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From access to agency

UNESCO strategy for gender equality in and through education 2026-2029



Education 2030

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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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From access to agency

UNESCO strategy for gender equality in and through education 2026-2029

Foreword

Education is one of the most powerful forces for advancing human rights, dignity and opportunity. Yet as we approach 2030, the reality is stark. While gender parity in access has improved in many contexts, deep inequalities persist in learning, leadership, safety, democratic and digital participation, and life outcomes. In too many places, progress is fragile; in some, it is even reversing.

From access to agency: UNESCO's strategy for gender equality in and through education 2026-2029 is our response to this moment. It reaffirms education not only as a fundamental human right, but as a transformative force for gender equality. Building on the 2019-2025 strategy and its independent evaluation, it sharpens our ambition for system-wide transformation while sustaining targeted action for those furthest behind. It aligns with UNESCO's strategic planning frameworks and Global Priority Gender Equality, contributes directly to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – in particular Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 and 5 – and reflects ongoing reform efforts under the UN80 Initiative.

Achieving gender equality demands more than incremental change: it requires transformation. Education systems must actively dismantle discriminatory norms, practices and power imbalances. They must be equipped with better data to inform action, stronger legal and policy frameworks to uphold rights, and teaching and learning environments that nurture agency, critical thinking and leadership. This strategy focuses on what education systems must deliver: safe and inclusive learning environments free from gender-based violence; equal access to digital, green, and STEM opportunities; and teaching that challenges harmful gender norms – engaging all learners as agents of change.

As the United Nations specialized agency for education, UNESCO brings unique strengths to this agenda: a strong normative mandate, global convening power, and leadership in coordinating and monitoring SDG 4. Through strong partnerships with Member States, UN agencies, civil society, youth networks, academia and the private sector, we are committed to accelerate progress and safeguard hard-won gains.

Gender equality in and through education is not just a matter of justice; it is essential to building peaceful, inclusive and sustainable societies. When education equips every learner with knowledge, skills, values and agency to thrive, it transforms lives and shapes a more equitable future for all.

I invite governments, partners and learners everywhere to join UNESCO in advancing this shared vision – from access to agency – and ensuring that education fulfils its promise as a catalyst for gender equality and human dignity worldwide.



Qun Chen
Assistant Director-General for Education
UNESCO

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Introduction

With the 2030 deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) rapidly approaching, the urgency to accelerate progress toward inclusive, equitable and quality education for all has never been greater. The 2030 Agenda envisions "a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity…and of equal opportunity, permitting the full realization of human potential," where all countries ensure that "girls and boys, women and men, not only gain access to and complete education cycles, but are empowered equally in and through education."

Achieving genuine gender equality requires harnessing the transformative power of education to challenge and change the unequal power relations, social norms, discriminatory practices and belief systems that perpetuate gender inequality and exclusion. This calls for education systems that are not only responsive to the diverse needs, interests and lived experiences of all learners, but that also actively addresses gendered and intersectional barriers at their root – enabling every child, youth and adult to realize their right to participate in, complete and benefit fully from education.


Mat Wright for British Council

As the lead agency for education within the United Nations (UN) system, UNESCO is advancing this agenda through a renewed strategy that sets out its vision and priorities for the years ahead. This strategy reaffirms UNESCO's longstanding commitment to gender equality in and through education and:

- builds on the *2019–2025 UNESCO strategy on gender equality in and through education,* incorporating findings from its independent evaluation;
- provides a coherent framework for coordinated action at global, regional, and national levels for the period 2026–2029, aligned with UNESCO's Medium-Term Strategy (2022–2029) and quadrennial programme and budget (43 C/5), its Global Priority Gender Equality, and the broader 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;
- integrates new conceptual insights, evidence and strategic learning on gender equality in and through education that have emerged in recent years; and
- responds to recent developments in the global education and gender agendas, along with the UN80 reform calling for greater system-wide coherence, strengthened coordination, and measurable impact.

The strategy capitalizes on UNESCO's distinctive added value and comparative advantage including its:

- global convening power and agenda-setting role, including its mandate as the United Nations specialized agency for education to lead, coordinate and monitor the SDG 4-Education 2030 Agenda;
- capacity to generate, analyze and disseminate knowledge, including through the UNESCO Institute for Statistics as the official source of cross-nationally comparative education data;
- recognized expertise in promoting quality, relevant, inclusive and lifelong education and learning from early childhood through adult education across formal, non-formal and informal delivery modalities;
- proven ability to foster interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral cooperation, drawing on UNESCO's major programmes in education, sciences, culture, and communication and information;
- privileged relationships with ministries of education, as the only United Nations agency with a global network of national cooperating bodies in around 200 countries and territories;
- proven ability to strengthen the institutional capacities of ministries to plan, manage and reform education systems.

As the countdown to 2030 continues, the strategy guides UNESCO's programmes, actions and resource allocation to accelerate progress towards the SDGs, and close persistent gender inequalities (see **Box 1**). It promotes coherence, collective action and strengthened partnerships to advance gender equality in and through education, and informs UNESCO's engagement in the post-2030 agenda.

Box 1
Snapshot of persistent gender inequalities in education

- **133 million girls and 140 million boys are out of school globally;[1] in Sub-Saharan Africa, girls are 1.5 times more likely than boys to be out of school.[2]**
- **In around 40 countries with data, around 80 young men are enrolled in university for every 100 young women, while 80 young women are enrolled in vocational education for every 100 young men.[3]**
- **Women represent only 35% of graduates in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).[4]**
- **While gender gaps in literacy are closing among youth, women comprise almost two-thirds of the 739 million adults lacking basic literacy skills.[5]**
- **Each year, an estimated 10 million unintended pregnancies occur among girls aged 15–19 in developing regions, often resulting in an abrupt end to their education.[6]**
- **Only 87 boys for every 100 girls reach minimum reading proficiency, while boys hold an advantage over girls in science and mathematics at higher achievement levels.[7]**
- **Between 2018–2022, the prevalence of bullying increased for girls in 34 of 66 countries with data, compared with 22 countries for boys.[8]**
- **Globally, women account for 93% of teachers in pre-primary, 68% in primary, 56% in secondary and 44% in higher education.[9]**
- **Only 11% of countries promote gender parity in the selection of school leaders.[10]**

Rationale

Despite major gains in access to education, particularly at primary and secondary levels, transforming access into learning, agency, leadership and decent work requires sustained commitment and systemic change.

