UNGEI FEMINIST NETWORK 2025
FOR GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION

GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION:

A MULTIPLE-IMPACT INVESTMENT IN A RESOURCE-CONSTRAINED WORLD

UNGEI

FOREWORD

In a time of uncertainty when budgets and commitments are shrinking, our response is often to pare down to the essentials and take everything else off the table. Rights-based issues like gender equality are a top casualty, including in sectoral priorities and budgets like education.

This is not just a moral mistake, it is a bad investment decision. Gender-transformative education achieves outcomes in learning, health and wellness, each of which add multiple dollars per capita to an economy. It can lead to less violence and inequality, both of which are enormous costs to national economies (in addition to lifelong psychosocial costs in people's lives).

In this time of global peril, gender-transformative education should not be swept off the table, it should be its centerpiece.

Gender-transformative education uses all parts of an education system – from policies to pedagogies to community engagement – to transform stereotypes, attitudes, norms and practices. In addition to ensuring all children can learn and succeed, GTE supports children to learn crucial values of respect and equality, and emerge as tolerant, non-violent adults. Through gender-transformative interventions, girls and young women are less likely to have children early, less likely to be forced into marriage and can to play an active role in the economy. Boys are more likely to communicate and engage and less likely to be violent. GTE holds the potential to reduce conflicts by fostering critical thinking, equitable and tolerant attitudes and encouraging open dialogue. All of these can save us from the crippling cost of war.

Yet, GTE has not convinced everybody. This collection of three briefs aims to change that. We want to show you – with evidence - that GTE is both urgent and life-saving. GTE provides a framework that encompasses universal, high-quality education as well as progress towards gender equality and other human rights. GTE solves problems. Period.

In that spirit, UN Girls Education Initiative (UNGEI) and the Feminist Network for Gender Transformative Education are delighted to present three briefs:

1. Multi-sector Impacts and Economic Returns of Gender-Transformative Education
2. Gender-transformative education: Transitioning young women to work
3. Beyond RCTs: Diversifying rigorous approaches to measure gender-transformative education

Multi-sector Impacts and Economic Returns of Gender-Transformative Education **details the impact on health, well-being, learning outcomes, safety from violence and equitable attitudes/ beliefs of 25+ in-country and several more regional/ global GTE programmes.** It also reflects on the cost of inaction given the high cost of violence, inequality and instability on individuals and communities. **This brief makes clear that GTE has a strong case *for* high RoI by supporting multiple results with known economic value and preventing multiple costly negative outcomes.**

Gender-Transformative Education: Transitioning Young Women to Work reminds us that girls graduating from school does not automatically mean they are empowered and independent. Detailing the many gendered barriers (pull and push factors) that prevent young women from accessing decent, paid work, the brief notes describes how a **system-wide approach like GTE can prevent these expensive barriers from arising in the first place by enabling support for gender equality as they grow up to be tomorrow's workers, employers and leaders.**

Finally, *Beyond RCTs: Diversifying Rigorous Approaches to Measure Gender Norm Change in Education* is a much-needed, much-asked-for summary of all the reasons why randomised control trials should not be the impact standard for norm change. Describing the limitations of this "gold standard" borrowed from the clinical trials of epidemiology, this brief describes **the risks and consequences of using RCTs to measure gender norm change (in education) and proposes alternatives, especially mixed method research approaches and tools.**

Earlier this year, the Feminist Network for Gender-Transformative Education sent a letter to 112 governments. The letter asked heads of states and their ministers to "*Imagine a world where every child goes to school, is free to play, free to learn, free to dream and free to work for those dreams to come true. This is the world we want. Gender-transformative education is the way to achieve it.*" We offer these briefs in support of these aims, and to enable children today and tomorrow to live in equal, prosperous and peaceful societies.

