

# From Girls' Education to Gender-Transformative Education: Lessons from Different Nations

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The examination of gender inequality in education around the globe reveals a multifaceted issue deeply intertwined with persistent challenges within education systems and society at large. Over the past three decades, girls'-education has often been portrayed as a panacea, touted as the solution to a wide array of societal problems, including issues as diverse as high fertility rates and global warming. This essay explores gender disparities in education, employing case studies from Latin America to elucidate the intricate dynamics of this global phenomenon and to illustrate the potential of gender-transformative approaches. Drawing upon two decades of empirical research and theoretical insights from the capability approach, I discuss the linkages between gender, education, and social transformation.

Examining gender inequality in education globally brings to the surface many of the deeply rooted and persistent problems in education systems and society more broadly. For the last thirty years, girls' education has been presented as the "answer to everything," a cure-all for issues ranging from high fertility rates to global warming.<sup>1</sup> The importance of girls' education first gained attention in economic discussions during the early 1990s, notably by Lawrence Summers. In his speeches and writings, he argued that education for girls and women might offer the highest return on investment available in the developing world. Since that time, girls' education has become a global rallying cry for politicians such as Boris Johnson (who referred to girls' education as the "silver bullet, the magic potion, the panacea . . . that can solve virtually every problem that afflicts humanity") and celebrities like Lady Gaga, Priyanka Chopra Jonas, and Rihanna.<sup>2</sup> Movie theaters across the globe have shown full-length documentary films about the importance of girls' education, including *Girl Rising* (2013) and *The Named Me Malala* (2015). More recently, girls' education has been touted as a "powerful climate solution" capable of fighting the root drivers of climate change and cutting carbon emissions.<sup>3</sup> The importance of girls' education has galvanized action among individuals, organizations, and governments that span a wide range of academic disciplines and political dispositions.

But while some were praising girls' education as a strategy to improve health outcomes, reduce fertility rates, raise income, and improve democracy, feminist scholars such as Nelly Stromquist argued that the gender gap in education was the manifestation of gender inequality in society. Simply expanding educational access for girls and women would not address the underlying causes of their underrepresentation in education. Getting girls into schools is a necessary first step, but schools often reflect and reinforce harmful social inequalities, including gender norms. An emphasis on empowering girls and women through education and other social interventions (such as small loans, vocational training) began to emerge in the mid-1990s. Education and empowerment of girls became and remain buzzwords, with little conceptual clarity as to what kind of education is empowering, in what context, and for what purpose.

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a study measuring gender equality in education from forty-three low- and middle-income countries, the authors explain that in some settings, increases in enrollment may have led to a deterioration in the quality of education and a lower proportion of young people with basic literacy and numeracy skills.

In addition to examining the aged statistic of educational parity in enrollment, common indicators of gender inequality also include the number of children out of school, as well as the number who complete primary, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary education. According to data from the World Bank, the primary school completion rate for girls has reached 90 percent globally, with an equal number of boys and girls completing primary school in most countries. Between 2000 and 2018, the number of out-of-school girls of primary school-age decreased globally from forty-seven million to thirty-two million.<sup>11</sup> As of 2023, roughly thirty-two million girls of primary school age were still out of school, compared with twenty-seven million boys. So while a roughly equal number of girls and boys are enrolled in primary school (gender parity), this statistic misses the more than forty million children that remain out of school, and that more girls are out of school than boys.<sup>12</sup> Figure 2 shows trends in the out-of-school population of primary school-aged children between 2000 and 2019. With regard to primary school completion, in 2013, only 70 percent of children in low-income countries



tion of these four framings helps conceptualize what gender equality in education should (and should not) entail. She calls these framings “what works,” “what disorganizes,” “what matters,” and “what connects.”<sup>17</sup> As general categories, they are useful tools to help understand the range of perspectives, policies, and interventions that characterize the field of girls' education.

