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Summary

# 12 Years of Quality Education for All Girls: A Commonwealth Perspective

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For more information on the Platform for Girls' Education and its members, please visit:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-hosts-first-platform-for-girls-education-meeting>

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Community outreach. © Eliza Powell / Campaign for Female Education (CAMFED)

## Foreword by Co-Chairs of the Platform for Girls' Education

More children are in school globally than ever before, but 262 million are not and 617 million – over half the school-age population worldwide – are not reaching minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics. The Agenda for Sustainable Development agreed by all UN member states in 2015 includes a commitment to quality primary and secondary education for all children by 2030.

At the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in London in April 2018, Leaders of the 53 Commonwealth nations affirmed their commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals and stressed the need for action to empower young people and expand opportunity for 12 years of quality education. As home to over half of the world's out of school children, Commonwealth countries have a major role to play in realising the global goals on education and there is much they can do to learn from and support one another – from bilateral cooperation between countries such as the UK and Kenya, to meetings of the Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers.

Guided by the “leave no one behind” principle, Commonwealth Leaders recognised the particular importance of expanding educational opportunities for marginalised groups including disadvantaged girls. The Platform for Girls' Education, which we are proud to co-chair, is a response to that challenge. At the Platform's inaugural meeting in September 2018, we asked Professor Pauline Rose to prepare a report on the state of girls' education in the Commonwealth to guide our collective work ahead of CHOGM 2020 in Rwanda. We are grateful to Professor Rose and her team, as well as to others involved, for the quality of the resulting product.

As set out in the report, many Commonwealth countries have made good progress towards gender parity in education, with girls out-performing boys in some countries. There is an overarching imperative to expand educational opportunities for both girls and boys. However, girls remain particularly disadvantaged in many countries and there is a compelling case for targeted efforts to support them. Not only is this the right thing to do, it is also one of the smartest investments we can make in building more prosperous, fair and resilient societies based on an “invisible chain” of shared values. Educated girls marry later, earn more, and have healthier families.

Sadly, 12 years of quality education remains a distant reality for millions of girls. Urgent action is needed and this report points the way forward through a comprehensive survey of “what works” in breaking down the barriers. We will do all we can, along with other members of the Platform for Girls' Education, to keep this issue high on the political agenda and to promote concrete action. We invite you to join us.

**THE RT HON JEREMY HUNT MP**  
Secretary of State for Foreign and  
Commonwealth Affairs, United Kingdom

**AMB. (DR.) AMINA C. MOHAMED, EGH, CAV**  
Cabinet Secretary for Education,  
Kenya

# Overview

## What Works for Marginalised Girls' Education?

### A. Leadership and financing

1. Visible high-level political commitment backed up with resources.
2. Grassroots leadership increasing awareness about the value of girls' education.
3. Formula funding targeting resources at those most at risk of being left behind.
4. Use of data to inform policy change.

### B. Targeted approaches

5. Prioritising early childhood education and early learning.
6. Addressing multifaceted challenges that girls face when they reach puberty.
7. Eliminating cost barriers.
8. Tackling disadvantages that intersect with gender, such as disability, location, poverty.

### C. Tackling discrimination

9. School environments that are safe spaces.
10. Gender-sensitive teaching practices and materials.
11. Promoting women's economic empowerment and providing pathways to productive work.
12. Tackling access and learning simultaneously, with sufficient resources.

## Priorities for further action

### 1. Visible political leadership

Ensuring high-level, visible political leadership that promotes education planning adopting a gender equality and empowerment lens and commits sufficient resources to reach the most marginalised girls.



### 2. Investing in early years' education

Tackling barriers to education for marginalised girls in the early years before they become entrenched, and prioritising domestic and international financing towards this.



### 3. Making girls' education a national development priority

Anchoring gender-inclusive education strategies in wider national development planning and cross-sectoral collaboration to ensure socio-cultural barriers are tackled, such as those related to gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health, girls' unpaid work, and limited productive employment opportunities.