Antara Ganguli
Director, UNGEI Secretariat

ABOUT THE FEMINIST NETWORK FOR GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION

The Feminist Network for Gender Transformative Education (FemNet4GTE) is a powerful, diverse and intergenerational movement of 210+ organizations, experts and government representatives, all working towards gender equality in and through education. Since 2022, our annual meetings have brought together Network members to share ideas and build actionable strategies for achieving gender equality in and through education. Our goal is that all learners are supported with gender-transformative education to realise their full potential and contribute to achieving equal, just societies.

The Network is co-ordinated by the UN Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI). It was developed in partnership with and generously funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and Echidna Giving.

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MULTI-SECTOR IMPACTS AND ECONOMIC RETURNS OF GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION

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Summary: Gender norms have the power to make or break a child's life, including their access to and completion of education. This impacts not only individual children but entire economies and societies, especially in crisis-affected contexts where harmful gender norms are exacerbated. Evidence from 25+ country-level interventions and multiple global and regional reviews shows that GTE supports results in numeracy, literacy, health, wellbeing, safety and improved gender norms. This summary of evidence shows that there is a strong case for GTE's high RoI: it supports multiple results with known economic value and prevents multiple costly negative outcomes.

Definition of Gender-Transformative Education

Gender-transformative education is learning to understand, recognize and challenge root causes of gender inequality and injustice. The "transformation" is in people's attitudes, beliefs and behaviours and in the education system – from gender unequal to equal. Gender-transformative education seeks to utilize all parts of an education system – from policies to pedagogies to community engagement – to transform stereotypes, attitudes, norms, and practices. The goal of gender transformative education is a world in which a person's gender does not impact their access to power, resources and opportunities.

UNGEI (2024), Your Gender-Transformative Education Glossary

INTRODUCTION

Although global primary gender parity was reached in 2015 and lower-secondary gaps are narrowing, gendered barriers continue to limit girls' access and completion of safe and high-quality education, particularly in low-income and crisis-affected settings[1]. This has created a false sense that the work on girls' education is done. Yet global statistics on broader outcomes for girls and women show that parity does not mean equality. Girls and young women continue to face gender-based violence, child, early and forced marriage/unions and early pregnancy, all of which jeopardise their right to learn and limit their potential. Meanwhile, boys are disengaging more from school around the world, are learning less when they are in school and have decreasing options outside of armed conflict in several parts of the world including the Caribbean, Sahel and some countries in the MENA region. Mental health crises, especially for adolescents, are at record highs. These risks multiply in crisis and conflict-affected settings.

These risks also harm communities and economies. In 2023, women's global labour force participation rate reached 64.5%, significantly below men's at 92%[2]. This is lost income in the tune of USD 7 trillion for the world[3]. Similarly, gender-based violence has huge economic costs, in addition to potentially life-long trauma and other impacts in individual lives. UN Women estimated that the global cost of violence against women (not including girls) was USD 1.5 trillion in 2016[4] and a World Bank study in 2014 found that it costs up to 3.7% of GDP in some countries[5], adding that this figure is more than these countries' budgets for primary education.

Education can end harmful gender norms or reinforce them. Gender biases embedded in curricula, teaching practices, and school environments can limit students' aspirations and shape inequitable outcomes. Girls may be discouraged from pursuing STEM subjects, while boys can face pressure to conform to narrow subjects related to livelihood and harmful notions of successful masculinity that deny expression, care and perpetuate violence. Boys may be at higher risk of grade repetition, school failure, and disengagement from learning[6].

Learning environments are also often unsafe, discouraging attendance. Despite sparse data on sexual violence experienced in school, a 2018 analysis found that up to 75% of children reported physical violence from teachers in Uganda, while a global survey of students aged 13–17 in 96 countries found that 11% had experienced sexual jokes or gestures in school[7,8]. In Africa, pooled data from nearly 15,000 adolescents showed that over half had experienced peer violence in schools[9].