Globally, gender parity in enrolment has been achieved on average across primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education, but these averages mask persistent disparities by region and education level. In sub-Saharan Africa, gender gaps in secondary school completion remain wide, with progress over the decade only half as fast as in Central and Southern Asia – the only other region where girls lag behind boys. In contrast, in Latin America and the Caribbean, more boys than girls are out of school, a gap that widened between 2015 and 2023.[11] Progress for the most marginalized is far too slow, with many never acquiring basic literacy and numeracy. In some contexts, extreme exclusion persists: in Afghanistan, gains were reversed following the 2021 ban on girls' secondary education, which was further extended to universities in 2022.

Achieving gender equality in and through education requires far more than access. Gender bias and discrimination remain embedded in education systems, often reinforcing rather than challenging gender inequality. These are reflected in classroom interactions and expectations, gender stereotypes in textbooks and learning materials, and unequal power relations within schools. Inadequate infrastructure and resources, particularly in conflict- or disaster-affected areas, undermine safe, inclusive and enabling learning environments, while weak policy, legal, planning and accountability frameworks erode the right to education.

Education holds enormous potential to transform unequal gender relations, norms and practices, and to affirm gender equality as a fundamental human right. Realizing this potential requires political will, innovation and strategic investment to address the structural drivers of gender inequality. Gender equality must be embedded across education – from policy and planning to teacher recruitment and training, curricula, textbooks and learning materials, and learning environments. Safe, high-quality learning environments and whole school approaches that engage learners and school communities in critically examining gender inequalities can drive sustainable change.

Gender parity in teaching and education leadership is as essential as closing enrolment gaps. While women comprise most of the global teaching workforce, they remain under-represented in leadership positions, limiting education systems' transformative capacity.[12]

Promoting gender equality must begin early. Children develop understandings of gender between ages three and seven,[13] with stereotypes shaping self-perceptions and interests from a young age.[14] Early adolescence is another pivotal window, as social pressures intensify: girls often experience increasing restrictions, boys greater independence, while gender-diverse learners may have heightened marginalization – dynamics that affect participation, learning pathways and career aspirations.[15]

In many contexts, achieving gender equality requires action beyond education to transform institutional, societal, political and legal systems that constrain girls' and women's opportunities. Particular attention is needed for those facing intersecting forms of discrimination linked to ethnicity, disability, age, language, migratory status, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity or expression, alongside learners in emergency or crisis contexts.

Investments in girls' education yields substantial individual and societal returns.[16] Educated girls experience better health, education, social, economic and leadership outcomes, while families, communities and countries benefit through reduced vulnerability to poverty, disease, exploitation and violence.[17] Addressing boys' gendered barriers, such as restrictive social norms, economic pressures and exposure to violence, also improves retention, learning and transition to decent work, while fostering cohesion, to peace and equality.

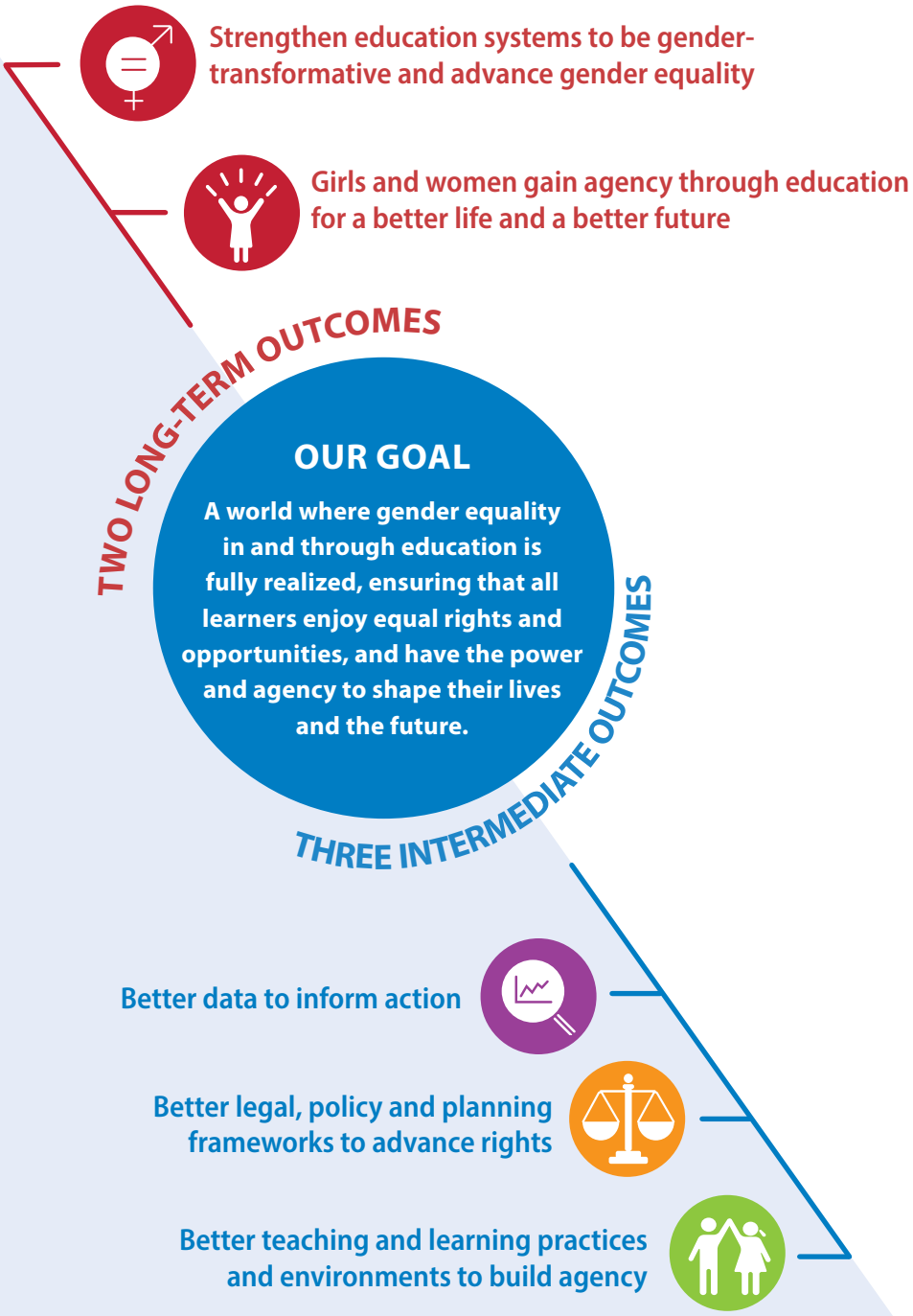
Building on its 2019-2025 strategy for gender equality in and through education, UNESCO is extending and deepening its two-pronged approach focusing on system-wide transformation building on UNESCO's core functions as well as targeted interventions. **Box 2** outlines key considerations informing the revised strategy.