**In 2015 leaders from across the globe pledged to achieve inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030. The first target of this education Sustainable Development Goal committed to ensuring that all children – regardless of their gender and circumstances within which they are born – should complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education. The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in April 2018 affirmed the importance of 12 years of quality education for all, particularly marginalised groups including disadvantaged girls. The Platform for Girls’ Education was launched in response to this commitment to “leave no girl behind”, with the aim of driving forward action in the run-up to CHOGM 2020.**

To support the Platform for Girls’ Education, this Report aims to situate the current evidence on girls’ education across the 53 countries in the Commonwealth, with a particular focus on low- and lower-middle income countries where the challenges are the greatest. It identifies the current situation of access to school and learning together with trends in domestic and aid financing to support the targets. It then presents evidence on interventions aimed at tackling barriers to girls’ access and learning in order to move forward towards achieving the commitments that have been made. It notes the distinction between gender parity in education – i.e. an equal proportion of girls and boys in school and learning – and the more ambitious goal of gender equality which involves wider steps to end discrimination and create a truly level playing field.

## **Where are we now in achieving gender parity?**

### **Trends in access, learning and finance**

**Over the past 20 years, considerable progress has been made in increasing access to primary schooling,** with gender parity in primary enrolment being achieved in **31** out of **44** Commonwealth countries with data.

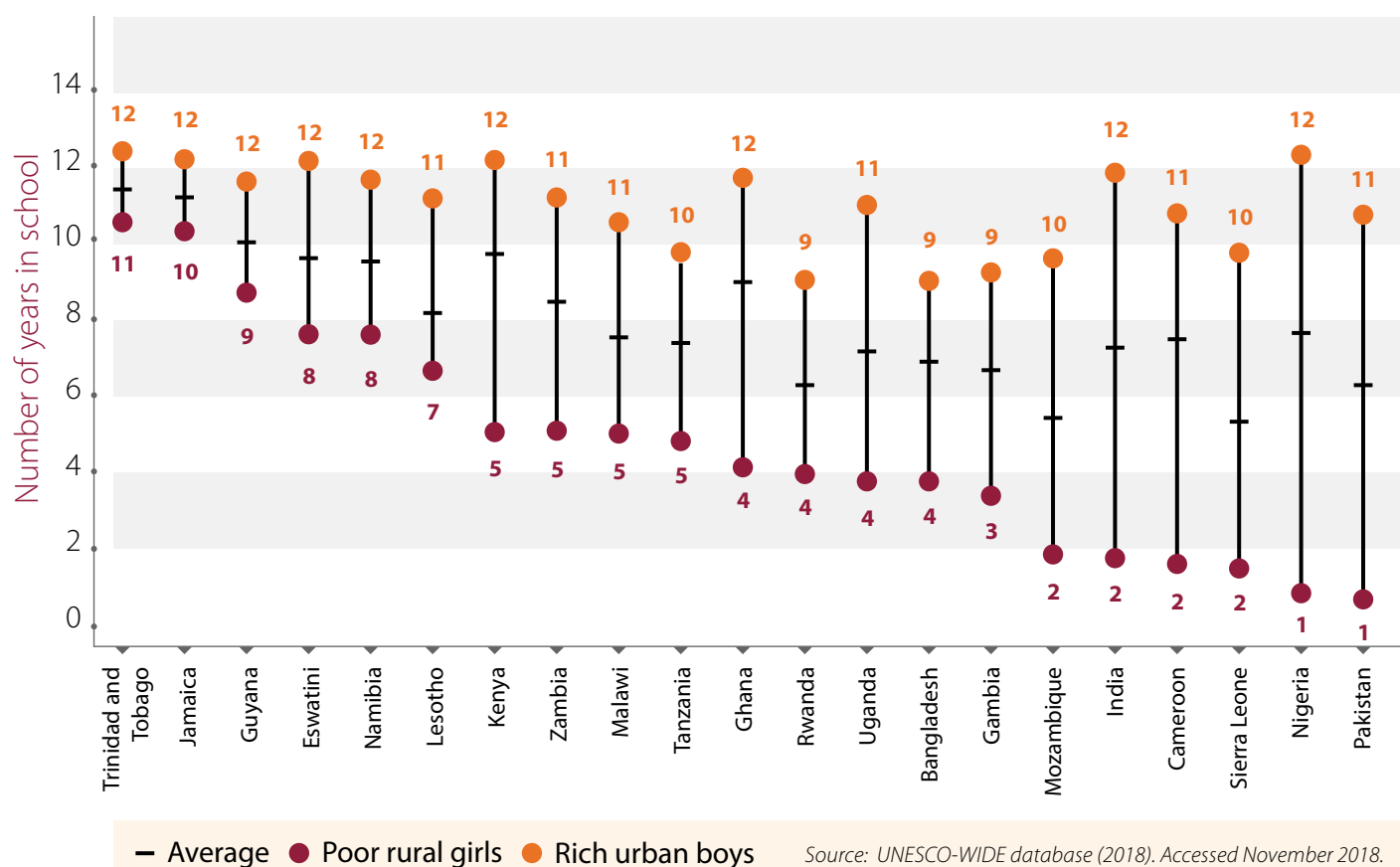
**Despite this progress, 12 years of schooling remains a distant reality for many of the most disadvantaged girls residing in Commonwealth countries.** Gender parity has sometimes been achieved even though primary schooling is still not universal: in 12 of the 31 countries that have achieved gender parity more than 10 out of every 100 primary-aged girls are not in primary school. Moreover, in 2017, 137 million primary-and-secondary school aged children were out of school in these countries, of which approximately half were girls. These children represented just over half of the global out-of-school population, despite comprising just over one-third of the world’s school-aged population. In 15 out of 21 Commonwealth countries with available data, poor rural girls spend no more than five years in school, and so have little chance of making the transition to secondary school (Figure 1). Children and adolescents affected by conflict are most likely to be out of school. Refugee girls are particularly at risk: they are half as likely as their male counterparts to be in secondary school.





