

*Leave No  
Girl Behind*



**Transformative Political  
Leadership to Promote  
12 Years of Quality  
Education for All Girls**

February 2020

**“It starts with  
educating a girl,  
and hopefully ends  
with a woman leader.”**

Julia Gillard

27th Prime Minister of Australia

How can political leadership promote 12 years of quality education for all girls? This report from the Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre, University of Cambridge, seeks to answer this question. The study is based on a review of global evidence, with a focus on low- and lower-middle income countries where most action is needed to achieve the world's development goals. The researchers also conducted interviews with 11 current and former political leaders involved in championing girls' education. On the basis of this research, this report outlines seven recommendations on how political leadership can be leveraged to achieve 12 years of quality education for all girls.

# Introduction

National and international leaders' commitment to girls' education has been gathering momentum since 2015, when UN member states adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG4 (to “ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning”) and SDG5 (to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” by 2030). At the same time, evidence about barriers to girls' education, in particular for marginalised girls, is growing, along with a consensus on ‘what works’ to advance girls' education. However, this new knowledge is not being translated into reforms that will put the world on track to achieve its shared development goals.

Across the world, over 130 million girls are out of school, and over half of all school-aged girls do not achieve minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics, even if they are attending school. Achieving gender equality in education requires an approach that goes beyond gender parity, ensuring that girls and boys not only gain equal access to education but are empowered equally in and through education. With global commitment for girls' education at an all-time high, there is an urgent need to identify the ways in which high-level political leadership can be harnessed to generate concrete, sustainable and effective action to achieve 12 years of quality education for all girls, especially the most marginalised girls.



# A framework for understanding the influence of political leadership for girls' education

The framework for this research draws on a **transformative leadership approach**, which seeks to transform power structures, social norms and ideologies that justify and perpetuate gender inequality and power imbalances. Figure 1 shows the key actors that have been identified by the report, and the processes through which they can use political leadership to advance girls' education through a **whole-system approach**. This framework identifies the roles of **individual leadership** (heads of government, ministers, members of parliament, senior civil servants) and **collective leadership** (collaboration among ministries, cross-parliamentary coalitions and cross-country coalitions of political leaders).

The framework emphasises the importance of engaging with a wide range of stakeholders, such as women's, youth and civil society organisations, and local political, traditional and religious leaders. The engagement of political leaders with these stakeholders establishes the conditions for sustainable change, and ensures relevance, ownership and effective implementation of strategies to promote girls' education.

Acknowledging the diversity of political systems and processes across the globe, this framework offers one approach to understanding the political leadership needed to influence and accelerate progress for girls' education. Political leadership for girls' education is understood in this research as "the strategic process through which political leaders, both **individually** and **collectively**, convert political commitment into meaningful action on, and accountability for, achieving 12 years of quality education for all girls."

**Figure 1: Transformative leadership to promote girls' education**



## INDIVIDUAL POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

**Heads of government** are essential for achieving legislative and policy change for gender equality. Their strategic and visible role means that they have the capacity to galvanise support for girls' education, creating a vision for change.

Alongside heads of government, **ministers and parliamentarians** have a mandate with which to develop legislation and policies to accelerate progress for girls' education, as they are instrumental in setting the direction of priorities, plans and strategies.

As non-elected staff within government structures, **senior civil servants** tend to hold longer-term positions in office and can therefore sustain support for girls' education beyond individual governments and election cycles. They play an important role in using current evidence and research, and building working relationships with civil society organisations and communities.

## THE ROLE OF WOMEN LEADERS

Although there is still a considerable lack of female representation in political positions at every level across the world, several countries have recently introduced quotas to improve gender balance in political participation and decision-making. While the presence of female leaders does not automatically improve outcomes for women and girls, women's political leadership can change social norms and challenge patriarchal structures that are holding back progress on gender equality.



## COLLECTIVE POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Successful reform depends rarely on individuals acting alone. It relies on alliances, collective action and advocacy. Therefore, networks and coalitions of political leaders are vital to tackle issues that are beyond the capacity of individuals to resolve, as well as to provide a stronger collective voice.

