



**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

# Leave no child behind

Global report on boys' disengagement from education

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Education is UNESCO's top priority because it is a basic human right and the foundation for peace and sustainable development. UNESCO is the United Nations' specialized agency for education, providing global and regional leadership to drive progress, strengthening the resilience and capacity of national systems to serve all learners. UNESCO also leads efforts to respond to contemporary global challenges through transformative learning, with special focus on gender equality and Africa across all actions.



## The Global Education 2030 Agenda

UNESCO, as the United Nations' specialized agency for education, is entrusted to lead and coordinate the Education 2030 Agenda, which is part of a global movement to eradicate poverty through 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Education, essential to achieve all of these goals, has its own dedicated Goal 4, which aims to *"ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."* The Education 2030 Framework for Action provides guidance for the implementation of this ambitious goal and commitments.



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# Executive summary





## Executive summary

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development makes the promise to leave no one behind. While improving educational opportunities for girls globally continues to be of paramount importance to achieve gender equality in and through education, this focus on achieving gender parity and equality must not ignore boys. Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all – Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 – and achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls – SDG 5 – requires gender-transformative action.

Education is a fundamental human right for everyone. Realizing this right requires addressing boys' disengagement from and disadvantage in education. Addressing the issue not only benefits boys' learning, employment opportunities, income and well-being, it is also highly beneficial for achieving gender equality and desirable economic, social and health outcomes. The social and fiscal costs of boys' disengagement from education are enormous, underlining the need for a broad, inclusive approach to education, ensuring educational opportunity for all.

To leave no child behind, UNESCO developed the first global report of this scope on boys' disengagement from and disadvantage in education, bringing together qualitative and quantitative evidence from over 140 countries.

To review the global situation, this report aims to:

- Provide an overview on the global situation on boys' disengagement from and disadvantage in education.
- Identify factors influencing boys' participation, progression and learning outcomes in education.

- Analyse responses by governments and partners and examine policies and programmes.
- Make recommendations on how to re-engage boys with education and address disadvantage.

The report comprises four components of research and analysis:

- 1. Data analysis:** Original analysis of statistical data sets for key education indicators.
- 2. Literature review:** Review of all relevant literature on factors influencing boys' educational access, participation and learning.
- 3. Policy and programme review:** Review of policy and programme documents as well as evaluations.
- 4. Focused research in five countries (Fiji, Kuwait, Lesotho, Peru and the United Arab Emirates):** National case studies on boys' disengagement from education, based on in-depth mixed-method research.

This report is not an overall comparative study of boys and girls, but a focus on countries and contexts where boys are struggling to access education and progress. While girls continue to face severe disadvantages and inequalities in education, the report shows that boys face similar and different challenges, that they are not a homogenous group and that certain boys need support. As this report shows, addressing boys' disengagement from and disadvantage in education is not a zero-sum game. Supporting boys does not mean that girls lose out and vice versa. Equal education opportunities benefit both girls and boys and the broader society.



## Key findings

### The global situation on boys' disengagement from and disadvantage in education

In many countries, boys are at greater risk than girls of repeating grades, failing to complete different education levels and having poorer learning outcomes in school. Where previously boys' disadvantage seemed most notable in high- or upper-middle-income contexts at the beginning of the millennium, this has shifted and now includes several low- and lower-middle-income countries. Secondary education is where boys' disadvantage is most prevalent.

The right to education remains unfulfilled for many boys. Far too many children and youth of primary and secondary school age are out of school. Just over half of them are boys. It has been a concern that the COVID-19 pandemic would lead to an increase in school dropouts. In 2020 – the last school year before the pandemic – an estimated 259 million children and youth of primary and secondary school age were out of school, 132 million of whom were boys. There will not be a clear picture of COVID-19 effects on enrolments before the end of 2022.

While in all regions the largest share of out-of-school boys is concentrated at the upper secondary level, in the Arab States and sub-Saharan Africa, a large proportion of out-of-school boys (around a third) are also concentrated at the primary level.