**Figure 1: In 15 Commonwealth countries, a girl from a poor rural household has no more than five years of schooling**

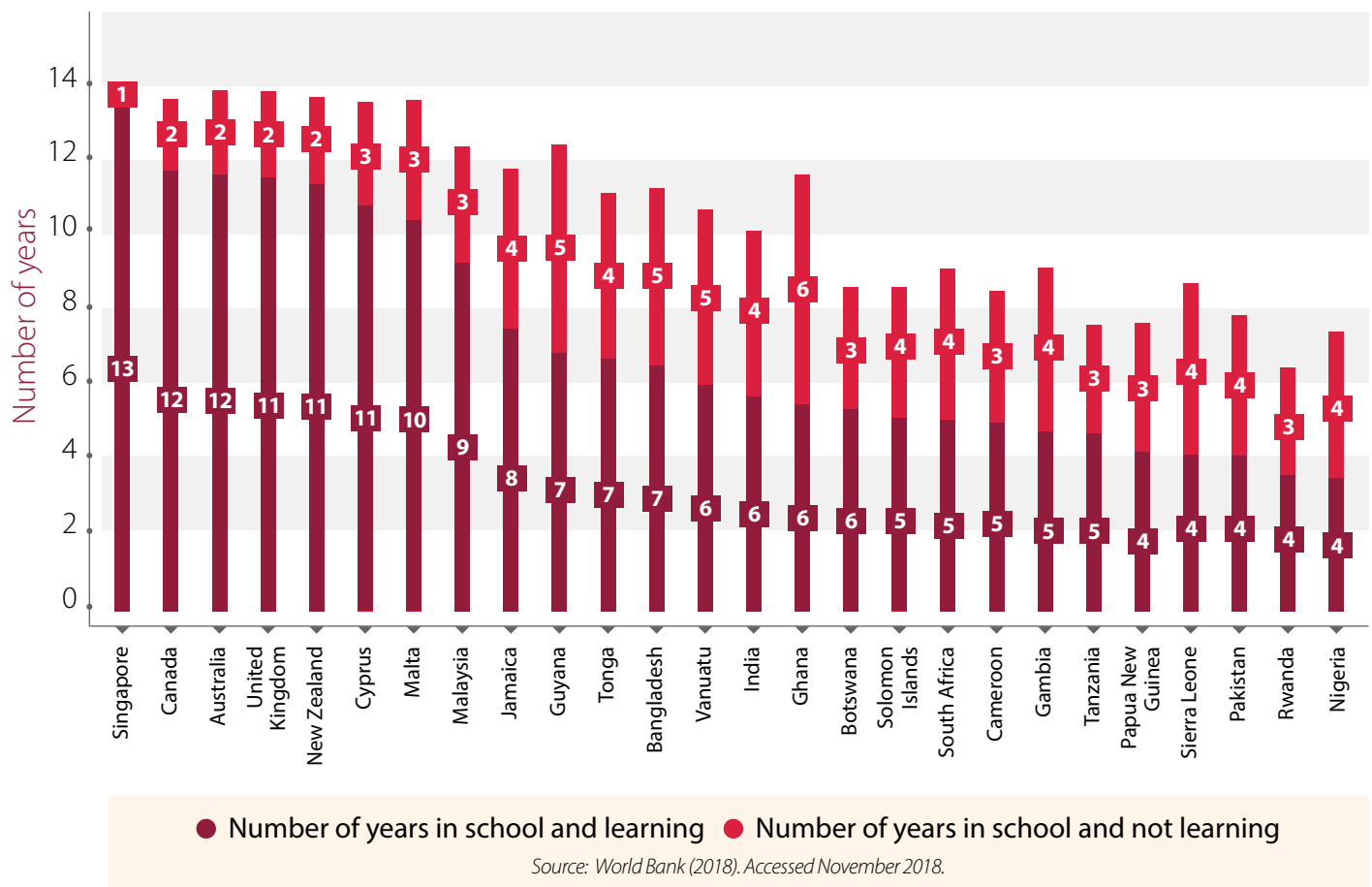
Mean years of schooling by group as reported by 20-24 year olds