**Cross-ministerial coordination**, for example between ministries of education, public health and social affairs, is important for the development of coherent and coordinated policies for girls' education.

**Cross-parliamentary coalitions**, such as the Forum of Rwandan Women Parliamentarians, can ensure sustained political commitment and accountability for girls' education beyond individual governments through bi-partisan engagement.

**Cross-country coalitions** can play a vital role in sharing and scaling up effective practices across countries. The Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), for example, has facilitated cooperation between sub-Saharan African countries to realise a shared vision for girls' and women's education, promoting positive programming examples that have been used in numerous contexts. FAWE was established in 1992 by five women ministers of education. The Forum's members include ministers of education, university vice-chancellors, education policymakers, researchers, gender specialists and human rights activists.



# Factors that underpin political leadership for girls' education

The pathways to policy change and political support for a social issue are rarely linear and can be difficult to trace, as they often involve numerous complex processes, influences and actors. This report therefore highlights some of the factors that may, individually or in conjunction with other factors, motivate political leaders to step up action for girls' education.

## 1. NATIONAL POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL INFLUENCES

Voter pressure, in particular at key points in the electoral cycle, can motivate high-level political leaders to commit to girls' education reforms in line with societal demands.

**“Providing sanitary towels was an election issue in the 2016 Ugandan elections, because there was an outcry at the time... so during the campaign all presidential candidates made the announcement to provide free sanitary towels to all girls in schools.”**

Florence Malinga

Former Commissioner for Planning, Ministry of Education, Uganda

More generally, critical junctures provided by economic, institutional and political shifts offer opportunities to galvanise political action on girls' education and initiate reforms to advance gender equality and transform social norms.

## 2. INTERNATIONAL INFLUENCES

International networks and initiatives have a vital role to play in bringing together expertise to support the work of political leaders. To give one example, the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) has played a pivotal role in bringing together senior civil servants in ministries of education for workshops to build capacity on designing and implementing gender-responsive education sector plans.

### GENDER AT THE CENTRE INITIATIVE

Launched in July 2019, the Gender at the Centre Initiative (GCI) was developed by the G7 Ministers of Education and Development in collaboration with multilateral and civil society organisations committed to advancing gender equality in and through education. Together with ministries of education in eight pilot countries in sub-Saharan Africa (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria and Sierra Leone), the partnership forms the GCI Alliance. Rooted in gender-responsive education sector planning (GRESPE), the GCI mobilises expertise and other resources to help the leadership of ministries of education and other national actors to advance gender equality in education through sector planning and monitoring. In addition, it aims to ensure that country-owned interventions, strategies and plans are financed, implemented and monitored for sustainable results.

The ratification of international treaties, standards and conventions can give national and international communities a way to pressure individual governments to act. For example, the Right to Education Initiative measures a country's commitment to gender equality in education on whether it has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention against Discrimination in Education, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Signing up to these treaties alone is not enough, but it does enable others to hold political leaders accountable to the treaties that they have ratified. Accountability mechanisms developed by regional communities can also provide a way to strengthen the implementation of policies, programmes and legislation for girls' education, and hold governments to account on these commitments.

## REGIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS

In 2008, 13 member states from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) signed and adopted the **SADC Protocol on Gender and Development**. The protocol seeks to consolidate the various commitments and instruments that SADC member states have subscribed to into one comprehensive regional instrument to plan, implement and monitor the SADC gender agenda. To track progress towards these commitments and hold governments to account for their progress, the **Gender Protocol Barometer** has been established as a regional monitoring tool, providing data, insights and analysis.

### 3. DATA AND EVIDENCE

**“You cannot make decisions or interventions in a factual vacuum. Evidence capturing the real situation of girls in marginal areas is very crucial in determining what the situation is, why it is as it is, what needs to be done, what resources are required, including finances, human resources and other materials.”**

Dr Amina Mohamed

Cabinet Secretary for Sports, Culture and Heritage, Kenya

Research evidence can provide political leaders with direction for policy and reform by presenting information on the challenges affecting girls' access to education and successful interventions to support them. Data on education outcomes, in particular data disaggregated by gender and other forms of disadvantage, provide empirical grounding to prompt political action. The use of data in advocacy and influencing strategies by civil society organisations can be a key way of encouraging policymakers to take evidence-informed courses of action, for example through high-profile media campaigns or social movements.

