global evidence on gender gaps in teacher training and recruitment is not available, there is a strong case for ensuring gender parity among teachers and in education leadership positions in order to improve women and girls' participation and promote gender equality.

2. Strengthen systems to be gender-responsive

Developing organisational commitment to and capacity for achieving gender equality at all levels of the education system— from education ministries through to schools— is vital for creating equal learning opportunities for girls, boys, men, and women and for ending gender-discrimination in education. The emphasis in the GPE's strategy for 2016-2020 (GPE 2016) on developing gender-responsive education sector plans helps focus efforts to address gender inequities during the national education planning phase. The [Guidance for Developing Gender-Responsive Education Sector Plans](#) developed by UNGEI with the GPE provides a set of guidelines for ministries of education to integrate gender analysis within the education sector planning and budgeting processes. It helps equip government officials, educators, civil society, and other stakeholders to systematically review, analyse, and address gender inequalities with national Education Sector Plans (ESPs). It also provides guidance for finance ministries to engage in

policy dialogue with education ministries so that ESPs are supported by gender-responsive budgets, implementation, procurement, human resources, and monitoring. The first ESPs developed according to these guidelines will be an important resource for other education planners in similar contexts to use as models.

Other key elements of a gender-responsive education system are:

- **A legal and policy framework for gender equality within and outside the education system that supports the rights of vulnerable populations**, especially girls from minority groups in rural and remote locations or those with disabilities. Gender analysis of policies and laws that have a direct and indirect impact on gender equality should be integrated within national policy dialogues and planning processes. For example, implementing policies for ending child marriage and for increasing access to comprehensive sexuality education and youth-friendly reproductive health services (in order to help prevent early pregnancy, gender-based violence, and HIV/AIDS) requires collaboration across different ministries.
- **Gender-responsive budgeting**, a useful tool for ensuring that activities proven to help promote gender equality and make schools more gender-responsive and inclusive are incorporated into national plans and are adequately financed. Where capacity in gender-responsive budgeting (or broader equity-focused budgeting) is limited, the international community can play a strategic role in providing technical and financial support.
- **Gender-responsive pedagogy**, which, when embedded in teacher training and school curricula and learning approaches, fosters equal treatment and participation of girls and boys by equipping teachers to understand and address their specific learning needs. This is not currently a standard element of pre- or in-service teacher training. Gender-responsive pedagogy equips teachers to design and use **gender-sensitive teaching materials and curricula**, in order to eliminate gender bias that can shape and solidify negative attitudes and perceptions among teachers and students and have an impact on girls' and boys' participation and performance in school (GEMR Policy Paper 28 2016). Reviewing and updating curricula to portray women and men in equal and mutually respectful roles and relationships will enforce a culture of equality within schools and has the potential to transform gender relations. This could be monitored by reporting efforts to review content and production of materials that are free of gender bias and that promote gender equality.
- **Eliminating gender-based violence in schools** and creating safe learning environments is crucial to student and teacher well-being and sets the stage for improved learning outcomes. Addressing and preventing school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) includes a school-wide recognition of the different forms of violence affecting boys and girls and implementing school codes of conduct to prevent violence. Promising approaches on SRGBV include creating safe spaces for girls and boys to discuss issues of gender, equality, and violence; providing opportunities for teachers to build skills to address SRGBV; creating mechanisms in schools to encourage reporting of violence; and promoting the use of positive forms of discipline along with enforcing a legal ban on corporal punishment. Several of these actions require dedicated resources and a plan for implementation at the national, provincial, and school levels. In addition, credible education sector plans can also include measures to protect groups further marginalized because of sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnic and religious background, and disability.

The *Education 2030 Framework for Action* highlights some additional approaches to improving quality, related to supporting teachers' development, conditions, and remuneration, and improving school governance. While these are not gender-targeted, they are an important part of the overall set of actions necessary to promote equal educational opportunities for all. Likewise, greater emphasis on mother-tongue instruction or bilingual education can help enhance learning and thus reduce drop-out caused by disengagement from schooling. Research has shown that girls are more likely to enrol in school when they can learn in a familiar language and teachers from the same linguistic and cultural communities as their students are less likely to exploit female students (UNESCO Bangkok 2005). Gender-integrated approaches within broader quality improvements

and initiatives that increase learning and retention for marginalised girls and boys will also contribute to gender equality outcomes.