**Even for those children in school, too often they are not learning the basics.** The recently launched Human Capital Index shows that girls' education fares far worse when years in school is adjusted for whether or not children are learning (Figure 2). In 14 out of the 26 countries with data, girls who are in school are learning for the equivalent of six years or less. The picture is likely to be even starker for girls in rural areas and those facing other forms of disadvantage.

**Figure 2: Girls are far from the 12 years target of being in school and learning**

Learning adjusted years of schooling for girls, latest year



**Disadvantage starts early.** Evidence shows that greater investment in the early years of a child's life can play a significant role in addressing the challenges faced by the most disadvantaged children in access and learning in later stages of the education system. However, the chances of girls attending pre-primary school are strongly contingent on where she is born. In eight of 14 Commonwealth countries with data, no more than 40 percent of poor rural girls have access to pre-primary education. In three out of these eight countries, fewer than 10 percent are enrolled.

**Even where progress has been made towards gender parity in access and learning, gender equality remains elusive.** The Right to Education Initiative has developed a six-tier classification on whether states have ratified relevant human rights treaties which guarantee the rights of women and girls to education. While these ratifications are a proxy measure of whether governments are committed to gender equality in education – and do not reflect a state's actual commitment, political will or implementation – just 20 out of the 53 Commonwealth countries have ratified the highest level of de jure commitment to gender equality in education.

**Governments rarely target funding to lower levels of education and to marginalised groups.** In 33 out of 45 Commonwealth countries with data, governments are spending far more on post-primary levels of education than on primary schooling, even though the probability of the most disadvantaged girls reaching these levels of education is extremely low. In 13 Commonwealth countries, governments are spending at least 25 percent of their education budgets on post-secondary education. In most of these countries, access to higher education is extremely limited, particularly for the most disadvantaged. Very few governments are prioritising early childhood education in their budgets. Of the 35 Commonwealth countries with data on pre-primary spending, 25 governments are spending less than five percent of their education budgets on pre-primary education.