Gender-transformative education (GTE) is an important part of the answer. GTE can unlock the full potential of all learners and drive more inclusive, peaceful and resilient societies[10,11]. This brief presents evidence of the wide-ranging impact of GTE interventions on multiple adolescent health, wellbeing, and learning outcomes. It then demonstrates how these gains translate into measurable economic returns, making the case for GTE not only as a moral imperative but as a strategic investment in national development.

IMPACT OF GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE

1. Education outcomes

There is strong evidence that GTE, particularly when integrated with economic interventions, significantly improves educational outcomes. For instance, resource-focused interventions providing school materials or infrastructure, such as girl-friendly schools in Burkina Faso and village-based schooling in Afghanistan, improved learning outcomes among boys and girls and reduced gender gaps in enrolment [12,13]. In addition, in Uganda, the Educate! skills-based model enhanced school completion and transition to higher education, and fostered gender-equitable career aspirations among secondary students in 500 schools. Young women participating in the programme were 8 percentage points more likely to graduate secondary school, 25 percentage points more likely to enrol in university, and 22 percentage points more likely to choose a business or STEM degree than peers in comparison areas[14]. The programme also improved 'soft' skills such as grit and patience and increased university enrolment amongst boys.

Furthermore, gender-responsive pedagogies and teacher training programs, such as those promoted by the Forum for African Women Educationalists in Malawi and Ethiopia, have improved classroom engagement and academic outcomes for girls by fostering equitable teacher-student interactions[15]. Further studies in Mali, Cambodia, and Liberia found that gender-responsive teaching practices led to increases in girls' exam pass rates and literacy outcomes[16].

These approaches have also proven to be scalable. The Gender-Responsive Continuum of Teacher Training across Rwanda, Mozambique, and Ghana trained over 4,000 teachers. Post-training, 81 percent demonstrated enhanced delivery of gender-responsive, play-based pedagogy, and a measure of girls' and boys' self-esteem rose from 77 percent to 98 percent[17]. Together, these findings affirm the potential of GTE in improving children's schooling achievement and expanding opportunities for all learners.

2. Health and wellbeing outcomes

Young people who experience a gender-transformative education can achieve better outcomes in adolescent health, safety, and wellbeing, particularly through reductions in gender-based violence and improvements in sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) outcomes. A recent systematic review found that approximately 74% of rigorous evaluations of gender-transformative programmes targeting adolescents report positive health-related outcomes[18]. Consistent evidence across reviews highlights that girls' clubs and safe spaces, often implemented in schools or as an after-school activity, improve SRHR outcomes by enhancing girls' knowledge, attitudes, and practices, while also strengthening peer networks and reducing social isolation [19-23]. A meta-analysis of 22 comprehensive sexuality education programmes showed that those explicitly addressing gendered power relations were five times more likely to reduce rates of STIs and unintended pregnancies compared to those without a gender focus[24]. Half of the ten effective studies included both female and male participants, although some only measured outcomes amongst girls.

Examples at the country level include a boys' life-skills curriculum in Cambodia, which led to significant gains in gender knowledge, positive attitudes toward shared household duties, and an increase in the intended age of marriage to 25 years. In Nigeria, training 157 teachers on gender-sensitive approaches not only increased commitments to gender-equitable classroom roles but also catalysed improvements in water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities for girls – key factors in reducing absenteeism related to menstrual health[25]. In South Africa, a school-based intervention delivered to mixed-sex small groups including storylines and discussions on youth sexuality, healthy relationships, and avoiding risky situations, reduced rates of unprotected sex and curable STIs, as well as condom-use skills, self-efficacy, and HIV/STI knowledge[26].

The education sector plays a crucial role in improving these health and wellbeing outcomes. A recent synthesis of successful gender-transformative interventions aimed at reducing adolescent pregnancy identified eight core mechanisms of change, three of which are embedded in the school setting: fostering a supportive and inclusive school environment, delivering comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education that promotes critical thinking and goal setting, and engaging boys in challenging harmful gender norms[27]. The same body of evidence linked these mechanisms to delayed marriage, and increased contraceptive uptake.