3. Finance gender equality in education

Current funding allocated to achieve SDG 4 falls well short of what is needed. Education spending in low- and middle-income countries will need to rise from \$1.2 trillion per year in 2014 to \$3 trillion in 2030, with \$102 billion per year in the least developed countries (Education Commission 2016). Filling this gap will require substantially increasing resource mobilisation from both domestic and international sources (Box 1). Initiatives such as the Girls Education Challenge Fund funding window announced in 2016, and commitments made at the Girls' Education Forum in 2016 (UK DFID 2016) contribute to filling funding gaps. In order to reach the 63 million girls who are currently missing out on an education, similar efforts are needed not only to fund targeted interventions but also rigorous applied research and evaluation that contribute to the body of knowledge on effective strategies.

Box 1: Key approaches to filling the funding gap for SDG 4

Filling the funding gap for SDG 4 will require:

- 1) Domestic resource mobilisation**, with countries spending at least 4 to 6 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) or allocating at least 15 to 20 percent of public expenditure to education (UNESCO et al. 2015).
- 2) Significantly more efficient resource usage** through improved financial management, making better use of existing expenditure, and investing in practices shown to produce results. Priorities include: increasing contact hours, reducing teacher absenteeism, and ending corruption in education procurement (UNESCO et al. 2015).
- 3) Increased international financing to education, and in particular:**
 - **donors increasing overall aid commitments** to 0.7 percent of gross national income (GNI), ensuring that 0.15 to 0.2 percent of GNI goes to least developed countries and that the share of bilateral aid that goes to education rises from 10 to 15 percent (Education Commission 2016);
 - **targeting education aid more effectively to low income countries** where enrolment rates are lowest, and gender disparities often highest. Only 24 percent of all education overseas direct assistance (ODA) was disbursed to low-income countries in 2014 (Education Commission, 2016);
 - **targeting education aid more effectively to reach children and young people in fragile and conflict-affected states and those affected by natural hazards**, and increasing the proportion of humanitarian aid devoted to education to 4 to 6 percent (Education Commission 2016). This could be channeled through the Education Cannot Wait Fund (Nicolai et al. 2016).

The estimates of funds needed for SDG 4 factor in the costs of getting all children into school for at least 12 years and of providing a high-quality education. They do *not* include gender-targeted approaches, investments that will be necessary to support systems to be gender-responsive, or innovative approaches to boost learning and increase access and quality of education for the most disadvantaged girls and boys. Additionally, as laid out in the *GEF Statement of Action*, there is a need to understand the costs and benefits of different forms of public and private sector engagement in education in relation to gender equality outcomes, and to ensure that new financing partners pay full attention to gender equality issues. This will be of particular importance given the urgent need to mobilise new sources of funds to meet the ambitious targets of the SDGs and Education 2030 Framework for Action.

Gender-targeted financing strategies that will advance gender equality and reach the most marginalised girls include:

- **Investing an adequate share of public financial resources in education**, in order to fully fund efforts to make education gender-responsive. This is broadly acknowledged to be at least 20 percent of national budgets (Archer 2017).
- **Increase funds available for investing in education by expanding the tax base and growing the national budget.** Emphasis should be on progressive taxation (e.g. targeting harmful tax incentives, aggressive tax avoidance, and high incomes and wealth) rather than regressive taxes that often disproportionately affect women. Ensure that additional funds are spent to increase gender equality in education (Archer 2017).
- **Increasing transparency and accountability in the budgeting process and budgeting for financing gender-responsive education**, including public spending on targeted groups and regions, especially regions where girls underperform the most.
- **Invest in effective strategies to reduce the cost born by poor families**, including removing school fees and all additional costs, and providing scholarships, subsidies, stipends, and family saving schemes.
- **Finance good quality interventions with proven gender outcomes**, such as teacher support and gender-responsive curricula and teaching and learning materials. Direct more funding to areas of education that have a large impact on gender equality, as early childhood education, which can help reduce unpaid care work by women and girls (Archer 2017).