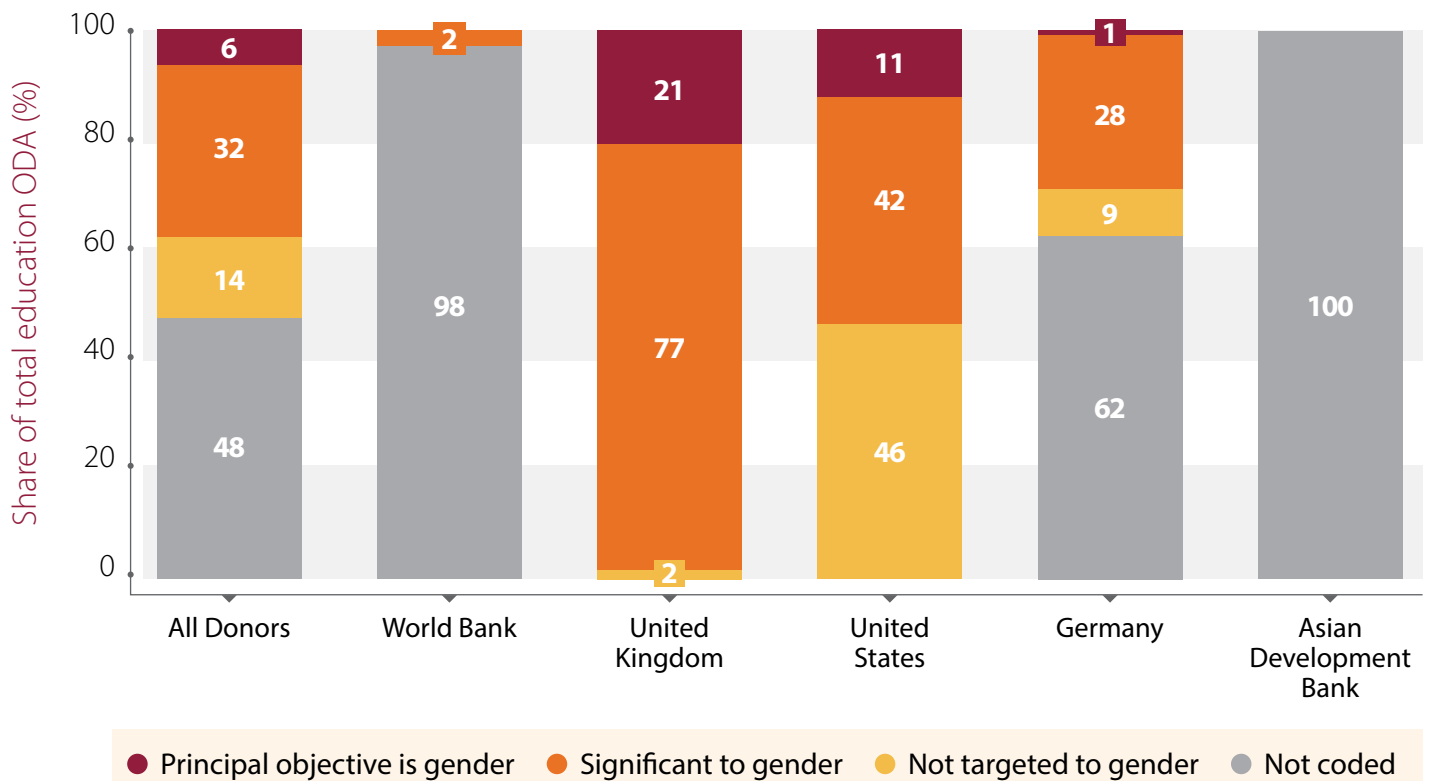
**Education aid does not prioritise the early years and does not show a consistent commitment to gender in its spending.** Even though the majority of the most disadvantaged girls in many Commonwealth countries still do not make it to the end of primary school, donors have reoriented their funding from primary to post-primary education levels. In 2002, almost two-thirds of education aid to Commonwealth countries was spent on primary education. By 2016, this fell to 47 percent. Moreover, just 0.4 percent of education aid to Commonwealth countries was spent on pre-primary education. By contrast, 10 percent is spent on scholarships to allow students from aid-recipient Commonwealth countries to study in donor countries, even though only the most privileged benefit from these scholarships.

In addition, only around five percent of total education aid appears to be disbursed with the main objective of achieving gender equality for those donors who report on this. This is far below the recommendation made by the G7's Gender Equality Advisory Council, which, in 2018, called for at least 20 percent of aid to target gender equality. However, around half of education aid to Commonwealth countries is uncategorised (Figure 3).



### Figure 3: Very little education aid to Commonwealth countries is specifically targeted for girls

Share of education ODA disbursed according to the extent to which it targets gender equality, 2016



Source: Authors' calculations based on OECD-CRS (2018). Accessed November 2018.

**Data gaps make it hard to track global and national progress.** For over half of all 53 Commonwealth countries internationally-comparable household data disaggregated by gender intersecting with poverty and location is not available on completion rates at primary and lower secondary level, nor on average years of schooling. The new data on Learning Adjusted Years of Schooling disaggregated by gender is only available for just under half of all 53 Commonwealth countries, mainly due to the lack of recent learning data. Moreover, this indicator is currently not disaggregated by poverty, location or other forms of disadvantage that girls may face. Even more limited data are available for other dimensions of disadvantage, such as disability.