“What works” is the approach consistent with the idea that girls' education is a sound investment that has positive spillover effects in a variety of different domains (health, economic growth, civil society). It seeks to attain parity: an equal number of boys and girls enrolled in and completing school. This approach is concerned with girls' education as something that “works” as an intermediary strategy to promote other desirable outcomes (such as poverty alleviation, improved child health and nutrition), as well as being a desirable outcome in and of itself. From this vantage point, policy and research have focused on interventions that increase the number of girls in school and the duration they stay there. These interventions might include reducing or abolishing school fees and/or providing girls with scholarships, reducing the distance to school, building toilets or latrines, providing school meals, and training teachers to improve their pedagogy. The what-works framing proposes largely technical solutions to address girls' underrepresentation in education. The research methodology to test these approaches involves large-scale, randomized control trials to evaluate the effectiveness of a different combination of intervention characteristics. These research studies have helped us understand a great deal about certain kinds of barriers that girls face in attending school, particularly by providing clear and consistent findings that the costs associated with schooling are a huge deterrent for poor families.

A second framing, what Unterhalter calls “what disorganizes,” concerns policies and actors that undermine or distract from what works and what matters—and is related to how girls' education has been identified as a pathway to development. These are instances where girls' education is co-opted to promote the interests of large corporations and organizations. An illustrative example of this approach, Nike Inc.'s Girl Effect, is documented extensively in Kathryn Moeller's *The Girl Effect: Capitalism, Feminism, and the Corporate Politics of Development*.<sup>19</sup> Corporations such as Nike, Coca Cola, and Unilever have used the narrative guise of girls' education and empowerment to expand their markets, improve their reputations, and grow their workforce. But as Moeller points out, their instrumental logic shifts the burden of development onto girls and women without transforming the structural conditions that produce poverty. Their efforts sidestep the practices of harmful business and working conditions, promoting a logic wherein consumption is the goal of development. In one project Unterhalter tags as “disorganizing,” Coca Cola and the British Department for International Development sponsored a £17 million training program for girls who would ultimately “join the Coca Cola value chain.”<sup>21</sup> Corporate social-responsibility initiatives such as these have also been

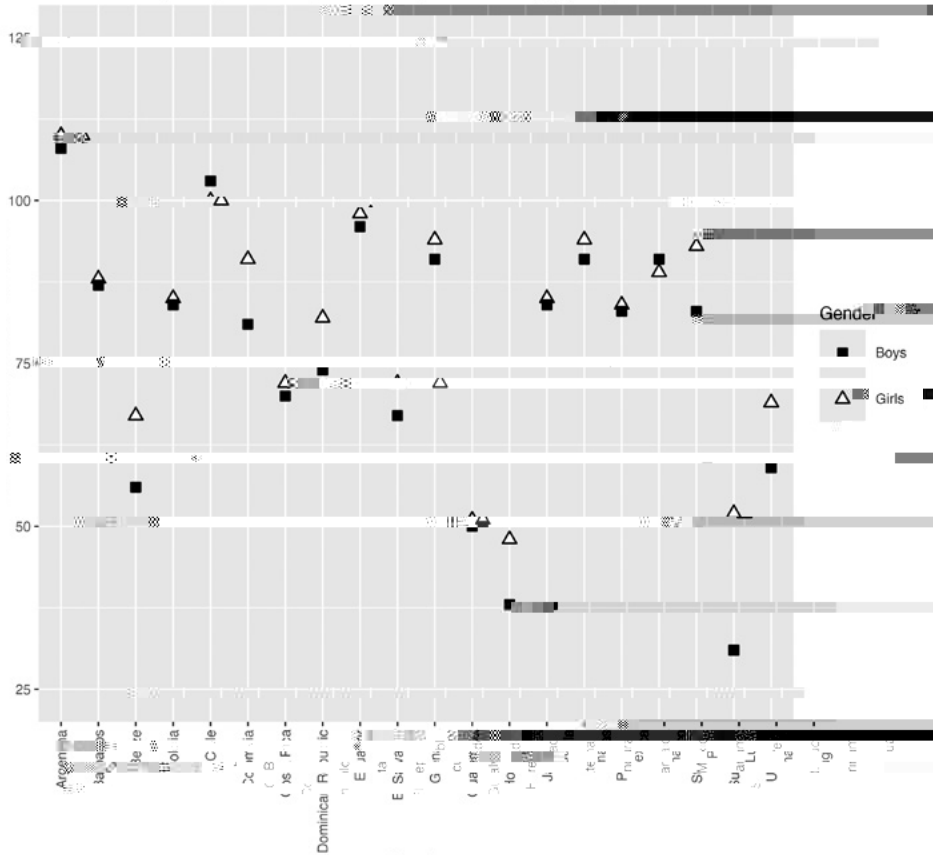
called “gender wash”: corporations clean up their image by using gender, girls’ empowerment, and education as a palatable marketing tool.