## **CITIZEN-LED EDUCATION DATA**

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) is a household-based annual survey administered in Pakistan, providing information on the schooling status of children aged 5 to 16 and basic learning levels for each province and district. ASER is able to generate a broader picture than data collected solely in schools as it counts out-of-school children and includes data disaggregated by gender and disability. This information is written up in gender reports and gender justice cards that are provided to government officials, parliamentarians and media, to clearly show the extent of disparities and inequalities in education.

## **4. CAMPAIGNS, MEDIA AND ADVOCACY**

Digital campaigns, advocacy and media attention can trigger action for girls' education by bringing attention to cases of political inaction or crises facing girls' education. Increasingly, 'hashtag activism' and the use of social media platforms such as Twitter are being recognised for their impact on national and global politics, allowing social actors to override or expose media inattention or bias. By mobilising support around key messages and suggested courses of action, and drawing attention to specific issues, activists can make powerful demands for change to political leaders through these online platforms.

Political leaders can also take advantage of online campaigns to advance their priorities. For example, the former U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama, who launched the U.S.-led Let Girls Learn Initiative in 2015, joined the Nigerian campaign Bring Back our Girls (which used the hashtag #BBOG) in 2014. Her remarks at a roundtable discussion on girls' education, published by the Washington Post, made public not only her support for the #BBOG campaign, but also her focus on advancing educational opportunities for women globally:

"Now that we have a bit of the world's attention on this issue, we have to seize upon this moment and take the opportunity to make some significant changes. Right now, today, there are millions and millions of girls around the world who are not in school."

## 5. PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

First-hand experience of the challenges that girls face can be a factor in motivating leaders to take action in support of girls' education, particularly women leaders who have experienced educational disadvantage themselves.

**“I saw [the power of girls' education] myself, I experienced it myself as an individual, as a student, then as a teacher and a headteacher. This gave an opportunity for me to be part of that process that will bring about change.”**

Barbara Chilangwa

Former Permanent Secretary for Education, Zambia



## 6. ENGAGEMENT WITH KEY STAKEHOLDERS

A transformative and whole-system approach to political leadership requires the engagement of key stakeholders. Their meaningful participation is critical to ensuring that policies and programmes developed for girls' education match the requirements and capacities of those they seek to support. This report highlights the vital roles of stakeholders such as women's organisations, youth-led networks, civil society organisations, local political leaders, traditional leaders and religious leaders. The particular 'key stakeholders' that high-level political leaders should engage with will vary according to the context.

**Women's organisations and women's movements** have played an important role in putting pressure on national leaders to enact legislation, policies and programmes for gender equality. For example, across 70 countries, the impact of women's movements on legal reform against gender-based violence has been found to be more critical to outcomes than other factors considered, such as numbers of women legislators, or national wealth.

Young people are directly affected by the resulting policy and legislative reforms, so the voices of **youth-led organisations** must be heard by decision makers. This helps to ensure that national leaders develop appropriate policies that align with the needs of young people.

**Civil society organisations and networks** that take a community-centered approach can play a role in ensuring that national leaders develop programmes that are supported by communities.

**Local political leaders** play a crucial role in supporting the implementation of policies for girls' education. They are closest to the point of implementation, and more closely embedded within local governance structures, and potentially linked with schools. In Ethiopia, for example, school directors often have a seat on the Kebele (local) Council, so there are strong links between policymakers, schools and communities, which help to ensure community investment and collaboration in providing education.

Engaging with **religious and traditional leaders** can have a particularly important impact in helping to change the social norms that hold back girls' education. Religious and traditional leaders occupy positions of authority due to the influence afforded to them by their communities. They can engage with and influence families and communities to mobilise support for policy reform and the transformation of social norms.

**In summary, the report identifies the following roles that key stakeholders play in influencing political leadership for girls' education:**

- 1.** Putting pressure on national leaders to enact legislation, policies and programmes for gender equality in education;
- 2.** Ensuring that national leaders develop appropriate policies that align with the needs of the community;
- 3.** Supporting the effective implementation of policies for girls' education;
- 4.** Holding national leaders to account, particularly to ensure sustainability of reforms beyond election cycles;
- 5.** Supporting high-level political commitment to achieve widespread and sustained social norm change and tackle gender-based discrimination.