Box 2
Key considerations and lessons learned informing the revised strategy

- As the 2030 Agenda enters its final phase, the strategy maintains its areas of actions to ensure continuity, focus and accelerated progress toward SDG 4 and gender equality in and through education.
- Protracted and overlapping crises have led UNESCO to expand its work in education in emergencies and promoting peace, human rights and resilience through education. The strategy calls for gender-transformative and rights-based national education approaches across crises preparedness, response, recovery and peacebuilding efforts.
- In the face of growing pushback on human rights, gender equality and comprehensive sexuality education – driven in part by online disinformation, anti-gender movements and shrinking civic space – the strategy calls for advancing gender-transformative, rights-based education to challenge harmful narratives.
- Global recognition of gender-transformative education, which addresses the root causes of gender norms, power imbalances and gender inequalities, informs UNESCO's continued leadership and expanded practice in this area.
- COVID-19 highlighted schools' roles beyond learning, including social protection and psychosocial support. The strategy emphasizes whole-school approaches that engage families and communities to transform gender norms and power relations, and foster resilience and well-being.
- Rapid digital transformation and the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) are reshaping education. The strategy calls for closing gender gaps in digital access, skills and aspirations, while addressing gendered algorithmic bias and technology-facilitated gender-based violence.
- Increasing evidence on the impact of harmful gender norms and masculinities on boys' education has informed the expansion of UNESCO's work in this area. The strategy calls for scaled up efforts that improve boys' participation, learning and retention while promoting equitable relationships and inclusive societies.
- The strategy aligns with the outcomes of key global processes over the last years, including the 2022 Transforming Education Summit, the 2024 Global Education Meeting and the 2023 Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development.[18]

Strategy at a glance



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UNESCO's vision

UNESCO's vision is a world where gender equality in and through education is fully realized, ensuring that all learners enjoy equal rights and opportunities and have the power and agency to shape their lives and the future.

Guided by this vision, and building on lessons learned from the 2019-2025 strategy, UNESCO is driving action towards achieving the SDGs – particularly SDG 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all, and SDG 5, promoting gender equality and girls' women's empowerment.

The strategy takes a system-wide approach, encompassing all levels of education and all delivery modalities, with the aim of ensuring equality in:

- **access**, including balanced representation of boys and girls, men and women, across all education levels and pathways;
- the **learning experience,** through gender-transformative teaching and learning content, processes and environments, supported by enabling policies, plans and resources;
- **educational outcomes**, translating learning into broader societal gains, including participation in public life and decision-making, access to decent work and resources, meaningful career pathways, and greater individual autonomy.

The strategy has two long-term outcomes:



Strengthen education systems to be gender-transformative and advance gender equality



Girls and women gain agency through education for a better life and a better future

And three intermediate outcomes:



Better data to inform action



Better legal, policy and planning frameworks to advance rights



Better teaching and learning practices and environments to build agency

UNESCO recognizes that gender interacts with other intersecting identities and characteristics including ethnicity, disability, age, language, migratory status, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and gender identity and expression.

We are committed to ensuring that all people can realize their rights and potential in and through education.

Theory of change

UNESCO STRATEGY FOR GENDER EQUALITY IN AND THROUGH EDUCATION

A world where gender equality in and through education is fully realized, ensuring that all learners enjoy equal rights and opportunities and have the power and agency to shape their lives and the future.