Recognizing the contradictions and problematic assumptions of “what disorganizes” in the field of girls’ education is important because it allows for a more profound questioning of “what matters.” A what-matters framing of girls’ education has a long history, as feminists have questioned the logic of “what works” for decades. However, as Unterhalter explains, this approach is supported by international organizations with less status and money, and uses different methods, including qualitative methods, that generate less respect in policy circles and more limited research funding. This makes it difficult to garner evidence that more holistic, less technocratic approaches “work.”<sup>22</sup> A what-matters stance situates girls’ education in a wider, normative context linked to advancing human rights, gender equality, feminist advocacy, and ultimately a different vision of prosperity and well-being. Many writers and activists in this category emphasize girls’ voices and empowerment, the limitations of policy texts, and the hingenim6h7 (oache7p as U)7

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**Figure 3**  
**Boys' Lower-Secondary School Completion is Lower Than Girls'**  
**in Most Latin American and Caribbean Countries (Completion Percent of**  
**Relevant Age Group), 2021–2022**



Note: Rates can exceed 100 percent due to late or early school entrants and overage children repeating grades. Denominator reflects children at entrance age for the last grade of primary education. Source: Figure developed by the author using data from the World Bank's Education Indicators, 2023 (latest data from 2021–2022).

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to gender. We were interested in why students were “no longer interested” in being students, despite having access to secondary school. Through statistical analysis and rich qualitative interview data, we discovered that dropout is patterned by schooling structures, such that more dropout occurs, for all adolescents, at the standard transition points (to lower-secondary school, to upper-secondary school, to tertiary school). We also observed that for both males and females, once a student drops out, they rarely return to school. Drawing from the capability approach, we used the concept of “conversion factors” to help explain our findings. Conversion factors refer to individuals’ ability to convert resources into “valued functionings,” to whether youth can reap the benefits of secondary education. We illustrate that, in the context of where these youth live, they have scarce opportunities to convert the resource of a high school diploma into a valued functioning, including a job. The youth we interviewed questioned whether education would lead to any change in their life trajectories, particularly in a context in which their future roles as wives and mothers (for girls) and breadwinners via agricultural or other manual labor (for boys) was all but certain. In particular, our findings regarding male school discontinuation provide further evidence that boys are distrustful of schooling as a guarantee of future employment and social mobility. The experience of Latin America shows that simply increasing the supply of schooling is not enough to address gender inequality in society.

**G**ender-transformative education has emerged as a way to frame how, in order to tap its transformative potential, education must go beyond closing gender gaps. Gender-transformative education is now a shared orientation among United Nations agencies, including UNICEF (United Nations Children’s Fund) and UNGEI (United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative), as well as leading nongovernmental actors such as Plan International, the Population Council, CARE and Girls not Brides. Gender-transformative education calls for “nothing less than a fundamental reset of how we approach education.”<sup>29</sup> A recent joint statement by Plan International, UNGEI and UNICEF posits that education has transformative potential, but to unlock this potential, change is needed in the way we educate. This approach recognizes that gender norms are extremely challenging to address because they are entrenched in every aspect of society, and education systems reflect and can reinforce these norms. And these norms are also harmful for men and boys. Dismantling patriarchy requires a transformative approach, one that recognizes how gender discrimination often intersects with discrimination based on poverty, race, class, ethnicity, caste, language, migration or displacement status, HIV status, disability, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Gender-transformative education actively seeks ways to address inequalities and reduce harmful gender norms and practices. As the joint statement explains:

Gender transformative education is about inclusive, equitable, quality education  
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increasing clarity.<sup>36</sup> In a lesson on truthfulness, presented as an essential quality or “property” of a human being, the following is provided to students for their reaction and discussion:

There is more to truthfulness than not telling lies. We should, of course, always tell the truth as we know and understand it. But what benefit will come from such truthfulness if what we think to be the truth is, actually, false? Another aspect of truthfulness, then, is the intention and the will to seek the truth with an open mind. For many centuries people believed that the Earth was flat. Later it was proved that they were mistaken. Their belief did not agree with reality; it was an error. If the intention and the will to seek the truth had not existed, humanity would still be thinking that the Earth is flat.

Can you think of a few erroneous ideas that humanity needs to reject today? What about the idea that some race is superior or inferior to another? That men are superior to women? That it is acceptable for one group of people to oppress another group? That it is acceptable for a few to possess extreme wealth while many suffer from hunger?

The lesson is presented in such a way as to challenge students to identify whether the assumption that men are superior to women is in fact a belief that they have been exposed to; whether they accept that such a belief is erroneous, and why; and where gender inequality is linked to other forms of oppression and injustice. Rather than simply list, in the various

**D**espite its potential, even gender-transformative education is not a panacea. Every school year, students <sup>SAT</sup> drop out to migrate to the United States. Girls struggle to envision a future in which they have opportunity



endnotes

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<sup>35</sup>Patrick J. McEwan, Erin Murphy-Graham, David Torres Irribarra, et al., “Improving Middle School Quality in Poor Countries: Evidence from the Honduran Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 37(1) (2015): 113–137; Catherine A. Honeyman, “Social Responsibility and Community Development: Lessons from the Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial in Honduras,” *International Journal of Educational Development* 30 (6) (2010): 599–613; Erin Murphy-Graham and Joseph Lample, “Learning to Trust: Examining the Connections Between Trust and Capabilities Friendly Pedagogy through Case Studies from Honduras and Uganda,” *International Journal of Educational Development* 36 (2014): 51–62; Erin Murphy-Graham, Alison K. Cohen, and Diana Pacheco-Montoya, “School Dropout, Child Marriage, and Early Pregnancy Among Adolescent Girls in Rural Honduras,” *Comparative Education Review* 64(4) (2020): 703–724; Erin Murphy-Graham and Graciela Leal, “Child Marriage, Agency, and Schooling in Rural Honduras,” *Comparative Education Review* 59(1) (2015): 24–49; Alice Y. Taylor, Erin Murphy-Graham, Julia Van Horn, et al., “Child Marriages and Unions in Latin America: Understanding the Roles of Agency and Social Norms,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 64(4) (2019): S45–S51; Diana Pacheco-Montoya, Erin Murphy-Graham, Enrique Eduardo Valencia López, and Alison K. Cohen, “Gender Norms, Control Over Girls’ Sexuality, and Child Marriage: A Honduran Case Study,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 70(1) (2022): S22–S27; and Diana Pacheco-Montoya and Erin Murphy-Graham, “Fostering Critical Thinking as a Life Skill to Prevent Child Marriage in Honduras: The Case of Holistic Education for Youth (HEY),” in *Life Skills Education for Youth: Critical Perspectives*, edited by DeJaeghere and Erin Murphy-Graham (Springer Nature, 2021).

<sup>36</sup>FUNDAEC “Properties” (curricular unit), 2005, Cali, Colombia.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Another example from the curriculum is a book students study during their first year (seventh grade) called *Systems and Processes*. Among its goals are for students to “act in the world with efficacy and promote constructive change” by “introducing words and concepts needed to speak about the many processes that continually unfold in the world and the systems in which they occur.” In the various lessons of the text, the human body is offered as an analogy for a well-functioning society, and the notion that even as the integrity of the body and its various subsystems (circulatory system, digestive system, and so on) are interdependent, “so too the health and well-being of society as a whole and that of the individuals within it that depend on one another.” In introducing the concept of a “system” so early in their studies, students can build the capacity to conceptualize and take actions toward the systemic transformations that are needed and consistent with a gender-transformative approach. See