3. Safety and ending violence outcomes

GTE interventions are also critical in violence prevention, including School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV), corporal punishment, and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). Whole school approaches to violence prevention aim to promote children's health via a coordinated set of activities across curricula, teaching, school ethos and environments, and family and community engagement[28-30]. The Global Working Group to End School-Related GBV (led by UNGEI, UNESCO) lists eight domains of the whole-school approach: school leadership and community engagement; teacher and educational staff support; codes of conduct; parent engagement; child rights, participation and gender equality; reporting, monitoring and accountability; incident response; and safe and secure physical environments in and around schools. This approach has been implemented in programmes across Sierra Leone, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe, incorporating capacity development for teachers, principals, community members, and school leadership; the establishment of school clubs and safe spaces; and the rollout of awareness campaigns. In Sierra Leone, the programme contributed to significant improvements in students' experiences and perceptions of safety and gender equality in schools, including reductions in SRGBV and sexual violence, increased willingness to report harm, less acceptance of corporal punishment, and a marked improvement in gender-equitable attitudes among students[31].

Evidence from multiple reviews underscores the effectiveness of school-based interventions that incorporate gender equality and anti-violence content into curricula, build teacher capacity, and challenge gender stereotypes[32-34].These interventions have been found to reduce bullying and sexual harassment while promoting healthier masculinities and respectful relationships[35]. A review of adolescent IPV prevention programmes further highlights the effectiveness of interactive, school- and community-based peer group education in transforming gender attitudes and norms. The key mechanism of change is adolescents' critical reflection on gender roles and relationships, leading to a re-evaluation of personal beliefs and the adoption of more equitable behaviours[36]. In addition, emerging evidence on whole school interventions including these reflections have demonstrated positive impacts on mental health outcomes, including reductions in depression[37]. Incorporating gender-transformative approaches into other school-based programmes, such as mental health education, may further enhance their effectiveness and reach[38].

4. Gender equitable attitudes and beliefs

A fundamental objective of GTE is to challenge restrictive gender norms and foster more equitable attitudes and behaviours among adolescents. Evaluations of GTE interventions consistently show positive impacts on attitudes, knowledge, and the broader social environment that reinforces gender inequality across contexts[39]. For example, the Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS) program, which implemented school-based activities promoting gender equality and questioning the use of violence in India, demonstrated significant shifts in gender-equitable attitudes among boys and girls. In intervention schools, the proportion of students expressing equitable views increased from 2% to 14%, compared to a more modest rise from 1% to 7% in comparison schools[40].

To be effective in improving gender equality, reducing discriminatory learning environments and experiences of violence, it is crucial that programmes also engage boys and male influencers in GTE interventions. For example, the GEMS programme increased the proportion of male and female students believing that girls should be older to marry and those who reported they would take action in response to sexual harassment, creating safer learning environments for all[41].

A recent review of gender-transformative programmes engaging men and boys to improve SRHR outcomes identified promising strategies, including multicomponent activities addressing capability, motivation, and opportunity; multilevel approaches that engage the wider community; and delivery by trained facilitators over a sustained period of time[42]. Engaging boys in girls' empowerment programmes can also improve community and parental support for interventions[43].

Beyond attitudinal change, GTE programmes increasingly aim to strengthen adolescent girls' self-confidence and communication skills, both crucial for effective participation in social and economic life[44,45]. In Ethiopia, the Act With Her life skills intervention showed significant improvements in girls' agency and voice, including increased involvement in household decision-making, greater comfort in communicating with parents, and more control over financial resources. In many of these indicators, outcomes in the intervention group were more than double those in the control group[46].