Education systems are gender-transformative and promote gender equality

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

Girls and women gain agency through education for a better life and a better future

Education management and monitoring systems identify and assess gender inequalities	Inclusive policies and legislation ensure the right to education without discrimination	Women and girls gain literacy, skills and pathways to lifelong learning	Teachers implement gender-transformative pedagogy and foster inclusive classrooms
Strengthened accountability drives gender equality in and through education	Education sector plans and budgets ensure strategic investments for gender equality	CSE builds knowledge, values and skills for gender equality and healthy lives	Girls and women access TVET and digital skills education for equitable career opportunities
Evidence, research and policy guidance inform gender-transformative education	Curricula and educational materials are free from gender bias and stereotypes	Normative instruments set benchmarks for inclusive equitable learning	Schools provide healthy, safe inclusive learning environments, free from SRGBV
Gender equality integrated into the post-2030 agenda and indicator framework	Inter-ministerial cooperation enforces right to education legislation	Addressing boys' disengagement from education benefits boys, girls and the wider society	Gender norms support women's participation in STEM and leadership roles

INTERMEDIATE OUTCOMES

- Better data to inform action
- Better legal, policy and planning frameworks advance rights
- Better teaching and learning practices and environments build agency

ASSUMPTIONS	Governments maintain commitment to gender equality	Teachers and education staff adopt gender-transformative practices	Data and evidence are available to drive strategic investments	Overarching support exists to challenge harmful norms	Sufficient resources are available to drive change
IMPLEMENTATION ENABLERS	Coordination across UNESCO	Expanded partnerships at global, regional and national levels	Leadership and advocacy	Institutional capacity strengthening on gender equality and education	Action planning, resource mobilisation, monitoring and reporting

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

We are rights-based, inclusive and intersectional	We aim to transform harmful gender norms and practices	We support country ownership	We are grounded in evidence	We believe that young people are crucial actors, leaders and partners	We apply a conflict-sensitive/do-no-harm approach

Note: CSE=comprehensive sexuality education; SDG=Sustainable Development Goal; SRGBV=school-related gender-based violence; STEM= science, technology, engineering and mathematics and TVET=technical and vocational education and training. For more details on implementation enablers, see pages 22-27.

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Better data to inform action



High quality timely data and evidence are key ingredients for policy-making, planning and the delivery of strategic interventions to advance gender equality in and through education.

Robust data enable countries to identify and analyze gendered patterns and trends, target resources effectively, and design interventions that influence participation, learning and agency from early childhood to higher education and across the life course.

Under the SDG 4 monitoring framework, all 11 global indicators are disaggregated by sex where possible, and indicator 4.5.1 requires the calculation of a gender parity index for all indicators that can be sex-disaggregated. Countries are also encouraged to assess the extent to which gender equality is mainstreamed in national education policies, curricula, teacher education and student assessment systems, and to monitor the availability of single-sex sanitation facilities in schools.[19]

However, the framework remains insufficient to capture the full scope of gender equality in and through education. The United Nations Secretary-General's 2022 Transforming Education Summit underscored the need for a more comprehensive monitoring framework – one that includes indicators related to social and gender norms, values and attitudes (many of which are shaped through education); education laws and policies, as well as relevant legislation and policies beyond the education sector; the allocation and use of resources; and teaching and learning practices and environments.[20]

Further efforts are also required to track disparities in non-formal and informal and learning within a lifelong learning perspective, and to improve data collection on the most excluded and marginalized populations, including those affected by conflict, crisis and protracted displacement. Because education disadvantage often accumulates over time, data collection and equity monitoring must begin in the early grades and follow learners across the education cycle to capture patterns of cumulative inequality.[21]

Drawing on its mandate as the lead agency for the coordination and monitoring of SDG 4, and its unique sector-wide expertise, including through its specialized institutes, UNESCO will build national capacity and improve the availability, quality, analysis and use of data, research and evidence to inform strategic action for gender equality in and through education.


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UNESCO's actions:

- Lead global monitoring of gender-related SDG 4 targets and indicators through the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, providing official, cross-nationally comparable data and intersectional analyses.
- Strengthen accountability for gender equality in education through the Global Platform for Gender Equality in and through Education, supporting Member States to translate Transforming Education Summit commitments into action.
- Produce and disseminate authoritative analyses of trends and strategies to address gender disparities across lifelong learning, including through the Global Education Monitoring Report gender releases and the triennial Global Report on Adult Learning and Education.
- Undertake forward-looking quantitative and qualitative evidence on emerging trends in gender equality in education, including intersectional analyses of compounding forms of exclusion, to inform policy and system transformation.
- Enhance national capacities to collect, analyze and use education data and monitoring tools, including education management information systems and technologies and AI, to identify and address gender inequalities in education.
- Embed gender equality in global, regional and constituency consultations on the post-2030 agenda with the SDG 4 High-Level Steering Committee and SDG 4 Youth & Student Network and inform the agenda and indicator framework.

Better legal, policy and planning frameworks to advance rights

The right to education lies at the heart of UNESCO's mission and is enshrined in numerous legally binding international treaties.[22]

By ratifying these instruments, countries commit to respecting, protecting and fulfilling the right to education without discrimination through legislative, administrative, budgetary, judicial and other measures. However, reservations and weak implementation often prevent commitments from being fully realised.[23]

Comprehensive constitutional, legal, policy, planning and budgeting frameworks are essential to guarantee quality education for all, from early childhood care and education to adult learning, and to dismantle barriers such as child marriage, child labour, and early and unintended pregnancy.

Governments must adopt and enforce laws and policies that remove barriers and promote equal treatment of all learners. This includes teacher policies to promote equitable training, recruitment, deployment, support and retention, as well as the repeal of laws permitting early marriage or the expulsion of pregnant and parenting girls from school.

Costed education sector plans provide the foundation for systemic change and resource allocation to advance gender equality. Integrating gender across planning cycles, humanitarian responses and joint needs assessments requires attention to gender across the analysis, formulation, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation phases.[24]

Targeted funding or equity measures may be required for girls and women, boys and men, and gender-diverse learners, particularly those facing intersecting, mutually-reinforcing disadvantages linked to ethnicity, disability, age, language, migratory status, socioeconomic



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status, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity or expression.

Through its global network, UNESCO will track country-level education policies and support analyses of national, regional and global policy and legislation on gender-related barriers to quality education and lifelong learning. Building on the 2025 International Symposium on the Future of the Right to Education and the 11th Consultation on the 1960 Convention against Discrimination in Education, UNESCO will renew global commitment to protect the evolving right to education.