Zomba, Malawi. © Eliza Powell / Campaign for Female Education (CAMFED)

## What Works for Marginalised Girls' Education?

Based on a review of available evidence, we identify interventions that have been found to improve access and learning, particularly to address the barriers that marginalised girls face. As many of the barriers are mutually reinforcing, there is a need to tackle these simultaneously through a combined package of reforms that tackle the multiple disadvantages that marginalised girls face. It is important to recognise that what works in some contexts might not work in the same way in other settings. While it is possible to identify interventions that work, visible political commitment and sustained investment is needed for them to have impact at scale.

### A. Leadership and financing

1. **Visible high-level political commitment backed up with resources.** In Uganda, national level plans and priorities have called for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women through gender responsive strategies such as improving retention and participation rates for girls in school and reducing harmful practices such as child labour and child marriage. This has been accompanied by *The National Strategy for Girls' Education in Uganda*. In the Gambia, high-level political commitment to girls' education from senior levels of government supported specific policies and programmes including high-level visible commitment through the *President's Empowerment of Girls' Education Project*.

- 2. Grassroots leadership increasing awareness about the value of girls' education.**  
**Grassroots leaders have an important opportunity to promote girls' education.** For example, a grassroots organisation in Ghana supports former girl programme participants as role models to help raise awareness and demonstrate the success of educational interventions for girls. Grassroots leaders have also effectively collaborated to put pressure on governments to provide the resources needed to improve the quality of girls' education.
- 3. Formula funding targeting resources at those most at risk of being left behind.** The cost of reaching the most marginalised girls is likely to be higher than their peers given the multiple disadvantages they face. Governments in India, Pakistan, South Africa and Sri Lanka have all adopted funding approaches that prioritise additional funding to the most disadvantaged groups. In India, for instance, the government moved away from a funding formula where each district received equal funding per pupil towards one where districts with high out-of-school populations, large gender disparities and large disadvantaged groups were allocated additional resources. This resulted in improved access to primary schooling for girls.
- 4. Use of data to inform policy change.** A recent evaluation of national, regional and international assessment programmes on education policies found that where there was continuity, stability and regular cycles for conducting learning assessments, this facilitates their greater use for policy-making. In Tanzania, the annual citizen-led learning assessment (UWEZO) has served as a catalyst towards greater critical dialogue in recognising the poor quality of education in Tanzania's public primary schools. UWEZO's findings contributed to the government's decision to introduce assessments in grade 2 in order to track progress, together with providing additional training of teachers in grades 1 and 2. This has the potential to benefit marginalised girls who are at risk of being left behind from the early grades.

## B. Targeted approaches

- 5. Prioritising early childhood education and early learning.** Poverty often combines with insufficient provision of pre-school facilities, particularly in rural areas, limiting access to quality provision. A successful intervention in Rwanda found that pedagogical early childhood care and development programmes benefited both girls' and boys' learning, whilst a parent outreach programme led to higher literacy gains for girls in particular. Despite these positive effects, very few domestic and aid resources are spent on the early years of education where disadvantage for marginalised girls starts.