4. Generate data and evidence for gender-responsive planning and programming

Efforts are under way to strengthen national statistical capacity to generate and analyse data on all SDG goals and targets via programmes such as the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data (www.data4sdgs.org/toolbox) and the Paris 21 initiative (www.paris21.org). Robust monitoring, evaluation, and learning is dependent on the availability of better data, which the Technical Cooperation Group for SDG 4 – Education 2030 is leading the charge to generate. This, in turn, supports effective advocacy and policy-making that is based on sound evidence.

In addition to global monitoring, there is a need to fill knowledge gaps by generating evidence from interventions in different contexts on effective and cost-effective ways to support girls' education and promote gender equality at scale. Impact and mixed-method evaluations and qualitative and longitudinal studies are needed to uncover factors preventing the poorest and most marginalised girls and boys from completing a basic cycle of education, as well as the solutions that are working in specific environments, including in humanitarian situations. Development partners can ensure that this emerging evidence is synthesised and feeds into government and national policy dialogues about strategies for gender-responsive education.

A great deal of work is under way to generate detailed, sex-disaggregated data for monitoring progress on SDG 4, spearheaded by the Technical Cooperation Group for SDG 4—Education 2030. In addition to global indicators, 43 internationally-comparable indicators will take more specific local or national concerns into account (UNESCO 2016c).

An evidence-based approach embedded within the education system would entail:

- **Collecting and analysing data on the household and government costs of educating the most marginalised, and the intersecting inequalities that contribute to the marginalisation of girls.** To identify the resources required to plan, budget, and monitor gender-responsive education interventions, planners and policymakers need data on the costs of approaches to mainstream gender equality versus targeted gender strategies.

- **Improve national information systems to track gender-related education data and make public resource** allocations for gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment in education.
- **Build the evidence base on what works to improve access, participation, and quality of education for adolescent and marginalised girls**, including literacy, numeracy and life skills that contribute to positive outcomes for girls through the entire development cycle.

Monitoring progress against a set of indicators for gender equality in education is equally important. Table 3 shows key relevant indicators for monitoring progress on gender equality in education. Broader trends that may influence progress (e.g. progress on gender-equitable policy frameworks or discriminatory gender norms) should be factored into the interpretation of data. New data on such issues is likely to be generated through monitoring of other goals, particularly Goal 5.

5. Eliminate barriers and reach the most marginalised

Reducing barriers to marginalised girls' education typically requires a combination of investment in infrastructure (such as transportation, sanitation, and accessibility for those with disabilities), curriculum change (such as including comprehensive sexuality education or employing mother-tongue or bilingual teaching), and actions to transform discriminatory social norms and to guarantee rights to education and gender equality. Gaining support for measures such as comprehensive sexuality education will also require sustained advocacy with policy makers within the education system and with communities. Together, strengthened leadership, increased resources, and robust evidence concerning specific gaps and effective strategies will help governments and education systems reduce barriers to girls' education.

Over the years, projects and programs aimed at eliminating barriers to education faced by marginalised girls have yielded a number of key good practices, including:

- **Applying a “gender lens” to the entire environment for learning** to understand gender norms, roles, and relationships and how these affect access to and control of services and resources. Gender analysis is also important for anticipating how policies and programs may affect girls and boys and men and women differently, as well as impact the relationships between them. Because marginalised girls are not a homogenous group, efforts to address their barriers to education must take into account their individual challenges and environments. Employing strong gender equality and social inclusion standards is key to ensuring that projects are designed, implemented, monitored, and evaluated to reduce gender inequality and avoid doing harm (GEC 2017).
- **Investing in changing social norms around girls' education** through media, advocacy, legislation, and community engagement, and promoting linkages between education, child protection, and legal frameworks that support the rights and participation of girls and women. These actions will create more gender-responsive systems and enable girls to transition through school. CARE Somalia found success in challenging harmful norms around child and early marriage and girls' education by engaging with religious and community leaders who shared messages via Friday prayers and radio shows (GEC 2017);
- **Addressing intersecting forms of marginalisation** that combine to limit the educational opportunities of children marginalised in multiple ways. Additional efforts will be needed to scale up education provision, to provide physical access, train teachers in more inclusive approaches, and, where necessary, address cost barriers, in order to tackle obstacles that intersect with gender inequality to limit access to education. In particular, efforts are required to ensure good quality provision in regions affected by conflict, among mobile populations, to children currently forced to learn in languages they do not speak or understand well, and people living in isolated areas. Leonard Cheshire Disability (LCD) employs a holistic approach to address the institutional, attitudinal (e.g. myths and