UNESCO's actions:

- **Promote the universal ratification and implementation of international normative frameworks advancing gender equality in education, notably the 1960 Convention against Discrimination in Education.**
- **Strategically position gender equality in education within high-level UN policy dialogues, economic policy fora (e.g., the G7 and G20), and global, regional and national advocacy processes, contributing to stronger policy prioritization and financing for gender-transformative education.**
- **Provide legal and policy analysis and guidance to strengthen national frameworks for inclusive, quality education without discrimination, including social and gender equity measures to reach marginalized learners, particularly in crisis and conflict settings.**
- **Deliver technical assistance, tools and policy guidance to apply a gender and intersectional lens to education sector planning, budgeting and implementation, with broad stakeholder engagement.**
- **Facilitate inter-ministerial, -sectoral and -generational cooperation to enact and enforce laws and policies on gender-transformative education, health and well-being, comprehensive sexuality education, school-related gender-based violence, and the gender dimensions of climate change.**
- **Provide policy guidance and implementation support to mainstream gender equality across curricula, learning materials and teacher development, including to support the 2023 Recommendation on Education for Peace and Human Rights and Sustainable Development, and green and digital transitions.**
- **Monitor, map and analyze legislation to advance girls' and women's education through the interactive HerAtlas tool.**
- **Develop and promote education-related ethical frameworks and guidelines addressing gender biases in AI and emerging technologies, alongside initiatives supporting women's participation and leadership in the digital sphere.**

Better teaching and learning practices and environments to build agency



Education is a powerful driver for human development, social cohesion and peaceful, just, inclusive and sustainable societies.

It is the necessary foundation for lifelong learning in a complex and rapidly changing world. But for education to build agency, it must challenge and change unequal power relations, and address norms, expectations and practices that prevent individuals from realizing their full potential. Learners must acquire competencies beyond literacy and numeracy, including cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioural skills that foster agency, critical thinking, conflict management, respect for diversity, creativity, leadership, cooperation, adaptability and global citizenship.[25]

UNESCO will support efforts to ensure all children, young people and adults, including those in crisis and emergency contexts, can exercise their right to education. This involves scaling up of effective teaching and learning practices that build agency, equality in access, and learning outcomes that translate knowledge and skills into life, work and leadership benefits. Education should enable individuals to make informed decisions and act – individually and collectively – to promote peace and protect the planet.

This strategy focuses on interlinked areas with demonstrated impact.

Through gender-transformative education that addresses the root causes of inequality and equips learners with knowledge, skills and agency, UNESCO advances education as a driver of equality, agency and sustainable development.

More qualified teachers and school leaders, better content and improved teaching-learning processes

The Santiago Consensus, adopted at the 2025 World Summit on Teachers, calls for inclusive, equitable and gender-responsive recruitment and career pathways for teachers and school leaders, alongside strengthened capacities to promote gender equality in practice.

Teachers' recruitment, qualifications, training and continuous professional development – including subject expertise and pedagogical competence – and working conditions are among the most important determinants of educational quality.[26] Teachers also serve as socializing agents, shaping how learners internalize expectations, attitudes and behaviours typically associated with gender. In contexts with rigid norms, the presence of women teachers encourages girls' enrolment and improves learning outcomes.[27] Yet women remain underrepresented at higher levels of education, in subjects such as science and mathematics, and in leadership roles including department heads and school principals.[28]

Pedagogical practices are often influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by gendered assumptions and stereotypes, which affect learners' beliefs, confidence and learning outcomes. For example, teachers may enforce harmful and restrictive gender norms through language, describing girls as 'helpful' and boys as 'mischievous.'[29]

High quality pre- and in-service training can reduce gender bias by enabling teachers to reflect on their assumptions, attitudes and expectations, and adopt strategies that promote equal treatment and participation in classrooms and the wider school community.[30] For lasting impact, gender equality must be integrated across all teacher education programmes and professional development pathways. School administrators, inspectors and management committees should also receive training to ensure consistent, system-wide commitment.

Equitable and supportive work environments for teachers and school leaders are essential, addressing gender-specific challenges and preventing and responding to all forms of violence and harassment – online and offline – to ensure dignity, safety and respect.

Alongside teachers, learning content is a critical determinant of education quality. Textbooks, curricula and other materials convey not only specialized knowledge but also values and messages, including explicit or implicit messages about gender – also through the 'hidden curriculum'. A recent review of over 1,255 textbooks from 34 countries found persistent gender stereotypes and under-representation of female characters, mirroring earlier findings from UNESCO.[31] Curriculum reform and capacity-building of curriculum specialists, teacher educators and assessment experts can help ensure learning is rights-based and relevant to learners' contexts and needs, and promotes equality, justice and sustainability.

Aligned with SDG 4.7, curriculum, textbooks and learning materials should promote positive messages about gender equality and gender-equitable norms. Competency-based and social and emotional learning equips learners of all ages with age-appropriate knowledge, skills, attitudes and values needed for peaceful, sustainable and healthy societies. Comprehensive sexuality education supports learners to safeguard their health, well-being and dignity, challenge harmful gender norms,

UNESCO's actions:

- **Update and monitor global normative instruments* on teachers and teaching, with a focus on equitable training, recruitment, motivation, remuneration and leadership opportunities for women teachers.**
- **Expand resources, guidance and professional development on gender-transformative pedagogy, strengthening national capacity to mainstream gender in pre- and in-service teacher education, including the promotion of positive and healthy masculinities, and the ethical use of AI in education.**
- **Deliver policy guidance, tools and capacity development to support national curriculum reforms that advance gender equality and rights, including the elimination of stereotypes and bias in formal and non-formal education materials.**
- **Facilitate guidance, partnerships and capacity support to responsibly leverage traditional and digital media to expand learning, engage communities, and contribute to the transformation of social and gender norms.**
- **Provide analysis, policy advice, standards and platforms for cross-country cooperation to address gender gaps in participation and achievement – particularly in STEM, TVET, and youth and adult literacy.**
- **Strengthen the evidence base, policy guidance and delivery support for comprehensive sexuality education, life skills, and social and emotional learning programmes, building knowledge, attitudes and skills essential for gender equality.**

* Namely, the ILO-UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers (1966) and UNESCO's Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel (1997).

develop respectful relationships, consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others, and understand their rights throughout life.[32] In doing so, it contributes to social cohesion and supports the development of egalitarian and sustainable societies.