# Political leadership can ensure that national planning and financing promotes 12 years of quality education for all girls

## EMBEDDING GENDER IN NATIONAL PLANNING

The framework developed for this research to understand the influence of political leadership on girls' education highlights the importance of a **whole-system approach** that tackles gender-based discrimination and harmful social norms beyond the education system itself. Given the multi-dimensional nature of the barriers to girls' education, **collaboration between ministries** is crucial to ensure coherence across national legislation and policy. Such collaboration can be achieved through coordination between the social protection, public health and labour ministries, for example, in conjunction with engagement with civil society organisations and other key stakeholders.

National policies and plans outline the long-term vision for a country's development. Therefore, integrating girls' education and gender equality into national policies and plans will influence how these issues are dealt with in sector plans, as well as the reporting structures that monitor progress towards national targets. An **overarching policy environment** that recognises and seeks to address the multiple barriers to girls' education will therefore help to support and reinforce the effectiveness of policies related to education specifically.

Uganda's commitment to gender mainstreaming at the national level is an example of creating an enabling environment for a whole-system approach to promote girls' education. The country's Second National Development Plan (2015/6) points to the need for integration of cross-cutting issues related to gender in sectoral plans, programmes and projects to ensure coherence across sectors and local governments.

## CROSS-SECTORAL MEASURES TO TACKLE CHILD MARRIAGE

In Ethiopia, the National Growth and Transformation Plan II (2015/16 - 2019/20) outlines cross-sectoral measures to strengthen girls' participation in education by tackling barriers beyond the education system, in particular the eradication of harmful traditional practices, including early and forced marriage. This approach includes public education and awareness programmes, engagement of women's movements, and enforcement of legal measures. In 2013, the National Alliance to End Child Marriage was established, and a national platform for the prevention and elimination of harmful traditional practices (including child marriage) was announced in 2015. Launched under the Ministry of Women, Children and Youth Affairs, the national platform includes representatives from civil society, women and youth associations and national federations, faith-based organisations and national associations.

## MOBILISING INCREASED RESOURCES FOR GIRLS' EDUCATION

Appropriate policy reform for girls' education must be supported by sufficient resources. The majority of spending on education in low- and middle-income countries comes from domestic government budgets and is therefore allocated through the national budgeting process. The research identified three funding mechanisms that can be used to promote gender equality and girls' education.



## 1. GENDER-RESPONSIVE BUDGETING

Public expenditure often supports boys and girls in unequal ways. The restructuring of spending and taxation to redress these imbalances and advance issues of gender equality, guided by gender-based assessments of the differential impact of budgets on males and females, is known as **gender-responsive budgeting**. According to the International Monetary Fund, 47 countries across the globe have implemented some form of gender-responsive budgeting.

This approach to government spending can mobilise domestic resources for girls' education. Enshrining such funding commitments in constitutional or legal provisions can ensure that they are sustained beyond the terms of individual governments.

### GENDER-RESPONSIVE BUDGETING IN UGANDA

In Uganda, a dedicated gender unit was established within the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) in 2012, offering technical guidance to ensure gender issues were considered by other departments.

- Through technical and political support from within the MoES, as well as from parliamentarians and the Ministry of Finance, the gender unit now participates in several working groups across the MoES, including the budgeting working group.
- The gender-responsive budgeting process led to the MoES securing funding to implement an ethical code of conduct for teachers and to integrate a violence-reduction component within the new National Teacher Policy programme.
- Enshrining gender-responsive budgeting in the Public Finance Management Act has played a key role in ensuring its sustainability.

## 2. FORMULA FUNDING AND SOCIAL CASH TRANSFERS

Formula funding and social cash transfers have provided effective ways to redistribute and target funding towards marginalised women and girls, including in education.

## FUNDING PRIORITIES FOR GIRLS' EDUCATION IN INDIA

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan ('Education for All Movement'), is India's flagship programme to achieve universal primary education. The programme is a collaborative effort of the central, state and local governments, as well as civil society organisations, non-profit organisations, and the private sector.