misconceptions), and physical/environmental barriers to education faced by girls and boys with disabilities in Kenya. In addition to the interventions listed above, the LCD approach includes tactics like working with male mentors and providing support to fathers, working with existing government infrastructure and engaging with the government at local, regional, and national levels, and provide psychosocial support and counselling to girls (Leonard Cheshire Disability 2017).

- **Paying attention to marginalised boys.** Care must be taken with the design of interventions and spending policies so that they do not unwittingly marginalise boys and generate backlash, as occurred with Bangladesh's secondary school stipends for girls (Asadullah and Khan 2009; Arends-Kuening and Amin 2004). More effective, workable approaches should be based on sound gender analysis that examines who is marginalised and why, so that programming can address these issues. This may involve pro-poor targeting and expanding opportunities for marginalised girls and boys, rather than ring-fencing funding and support for girls. For example, a midline assessment of a Girls' Education Challenge project by ChildHope in Ethiopia showed that girls were experiencing anger or violence from boys who felt excluded from the project. "Good Brothers' Clubs" were launched to help boys understand the need for girls' education and the ways in which they benefited from the project as well (GEC 2017)
- **Engaging in effective cross-sectoral action.** Recognising that some of the actions promoting gender equality in education lie outside the education system, cross-sectoral action such as engaging child protection actors on issues like gender-based violence and child marriage or with legal systems to bring offenders to justice. Effort and funding are required to build the relevant working relationships, and it may be necessary to involve less obvious actors in order to create effective partnerships. For example, working with transport planners to ensure safer journeys to and from school. Cross-sectoral linkages of this kind are integral to the SDGs, for which working in partnerships and outside sectoral silos is a foundational principle. It is often challenging practically, particularly in low-income countries with under-resourced local line ministries, and an area where the international community could play a catalytic role.
- **Prioritising youth and adult skills development, literacy, and numeracy** (targets 4.4 and 4.6). The scale of skills development opportunities for marginalised young people continues to be limited and many such programmes are not sufficiently gender-responsive (Katz 2008). Catch-up basic education programmes for adults continue to be a low priority in education budgets. With women over-represented among the world's illiterate population and with the multiplier effects of women's education well-recognised, a specific set of commitments and a plan of how to achieve these targets are needed.

Accountability for achieving gender equality in education

A strong accountability framework enables on-going monitoring of progress and makes it possible for citizens to hold their governments answerable for fulfilling their commitments under the SDGs. The accountability mechanisms for achieving SDG commitments primarily consist of peer review within regional fora, and country and thematic reviews at the High Level Political Forum (HLPF) and within working groups on particular goals. The 2017 HLPF thematic review of SDG 5 underscores the interlinkages between SDGs, including the importance of education for achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls. It advocates for significant increases in spending for gender equality, coupled with transparent systems for tracking and making public these expenditures in order to increase accountability (UN ECESA Plus 2017). In November 2017, two ministerial-level panel debates will take place in Paris to facilitate knowledge sharing on what works to strengthen accountability in the implementation of SDG 4-Education 2030. The Education Goal will be reviewed in 2019, by which time monitoring data should reveal where early investments have borne fruit as well as where progress is slow and concerted advocacy is needed to galvanise action to close the gaps.

These review processes are key moments to bring policymakers and public attention to the extent of progress on gender equality in education and to areas where progress is lagging, and to spur renewed commitment to action. If a lack of progress is identified among particular targets, regions, or social groups, it will be important to examine why and take early actions to address shortcomings.

Coalitions of different groups of stakeholders from civil society and the international community, among others, will need to keep a spotlight on change processes, successes, and weaknesses and advocate for changed strategies if necessary. The UN Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) for example, leverages the collaborative advantage of a far-reaching network of global, regional and country partners to advocate for advancing gender equality in and through education and for the empowerment of women and girls. At the regional level, transnational networks for sharing effective strategies to monitor and hold governments to account on progress could play a vital role in keeping up momentum for achievement of the gender equality elements of SDG 4.