Education must equip learners with skills, networks and assets for the future of work, including digital skills, AI literacy, targeted mentoring and support for school-to-work transitions, while addressing gendered barriers to participation and progression.[33] Lifelong learning pathways, including TVET, can further build competencies for green and digital transitions.

Safe, inclusive and healthy learning environments

The physical and psychosocial environments in which learning takes place are critical for educational quality and outcomes at all levels. Yet providing 'child, disability and gender-sensitive' education facilities and 'safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all' (SDG 4, Target 4.a) remains a major challenge in many contexts.

In numerous parts of the world, school infrastructure is inadequate or fails to meet students' basic needs. Lack of separate sanitation facilities and supplies, for example, remains a major barrier to regular school attendance, particularly for menstruating girls. A 2025 analysis of household survey data from 44 low- and middle-income countries found that nearly one in six adolescent girls aged 15-19 missed school due to menstruation.[34]

Globally, an estimated 1 billion children aged 2-17 experience some form of violence each year, much of it in educational settings.[35] Learners in crisis-affected contexts are particularly vulnerable. Violence can occur on school grounds, in transit, and/or via online and digital platforms, taking forms such as bullying, corporal punishment, physical assault or sexual violence. It is often rooted in harmful gender norms, stereotypes and unequal power dynamics. Learners whose real or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity and expression do not conform with the norm face heightened risk of violence, resulting in absenteeism, drop out or poor learning outcomes.[36]

In some contexts, education institutions themselves are deliberately targeted, including attacks on girls' schools and women educators and students, by groups opposing girls' and women's education.[37] Such attacks harm learners physically and psychologically, and can deter teachers – particularly women – from joining or remaining in the profession.[38]

Every measure must be taken to ensure that educational environments are safe, accessible, inclusive, healthy, enabling and conducive to learning and equality. Education can play a transformative role: quality comprehensive sexuality education and global citizenship education foster respect, empathy, critical thinking and equality, equipping learners to challenge harmful norms that perpetuate violence and discrimination. Out-of-school children and youth, often the most vulnerable to misinformation, coercion and exploitation, must also have access to opportunities to develop these essential life skills.

Learning extends beyond formal schools through non-formal and informal programmes and initiatives which help meet diverse and context-specific needs across the life course, including literacy acquisition. UNESCO has been at the forefront of global literacy efforts since 1946, continuing to close persistent gendered literacy gaps and foster innovation through digital learning and technology-enabled solutions.


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UNESCO's actions:

- Develop and deploy tools and technical support to develop national frameworks for the prevention of and response to violence and discrimination in education including gender-based violence, bullying and cyberbullying.
- Undertake global coordination, knowledge generation and joint advocacy to address school violence, including through co-leadership of the Global Working Group to End School-Related Gender-Based Violence.
- Strengthen monitoring and documentation systems to track violations of the right to education, including gender-based attacks on education institutions, and to document effective gender-transformative prevention and response strategies in emergencies and protected crises.
- Lead advocacy and provide technical assistance to promote healthy, safe and inclusive learning environments, supporting the delivery of health and comprehensive sexuality education, puberty education and menstrual health management, and linkages to health and social services.
- Support policy guidance, technical support and capacity development to deliver quality, flexible and accelerated lifelong learning, non-formal, second chance and adult education, and accredited online, blended and distance learning models that promote gender equality and address gendered barriers to participation, including in emergency contexts.
- Serve as the clearinghouse for cutting-edge research, data and good practice on literacy, with a focus on closing persistent literacy gaps among women and supporting innovation through digital and lifelong learning approaches.

Implementation enablers

The implementation of this strategy will build on UNESCO's guiding principles and its core functions as a laboratory of ideas, clearinghouse, standard-setter, catalyst for international cooperation and capacity-builder. It builds on UNESCO's longstanding work at global, regional and national levels to advance gender equality, and girls' and women's agency, in and through education.

Coordination across UNESCO

Effective coordination will be central to delivering this strategy. Efforts will focus on ensuring coherence, complementarities and synergies across UNESCO's Education Sector, including Headquarters, Field Offices and the institutes, as well as across other programme sectors and with external partners.

Leadership for coordination will rest with the Section of Education for Inclusion and Gender Equality within the Education Sector, supported by UNESCO's network of in-house gender expertise. Strategic guidance will be provided by the Division for Gender Equality in the Office of the Director-General and by other senior management, ensuring alignment between policy innovation, standard-setting and operational support to Member States.

Implementation will mobilize expertise across the Education Sector, including staff in UNESCO Headquarters, 53 field offices and nine specialized institutes.[39] It will also draw on the expertise of the wider UNESCO family including UNESCO Chairs and the University Twinning and Networking Programme (UNITWIN), the Associated Schools Network (ASPnet), and UNESCO International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (UNEVOC) centres. While this strategy provides a global framework, Africa will remain a priority focus, in line with its designation as UNESCO's institutional Global Priority alongside gender equality. Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and youth will remain key focus groups for UNESCO's actions, consistent with institutional priorities.

