

FACTSHEET #1:

BUSTING MYTHS ON GIRLS' EDUCATION AND GENDER EQUALITY

This document was developed jointly by the UN Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) and the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) to challenge widely held myths that can have a significant and persistent negative impact on the rights and education of women and girls. Bringing evidence and data to the fore is an important step towards shifting harmful beliefs and attitudes prevalent in education policy, dialogue, and practice, driving progress towards gender equality in and through education.

MYTH #1:

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



Busted:

According to UNICEF, [only 19% of low-income countries and 17% of low- and middle-income countries have achieved gender parity](#). In addition, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics estimates that girls are 1.5 times more likely than boys to be excluded from primary school. That is 15 million girls of primary school age who will never attend primary school, compared to around 10 million boys. [Global-level data masks pockets of inequality and educational disadvantage](#). This is particularly true in the context of Covid-19, where emerging evidence suggests:

- ★ In Malawi, [the dropout rate among girls in secondary education increased by 48%](#) (from 6.4% to 9.5% between 2020 and 2021);
- ★ In Bangladesh, [one in ten girls aged 12-15 reported not going back to school](#) once systems reopened after COVID-19 induced school closures;
- ★ In Ghana, where national re-enrolment was high at 97 percent, [60 percent of the dropouts were girls](#).

MYTH #2:

“Girls are always more disadvantaged than boys in education. Working for boys' education is not part of gender equality.”



Busted:

According to UNICEF, [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 are highly context-specific and manifest differently due to intersecting factors such as income, age, ethnicity, race, and disability. In Eswatini and Jamaica, for example, boys have been out of school more than girls for many years](#). This is against their rights. Gender barriers – whether related to gangs, child labour, of conflict - keep boys out of school. [Transforming harmful gender norms within and beyond education will benefit all learners](#).

MYTH #3:

“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 sexual violence, the fear of sexual violence, bullying, and corporal punishment. Globally, an estimated 246 million children and adolescents experience school violence and bullying in some form every year.

- ★ [Girls are more likely to be victims of non-consensual sex attempts in schools when the perpetrator is a teacher.](#)
- ★ [Approximately one in three girls between the ages of 13 and 15 worldwide experience bullying on a regular basis.](#)
- ★ [LGBTQ+ young people report disproportionate experiences of depression, bullying, and feelings of unsafety at school.](#)
- ★ [In Mozambique, in a Ministry of Education study, 70% of girl respondents reported knowing that some teachers use sexual intercourse as a condition for promotion between grades.](#)
- ★ [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.](#)

School-related gender-based threatens the rights, ability to learn, safety, physical health, and emotional wellbeing of learners across the globe. Ending gender-based violence in and around schools requires a **whole school approach** to shift gender attitudes and beliefs which underpin this violence.

MYTH #4:

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

Busted:

Let's take (1) child marriage and (2) climate change as examples. Why are these education issues?

1. There are [650 million child brides in the world today](#). Each year of secondary education may reduce the likelihood of marrying before 18 by five percentage points or more in many countries. [Strategies to transcend harmful gender norms](#) – both within education systems and in collaboration with parents, children, youth, civil society, young feminist activities, teachers and school leaders, communities, and religious leaders – can increase gender equality in education **reduce harmful practices**.
2. Nearly [40 million children a year have their education interrupted by natural disasters](#) and subsequent disease outbreaks following extreme weather events. 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. The impacts of this are doubled down when you consider that **girls' education and empowerment are critical tools in the fight for climate justice**.

CSE also contributes to positive 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;
- ★ and improving educational outcomes.

MYTH #6:

“Schools should be about mathematics, science, languages, history and geography. That is what children need to learn.”

Busted:

Okay - but did you know that [textbooks deliberately 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 huge social, political and environmental benefits](#).

UNGEI is a global, intergenerational and multistakeholder platform. Through evidence building, coordinated advocacy and collective action, the UNGEI partnership works to advance progress for girls' education and gender equality in education.

Do you have any other myths we can bust?
Contact gdiamond@ungei.org.

MYTH #5:

“Teaching children and youth about sexuality education in schools will increase promiscuity, homosexuality, and STIs”

Busted:

According to UNESCO, [only 34% of young people around the world can demonstrate accurate knowledge of HIV prevention and transmission](#). A lack of quality, comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) can leave children and young people vulnerable to inaccurate information, harmful sexual behaviours and sexual exploitation. A review by UNESCO found [no correlation between CSE programmes and earlier sexual activity in young people](#). It also found that more than a third of the sexuality education programs increased condom or contraceptive use, while more than half reduced sexual risk-taking. CSE does not promote homosexuality or endorse or campaign for any particular lifestyle. [CSE promotes quality education, health, and well-being for all](#). It equips young people with accurate and relevant information to understand and question social norms and practices concerning sexuality, gender and relationships and contribute positively to society.