While globally, girls remain less likely than boys to enrol in school, in many countries boys are at greater risk of repeating grades, failing to progress and complete their education and not achieving adequate learning while in school. At the global level, almost no country with data has achieved gender parity at the tertiary level. The gender parity index data in 2019 for tertiary enrolment showed 88 men for every 100 women enrolled at tertiary level. While previously boys' disengagement and dropout was a concern mainly in high-income countries, several low- and middle-income countries have seen a reversal in gender gaps, with boys now lagging behind girls in enrolment and completion. In 73 countries less boys than girls are enrolled in upper-secondary education. Boys are more likely than girls to repeat primary grades in 130 out of 142 countries with data, indicating their poorer progression through school.

In 57 countries with data on learning poverty, 10-year-old boys fare worse than girls in mastering reading skills and adolescent boys continue to fall behind girls at the secondary level. In mathematics, on the other hand, the gender gap that once worked against girls at the start of the millennium has narrowed or equalized with boys in half of all countries with data.

### Factors influencing boys' participation, progression and learning outcomes

In the complex social milieu surrounding boys' and girls' participation in education, a range of factors – at the levels of the macrosystem (societal, economic, cultural), mesosystem (schools and other institutions) and microsystem (interpersonal and personal) – combine to influence participation, progression and learning outcomes. Overlapping factors exacerbate constraints on boys' education and lead to, and reinforce, poor educational outcomes.

Poverty and the need to work are important drivers of school dropout. Gendered norms and expectations impact on boys' motivation and desire to learn. In many contexts, school activities and certain subjects are considered at odds with expressions of masculinity, making education unpopular with boys.

Practices such as streaming of classes and gender segregation contribute to boys' low motivation, underachievement and disengagement from education. Harsh discipline, corporal punishment and other forms of school-related gender-based violence impact negatively on boys' academic achievement and attainment. Fear and experiences of violence lead to increased absenteeism and may contribute to dropout. Boys are more likely than girls to experience physical bullying and are often targeted because of their real or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity or expression (SOGIE).

Conflict and forced migration exacerbate challenges in accessing and completing education. Language barriers, mobility and discrimination contribute to educational exclusion. Prolonged school closures and the longer-term impact of COVID-19 on learning loss and school dropout are likely to exacerbate existing gender disparities unless steps are taken to address the learning needs of all.

### Responses to address boys' disengagement from and disadvantage in education

Despite boys' clear disengagement from and disadvantage in education in certain contexts, there are few programmes and initiatives addressing this phenomenon holistically, with system-level, gender-specific policies even more rare.

Scarce policy attention has been given to gender disparities in education that disadvantage boys. Existing policies are predominantly in high-income countries. Few low- or middle-income countries have specific policies to improve boys' enrolment and



completion of primary or secondary education, even in countries with severe disparities at boys' expense. Very few policies, programmes or initiatives address intersecting disadvantage, such as remoteness, wealth, disability, ethnicity, language, migration, displacement, incarceration, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and religion.

The policy review done for this report shows that options to address boys' disengagement from and disadvantage in education include: reducing the cost of schooling, improving school infrastructure, improving the accessibility and quality of pre-primary education, providing remedial support and non-formal education to support the return to education, avoiding streaming and segregation, improving teacher quality and recruitment, curriculum and pedagogy, banning corporal punishment and tackling gender-based violence.

Multi-level policies and programmes that aim to understand and address the factors influencing boys' disengagement from and disadvantage in education across levels (individual, family, peers, community, schools, and state and society) appear most effective. Collaboration across sectors and stakeholders, including youth, can ensure an informed and comprehensive approach.

Promising programmes start at a young age before children internalize gender and social norms. They critically examine gender stereotypes, dismantle traditional constructions of masculinity and emphasise the benefits of masculinity that respects gender equality. They also build boys' social and emotional skills, and keep boys engaged with education through reduction or risk behaviour and increased connectedness to peers.

Boy-specific programmes addressing gender-based violence have shown results. Community approaches have also shown to be successful in preventing violence and promoting learning for boys.