- Phase I was launched in 2001-2002. The funding formula approach targeted more funding to districts with large out-of-school populations, wider gender disparities and greater minority populations together with poor infrastructural conditions.
- The National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level component, launched in 2003, prioritised girls.
- Budgetary provisions were integrated to disburse additional support to the hardest-to-reach girls in Grades 1 to 8.
- Following the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act in 2009, the second phase of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan was extended until 2011-12 to meet the challenges of equitable access, retention and quality.



### 3. DONOR TARGETS FOR FUNDING GENDER EQUALITY IN EDUCATION

Donor governments can support the delivery of policy and programmes for girls' education. Visible backing from heads of government in donor countries has shown to be significant for securing commitment to gender equality in international aid spending. Bilateral assistance also allows donor countries to demonstrate leadership for issues of gender equality at the international level, and coherence with national positions on gender equality.

For example, the Canadian government launched the Feminist International Assistance Policy in 2017, which ensures that by 2021-22, 95% of Canada's bilateral international development assistance initiatives will target or integrate gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. In 2014, the UK government became one of the first donor countries to enshrine in law its commitments to advancing gender equality through bilateral aid spending, through the International Development (Gender Equality) Act. The legislation had high-level bipartisan political support.

**“We are working closely with DFID, the Department for Education, and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to mobilise our global network to carry forward the high-level political commitment to girls' education. The Gender Equality Unit draws on DFID's expertise in technical areas, and we use the FCO's strong experience on the diplomatic side to galvanise support for girls' education in political multilateral situations.”**

Senior civil servant  
UK Government

# Conclusions and recommendations

The report identifies five key areas in which political leadership can be translated into concrete, sustainable and effective action for girls' education:

## 1. INDIVIDUAL ACTION

**RECOMMENDATION A:** Heads of government, government ministers and parliamentarians must use their platform to demonstrate visible commitment to, and public advocacy for, the development and implementation of policies in support of 12 years of quality education for all girls. Senior civil servants must be supported and given appropriate resources to provide technical expertise and promote girls' education in ways that can be sustained across election cycles.

**RECOMMENDATION B:** Women leaders should be represented at every level of government to improve the gender balance in political participation and decision-making, contribute to social norm change and challenge patriarchal structures.

## 2. COLLECTIVE ACTION

**RECOMMENDATION C:** A global coalition of parliamentarians should be established to advocate for girls' education. Such a coalition should work across geographical and political divides in a non-partisan and inclusive fashion. It should engage with women's and youth organisations and civil society stakeholders, and share their commitment to tackling the barriers that hold back progress for girls' education, particularly the most marginalised girls.

## 3. RESEARCH AND DATA

**RECOMMENDATION D:** Senior civil servants need to promote investment in and use of data on education, in particular data disaggregated by gender and other sources of disadvantage, to build evidence-based options for policy and reform. Heads of government and parliamentarians should adhere to global accountability mechanisms in order to strengthen the implementation and sustainability of reforms for girls' education and use data and evidence so that they can be held to account for their commitments.

#### 4. ENGAGEMENT WITH KEY STAKEHOLDERS

**RECOMMENDATION E:** All political leaders must engage with and create space for key stakeholders, including women's and youth organisations, civil society organisations and local political, traditional and religious leaders. This will ensure that the voices of those directly affected by reforms are heard by decision makers, and that communities develop a sense of ownership of policies and programmes for girls' education.

#### 5. PLANNING AND FINANCING

**RECOMMENDATION F:** Government ministers and senior civil servants need to establish innovative, whole-system approaches to embedding gender equality in national plans and policies, in order to tackle the multi-dimensional barriers to girls' education and ensure coherence across sectors.

**RECOMMENDATION G:** Heads of government and government ministers must implement gender-responsive budgeting, ensuring sufficient domestic resources are allocated to girls' education and appropriately distributed to the most marginalised groups. Heads of government and parliamentarians need to enshrine such funding commitments in constitutional or legal frameworks so that their implementation continues beyond individual government cycles, within a longer-term accountability framework.

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