Aligned with UNESCO's 43 C/5, intersectoral collaboration will be further scaled up to harness UNESCO's interdisciplinary capacities and address shared challenges. Examples include collaboration with the Sciences Sector on gender-transformative STEM education and advancing the *Call to Action on Closing the Gender Gap in Science*,[40] and on masculinities and the ethics of AI; with the Communication and Information Sector on gender-transformative digital learning policies and skills development; and with the Culture Sector on arts and culture education, reinforcing UNESCO's role as a catalyst for integrated, system-wide solutions.

Expanded partnerships at global, regional and national levels

UNESCO will work with a diverse range of partners including national authorities, UN agencies, academic institutions, civil society and the private sector to implement the

Box 3
UNESCO's guiding principles

- **Human rights** – Guided by international human rights principles, conventions and standards, UNESCO applies a rights-based approach that promotes equality, non-discrimination, participation, accountability and respect for diversity.
- **Gender equality** – UNESCO programming aims to challenge gender bias and discrimination and seeks to transform harmful gender norms, practices, and power structures that restrict rights, freedoms and opportunities.
- **Inclusion** – UNESCO believes that every learner matters equally and is committed to addressing factors of exclusion or disadvantage – such as ethnicity, disability, age, language, migratory status, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and gender identity or expression – to ensure equitable access to quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all.
- **Country ownership and an enabling international environment** – UNESCO upholds national ownership and harmonisation as outlined in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the Accra Agenda for Action, and supports gender mainstreaming across the financing for development agenda in line with the 2025 Sevilla Commitment.[44]
- **Evidence-based action** – UNESCO prioritises approaches that are informed by data and evidence and supports countries to implement education responses that are evidence-driven.
- **Conflict-sensitive/do-no-harm** – UNESCO promotes conflict-sensitive, do-no-harm approaches in crisis- and conflict-affected contexts to safeguard learners and education personnel, prevent the exacerbation of inequalities or gender-based discrimination, and support safe, inclusive, and resilient education systems.
- **Intergenerational collaboration and meaningful youth participation** – UNESCO promotes youth engagement and intergenerational collaboration to shape policies and programmes that affect learners' lives and opportunities.

Through Her Education, Our Future, UNESCO will continue to generate and share data on progress, as well as evidence on what works, and facilitate cooperation and joint action on girls' and women's education.


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strategy to advance gender equality in and through education. Priority will be given to collaboration with national authorities and ministries of education, including teacher training institutions, statistical bodies, research centres and specialized gender units at national and sub-national levels, strengthening national ownership and institutional capacity.

While national and decentralized education actors are key, they cannot achieve gender equality in and through education alone. Intersectoral cooperation is needed to address structural drivers of gender disparities and inequalities, including collaborations with parliaments and other sectors including finance, health, youth, child protection, water and sanitation.

Building on system-wide reforms under UN80, UNESCO will strengthen partnerships with United Nations agencies and networks to drive coordinated action at global, regional, and national levels. For example, in line with its standard-setting role, collaborations with the ILO will focus on updating and monitoring international standards for teachers and higher-education teaching personnel. Gender equality will also be mainstreamed across UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks and joint programming, and UNESCO Field Offices' engagement in Humanitarian Country Teams and Education, Gender-Based Violence, and Child Protection clusters in humanitarian, crisis and post-crisis contexts. This approach would contribute to survivor-centred approaches, including the safe reintegration of survivors of violence into education systems, while ensuring that gender equality and protection considerations are embedded across crisis preparedness, response and recovery efforts.

Beyond the United Nations, UNESCO will leverage its convening power to drive collective action. As co-lead of the Global Platform for Gender Equality in and through Education, UNESCO will bring together a wide coalition of organizations to strengthen transformative leadership, accountability, data and financing. It will continue to participate in multisectoral initiatives promoting gender equality in and through education, including the UN Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI), the EQUALS Partnership for Gender Equality in the Digital Age and the Global Working Group to End School-Related Gender-Based Violence. It will also ensure sustained attention to gender equality within other global networks including the Teachers' Task Force, the Global Alliance on Literacy, the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, and the Global Alliance for Disaster Risk Reduction and Resilience in Education Systems.

UNESCO will maintain collaboration with the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) to advance the hardwiring of gender equality across sector diagnosis, policy dialogue, and grant design and monitoring. This includes strengthening country capacities, promoting mutual accountability, and contributing to the refinement and implementation of GPE's partnership approach through participation in GPE governance. At the country level, UNESCO will support the implementation of engagement in GPE-funded grants and the GPE Gender Equality Technical Assistance Initiative, mobilizing expertise across Headquarters, Field Offices and the specialized institutes.

Academic and research networks, including UNESCO Chairs and the University Twinning and Networking Programme (UNITWIN), will be leveraged to enhance institutional capacities, foster knowledge-sharing and promote South-South cooperation on strategic priorities, strengthening UNESCO's laboratory of ideas function.

UNESCO will expand cooperation with international and national non-government organizations, parents' associations, youth organizations, teachers' unions and education champions to shape policies and plans, monitor progress and hold governments accountable for their commitments to gender equality. It will

also promote and facilitate meaningful youth engagement at all levels, amplifying young people's solutions to the challenges they face.

Partnerships with the private sector will be broadened to include entities aligned with UNESCO's vision, providing expertise, resources and innovations to extend the reach of UNESCO's programmes through financing, programme delivery, technical assistance and advocacy.

Leadership and advocacy

As the lead UN agency for education, UNESCO plays a pivotal role in generating new thinking and shaping global and regional debates on gender equality in and through education. In coordinating and monitoring SDG 4, UNESCO will strengthen commitment to an inclusive, evidence-based and gender-transformative agenda that leaves no one behind.