A Special Representative on Education, if appointed as per the recommendations of the High Level Education Commission in 2016, could be an important ally in keeping girls' education issues high on the global planning and steering committee agendas. Malala Yousafzai, a child rights advocate and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, has recently been appointed a UN Messenger of Peace with a special focus on girls' education. In this role, she will continue her efforts to promote gender equality in education and will raise awareness of the UN's efforts in this area (UN News Centre 2017). Engaged civil society movements can play a crucial role in keeping up pressure for gender equality in all sectors of society (Htun and Weldon 2013), including education and areas that impact on education.

Conclusion

In aiming to universalise access to education at all levels, from pre-primary through to tertiary and life-long learning, promoting gender equality in access, and emphasizing inclusive education that for all, the SDGs are more ambitious than the MDGs with regard to gender equality in education and gender equality more broadly. They represent not only a chance to redress short-comings of the MDGs in relation to gender equality, they also provide an opportunity to put in place stronger accountability and learning mechanisms to help monitor progress and ensure that goals are met and that governments honour their commitments.

A hard look at the current status of gender equality in education reveals significant gaps and challenges, particularly in secondary school access, transition, and completion for both girls and boys and in women's literacy, but also makes it possible to develop a realistic roadmap toward achieving SDG 4 and contributing to the achievement of SDG 5. Policy initiatives from the Education Commission, the GPE, UNGEI, and other stakeholders have produced a series of recommendations to accelerate investment and action while making strategic and cost-effective choices that build on what works to support gender equality in education. These recommendations emphasise the need for effective leadership and political will, strengthening education systems to be gender responsive, ensuring adequate financing, generating better data and evidence, and removing barriers to reach the most marginalised. They are time-sensitive, in that the longer countries wait to implement them the harder it will become to achieve the Education 2030 agenda. But they are also complementary and mutually reinforcing in many cases, such that progress in any one area will help spur and bolster progress in other areas and increase momentum towards the end goal.

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Annex 1

Table 1: Key Commitments to Gender Equality in Vision 2030

Element	Commitment/Statement	Key Documents
Emphasis on empowerment	<i>“Achieving gender equality requires a rights-based approach that ensures that girls and boys, women and men not only gain access to and complete education cycles, but are empowered equally in and through education.”</i>	Education 2030 Framework for Action
	<p><i>“All youth and adults, especially girls and women, should be provided with opportunities to achieve relevant and recognized functional literacy and numeracy proficiency levels and acquire skills for life and decent work.”</i></p> <p>We recognize the importance of gender equality in achieving the right to education for all.</p>	Incheon Declaration
Attention to intersecting inequalities	By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in vulnerable situations.	Target 4.5, SDG Declaration
Gender-sensitive policy and planning	<i>“We are therefore committed to supporting gender-sensitive policies, planning and learning environments.”</i>	Incheon Declaration
Gender-sensitive school environments, teaching and curricula	<p><i>“We are therefore committed to supporting gender-sensitive ... learning environments; mainstreaming gender issues in teacher training and curricula; and eliminating gender-based discrimination and violence in schools.”</i></p> <p><i>“To ensure gender equality, education systems must act explicitly to eliminate gender bias and discrimination resulting from social and cultural attitudes and practices and economic status. Governments and partners need to put in place gender-sensitive policies, planning and learning environments, mainstream gender issues in teacher training and curricula monitoring processes, and eliminate gender-based discrimination and violence in education institutions to ensure that teaching and learning have an equal impact on girls and boys, women and men, and to eliminate gender stereotypes and advance gender equality. Special measures should be put in place to ensure the personal security of girls and women in education institutions and on the journey to and from them, in all situations but in particular during conflict and crises.”</i></p>	<p><i>Incheon Declaration</i></p> <p>Education 2030 Framework for Action, para. 20</p>
Emphasis on empowerment	<i>“Achieving gender equality requires a rights-based approach that ensures that girls and boys, women and men not only gain access to and complete education cycles, but are empowered equally in and through education.”</i>	Education 2030 Framework for Action