- 6. Addressing multifaceted challenges that girls face when they reach puberty.** A lack of sanitation materials in school can lead to absenteeism during menstruation, and so adversely affect learning and lead to dropout. Such problems are likely to start in primary school given that marginalised children often start school above the official enrolment age. In Uganda, a project giving girls in primary and secondary schools a package of sanitary pads and teaching them how to use them led to reduced absenteeism during menstruation and greater confidence and less distraction for girls during their period. In late adolescence, early marriage and early pregnancy particularly affects the poorest girls, where financial pressure and the influence of social norms may lead families or girls to choose early marriage. In Jamaica, the Women's Centre Foundation helps to reintegrate girls into secondary school after they have given birth, through a combination of academic tuition, nursery provision, and other health services. Participants are more likely to complete their education and less likely to have a second pregnancy.
- 7. Eliminating cost barriers.** Even when fees are abolished, there are additional costs of schooling, such as uniforms, school supplies, sanitation and transport, that act as a barrier to education for girls from the poorest families. In some contexts, poverty has been found to lead to some girls having sex with men who provide them with the essentials for secondary schooling that their families cannot afford. Girls from the poorest families may also be more likely to have increased childcare and domestic work responsibilities which reduces their attendance at school and may cause them to drop out. A cash transfer programme in Nigeria targeted areas with high numbers of out-of-school girls with benefits paid to their caregivers. The programme was found to have a positive impact on household consumption and welfare and led to a significant change in caregivers' spending in favour of girls' education. In Bangladesh, a conditional incentives programme targeting adolescent girls found that financial incentives led to reduced levels of early marriage and pregnancy, whilst a support and training programme increased the likelihood of girls being in school.
- 8. Tackling disadvantages that intersect with gender, such as disability, location, poverty.** In addition to poverty, barriers to girls' education are further exacerbated by disability, rural location and other factors. For example, girls in rural areas are more likely to face barriers in travelling to schools. For girls with disabilities, insufficient infrastructure, appropriate aids and transport to school, alongside potentially lower parental aspirations can reduce their ability to access education. In Kenya, an intervention specifically focused on girls with disabilities engaged with multiple stakeholders, including families, communities and schools, to tackle the attitudinal and practical barriers to enrolment for girls with disabilities. Providing transportation, and information and arguments on the right to and potential of education for girls with disabilities, led to an increase in enrolment.





Zomba, Malawi. © Eliza Powell / Campaign for Female Education (CAMFED)

## C. Tackling discrimination

**9. School environments that are safe spaces.** Girls face additional barriers to both access and learning due to vulnerability to gender-based violence during travel to school and in school, with such risks becoming greater when they reach adolescence. In Pakistan, providing schools with female staff, locations within walking distances of homes, security through boundary walls, and free door-to-door transportation enabled families to feel more comfortable sending their daughters to school and led to an increase in girls' enrolment. Providing safe spaces for girls are particularly important in conflict settings. A project in Sierra Leone directly tackled gender-based violence in schools attended by refugee children by providing schools with female staff who had an explicit mandate to mitigate abuse and exploitation of students and support a girl-friendly school and learning environment. This led to girls stating that classrooms were friendlier and more encouraging spaces to learn.

- 10. Gender-sensitive teaching practices and materials.** Curriculum and school materials can reinforce negative gender stereotypes that lead to girls' exclusion and low levels of learning. These stereotypes can also weaken girls' self-confidence. An intervention in countries in Sub-Saharan Africa designed to equip teachers with knowledge, skills and attitudes to empower them to respond adequately to the learning needs of girls and boys, by using gender-aware classroom processes and practices found evidence of change in the gender dynamics of the school, attitudes of girls and boys in the classroom and also reported improvements in girls' learning outcomes. The programme included gender-sensitive lesson planning, teacher-learner interaction, language use, resources for teaching and assessment and sensitisation of school management on gender. A secondary school-based intervention in India which promoted discussions on gender equality, gender stereotypes, roles and women's employment led to more progressive gender attitudes among students involved.
- 11.. Promoting women's economic empowerment and providing pathways to productive work.** Commitments to girls' education are influenced by the reality that women's access to paid employment is often far more limited than that of men. Interventions aimed at expanding labour market opportunities for women can therefore positively influence girls' enrolment. A community-based intervention in rural India provided girls with recruiting services, with the intention of increasing awareness of a specific industry. This led to an increase in women enrolling in vocational and training institutes and an increase in younger girls' enrolment in school.
- 12. Tackling access and learning simultaneously, with sufficient resources.** A programme in government secondary schools in Tanzania provided the most marginalised girls in remote under-served rural communities with a combination of bursaries and pedagogical interventions in school to address barriers to both access and learning. Evidence from the programme suggests an increase in enrolment levels and large gains in scores on learning assessments. Although these programmes are likely to cost more, findings from this programme resulted in two additional years of schooling for every \$100 spent, demonstrating that they can still be cost-effective.

# Priorities for further action

Based on the evidence presented in the Report, three overarching priorities are highlighted for further action:

## 1. Visible political leadership

Ensuring high-level, visible political leadership that promotes education planning adopting a gender equality and empowerment lens and commits sufficient resources to reach the most marginalised girls.



## 2. Investing in early years' education

Tackling barriers to education for marginalised girls in the early years before they become entrenched, and prioritising domestic and international financing towards this.



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