UNESCO will leverage its convening power to catalyse Member States' commitments at global, regional and national levels, mobilizing both political will and domestic resources to advance gender equality in and through education. In line with the 2024 Fortaleza Declaration,[41] it will provide specialized policy advice, technical assistance and normative guidance, bridging standard-setting with country-level capacity development to deliver transformative outcomes through education.


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UNESCO will continue to play a leading role as the clearinghouse for cross-national comparative data on education. Through the UNESCO Institute for Statistics and the Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report team, it will advance understanding of inequalities within and across countries, providing evidence to inform policy design and public debate. As part of its *Countdown to 2030 series*, the annual UNESCO GEM Reports will analyze country trajectories and challenges in addressing gender inequalities, focusing on access and equity (2026), quality and learning (2027) and relevance (2028).

Global, regional and national-level advocacy and awareness-raising initiatives will be a key focus. UNESCO will work with media and partners to deliver high-impact, gender-transformative messages aimed at eliminating gender bias and discrimination in classrooms and society. It will convene and host high-profile events, campaigns and communication to highlight the transformative power of education, with particular attention to areas of demonstrated leadership, including gender-transformative STEM education, masculinities and education, comprehensive sexuality education and school-related gender-based violence.

Targeted advocacy will promote equality of opportunity and leadership in and through education. Initiatives on girls' and women's education will continue to monitor trends and progress, present new data and tools, and highlight effective programmes and innovations. By engaging global, regional and national champions, UNESCO will raise public awareness, strengthen advocacy and catalyse action to drive investments and strengthen commitment to gender equality in and through education.



In recognition of exceptional leadership and practice, UNESCO will continue to award the UNESCO Prize for Girls' and Women's Education, leveraging it to share lessons, inspire action and promote global learning on effective strategies.

With only five years remaining to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and as discussions on the post-2030 education agenda begin, UNESCO will ensure that gender equality is fully integrated into the SDG 4 High-Level Steering Committee's work and initiatives. This includes guiding the phased consultation process led by the SDG 4 High-Level Steering Committee and the SDG 4 Youth & Student Network.

Institutional capacity strengthening on gender equality and education

Since the designation of gender equality as a UNESCO Global Priority in 2007, all parts of UNESCO have been called upon to integrate a gender perspective into policy planning, programming, implementation and evaluation activities across its mandate.

Initially addressed through a stand-alone action plan, gender equality evolved under the Medium-Term Strategy 2022-2029 (41 C/4) and the quadrennial programme and budget 2026-2029 (43 C/5), fostering new

synergies and mainstreaming gender equality throughout UNESCO's core strategic planning. This mainstreaming strengthened UNESCO's gender architecture, underpinned by the Global Priority Gender Equality Framework, a tailored internal capacity-building programme, and enhanced mechanisms for programmatic and budget tracking.

The Global Priority Gender Equality Framework provides strategic guidance aligned with UNESCO's strategic objectives for 2022-2029, outlining the Organization's commitment to promoting gender equality across its mandate, including education. It also forms the foundation for the UNESCO strategy for gender equality in and through education 2026-2029.

Monitoring and reporting have been strengthened through the integration of revised UN standard Gender Equality Markers into UNESCO's planning and monitoring systems, complemented by new monitoring tools and gender-specific performance indicators. This will enable more effective tracking of the implementation and financing of the strategy.

Aligned with the evaluation of Priority Gender Equality,[42] the Education Sector will further develop staff capacity and expertise in gender equality. This includes reinforcing the Sector's architecture to ensure sufficient capacity for mainstreaming gender equality in UNESCO's assessment, planning and proposal development, monitoring, evaluation and documentation processes.

UNESCO will build on existing tools and resources developed by the Division for Gender Equality and the Education Sector,[43] complemented by targeted, on-demand training and staff support. Efforts will focus on further strengthening the Education Sector's community of practice and deepening access to knowledge and resources to advance equality.

Action planning, resource mobilization, monitoring and reporting

This strategy will be implemented through annual action plans outlining a costed and prioritized set of key activities and deliverables aligned with its three thematic priorities. Continuing the practice from the previous strategy, UNESCO will release an Annual Report to review progress, analyze challenges and opportunities, and provide recommendations and key priorities for the coming year.

UNESCO will monitor and report on measurable, sex-disaggregated results through the Integrated Results and Resources Framework, introduced in UNESCO's quadrennial programme and budget 2026-2029 (43 C/5).

Global, regional and country programmes will allocate resources to ensure that gender equality results are achieved. Field Offices, Headquarters and institutes will actively pursue additional funding opportunities from Member States and other partners, in line with UNESCO's overall resource mobilization strategy.

A mid-term review and final evaluation will assess the implementation of the strategy, providing evidence and lessons to guide future efforts to advance gender equality in and through education.

Acronyms

AI	Artificial intelligence
ASPnet	UNESCO Associated Schools Network
CSE	Comprehensive sexuality education
GEM Report	Global Education Monitoring Report
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
ILO	International Labour Organization
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
SRGBV	School-related gender-based violence
STEM	Science, technology, engineering and mathematics
TVET	Technical and vocational education and training
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNEVOC	UNESCO International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNGEI	United Nations Girls' Education Initiative
UNITWIN	University Twinning and Networking Programme (UNESCO)

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From access to agency

UNESCO strategy for gender equality in and through education 2026-2029

From access to agency: UNESCO's strategy for gender equality in and through education 2026-2029 builds on the Organization's longstanding commitment to gender equality. Aligned with the 2030 Agenda, the strategy guides UNESCO's programmes, actions and resource allocation. It lays out our vision of a world where gender equality in and through education is fully realized, ensuring that all learners enjoy equal rights and opportunities and have the power and agency to shape their lives and the future.

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4 QUALITY EDUCATION
5 GENDER EQUALITY
Sustainable Development Goals