Parents, role models and inclusive learning environments are important to make boys thrive. Programmes engaging parents by providing reading materials and encouraging parents to read to their children can improve boys' literacy skills. Exposure to male role models and mentors can dismantle stereotypes and increase boys' motivation to learn. Whole-school approaches can support inclusive school environments, address learners' needs, and are particularly effective in changing harmful gender norms.

In contexts where boys are disengaged or disadvantaged, programmes aiming at improving education opportunities for all had a greater positive effect on boys than girls or showed potential to improve boys' situation. Interventions directly targeted at boys may be most effective when addressing constraints that are unique to them, and focusing on the marginalized.

Overall, rigorous evidence about the effectiveness of policies, programmes and interventions addressing boys' disengagement from and disadvantage in education remains thin, especially related to intersectionality.

## Recommendations

To leave no child behind and to address boys' disengagement from and disadvantage in education, governments, bilateral and multilateral organizations, civil society, the private sector, academia, communities, schools, students, families and caregivers need to work together. In this respect, the report makes the following recommendations to be tailored to countries' specific contexts (see the following table):



## Recommendations

ECOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK SYSTEMS	MICROSYSTEM			MESOSYSTEM			MACROSYSTEM	
	STUDENTS	PARENTS	PEERS	COMMUNITIES	SCHOOLS	GOVERNMENTS	DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS	
<b>Stakeholders</b>								
<b>Advance equal access to education and prevent boys' dropout</b>								
In line with SDG 4, provide 12 years of free, publicly funded, inclusive, equitable and quality education, without discrimination, including by subsidizing indirect costs associated with schooling, providing social protection programmes such as cash transfers for poor families, and ensuring education systems and schools are responsive to gender-specific needs.						X		
Mobilize support to advance gender-transformative policies for both girls' and boys' education.				X				X
Provide flexible, accelerated learning and bridging programmes for boys who, alongside girls, missed out on education or whose education was interrupted.						X		X
Strengthen and enforce labour laws and employment regulations, ensuring that they are aligned with compulsory education policy, to protect youth from exiting the school system and prevent harm.						X		
Monitor students' learning performance, attendance rates and other predictors of dropout, following up with students and parents as necessary.	X	X			X			
Support interventions, including career counselling, that help boys and young men understand the value of higher education.	X	X	X		X			
Work with local communities where boys are at risk of dropout to raise awareness on the importance of boys' completion of a full cycle of basic education.		X			X			X
Reform traditional practices or adapt their timing, such as initiation ceremonies, which pull boys and young men out of school.	X	X				X		
Build on the lessons of the extensive work identifying and addressing barriers to girls' education.				X	X			X
<b>Make learning gender-transformative, safe and inclusive for all learners</b>								
Create gender-transformative and inclusive learning environments that address all learners' needs. This includes training teachers on gender-transformative pedagogies, enabling them to challenge rigid gender norms and making curricula, teaching and learning materials gender-transformative, inclusive and free of stereotypes.	X				X			X
Promote a positive learning culture that stimulates the interests of all learners, with teachers being fair and having high expectations of all learners, and providing constructive feedback to students, building high-quality teacher–student relationships.	X				X			
Introduce or strengthen language-related support for learning, including options for mother tongue language of instruction and remedial language support for ethnic minority, migrant, displaced and refugee students.					X			
Implement tutoring and mentoring programmes for underachieving boys.					X			
Promote whole-school approaches to promote gender equality and include parents and the community in activities designed to dismantle gender stereotypes.	X	X	X		X			X
Prohibit corporal punishment at school; introduce, disseminate and enforce codes of conduct for teachers and students; and provide training on positive non-violent discipline for teachers, as well as effective monitoring and response mechanisms.					X			
Abolish streaming of classes and minimize gender-segregation practices.					X			
Abolish repetition policies and implement automatic promotion to the next grade, alongside appropriate remedial support.					X			
Develop and make use of effective pedagogical strategies to develop boys' reading skills.					X			X







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### Stay in touch



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