Moreover, integrating gender equality content within broader educational approaches can enhance both cognitive and socio-emotional learning. The Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial (SAT) programme in Latin America, which embeds gender and citizenship education within academic instruction, led to a 45% improvement in learning outcomes and strengthened students' sense of social responsibility. Importantly, female students in the SAT programme reported enhanced empowerment, defined by greater self-determination and increased capacity to make strategic life choices[47,48]. Similarly, gender-transformative pedagogy, implemented in India and Bangladesh, led to a 71–73 percentage-point increase in both girls' and boys' association of domestic tasks with any gender, reflecting greater mutual respect and self-confidence in non-stereotyped roles.

Embedding gender equality in "learn to live together" curricula equips learners to question harmful norms, fostering inclusive school cultures and stronger peer support networks. These social shifts are critical: they sustain the impact of GTE beyond the classroom and support more equitable communities[49]. Furthermore, by laying the foundations for gender equality from an early age, GTE contributes to the development of more peaceful, resilient, and prosperous societies, which is reflected in the strong correlations between women's inclusion, justice, and security measured by the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Index[50].

THE COST OF INACTION: ECONOMIC LOSSES TO ECONOMIES WITH NO/ POOR INVESTMENT IN GTE

GTE is not only a powerful tool for fostering young people's development and wellbeing, but also a strategic economic investment for national governments. This section explores evidence on the economic gains of integrating gender equality and non-violence into educational systems, as well as the cost of inaction of not investing in these interventions.

Promoting gender equality in schools goes far beyond educational impacts, influencing lifelong outcomes, especially for girls[51]. When girls leave school early or never attend, they face high youth unemployment rates, and their employment opportunities are constrained, often limited to low-wage or informal sectors. [See the accompanying brief: Gender-transformative education: transitioning young women to work.] This entrenches intergenerational poverty. Globally, economic inequality between men and women results in $160 trillion in lost wealth due to disparities in lifetime earnings[52]. Much of this gap stems from girls' unequal access to quality education and employment opportunities. According to a World Bank study, if every woman alive today had benefited from universal secondary education, the global economy would be $15–30 trillion richer in human capital wealth[53].

Beyond economic productivity, lack of access to education systems that challenge harmful stereotypes and power imbalances also increases the risk of other harmful social and health outcomes for girls. Girls who are out of school and who face discriminatory gender norms are more likely to marry early and have children in adolescence. A 2017 World Bank/International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) study revealed that eliminating child marriage could yield enormous economic dividends from its impact on lower fertility and population growth, as well as lower child mortality and malnutrition. Annual costs associated with the impacts of early, forced, child marriage or unions (referred to as child marriage in the rest of this brief) are expected to reach a global total of $664 billion in 2030. For example, in Niger, where child marriage prevalence is highest globally, ending the practice in 2015 would have resulted in annual gains by 2030 of over $2 billion in additional welfare, health and education sector savings[54]. The potential of GTE in reducing child marriage and yielding economic dividends is especially important for humanitarian settings, where child marriage is often used as a coping mechanism to face various forms of crisis.

Violence also imposes heavy economic costs. A global study by ODI estimates that violence against children, including physical, psychological, and sexual forms of violence, costs between 2% and 8% of global GDP[55]. The World Bank has estimated this cost to be between 1.2% and 3.7% of GDP in some countries[56]. In South Africa alone, the cost of inaction to prevent such violence, which accounts for its links to poor mental health and substance abuse, has been estimated at 5% of national GDP[57]. These figures suggest that the cost of violence prevention through GTE is likely to be substantially lower than the long-term costs of the violence itself.

Further evidence highlights the significant welfare gains that could result from investing in adolescent health through GTE interventions, particularly in the area of SRHR. In South Africa and Zimbabwe, the combined user and provider costs of inaction – specifically the failure to prevent early pregnancy, HIV transmission, and gender-based violence – are estimated to result in lifelong economic losses equivalent to 8.1% and 12.9% of annual GDP, respectively. In Zimbabwe, this cost was nearly on par with the country's entire national budget in 2021[58]. Given the proven effectiveness of GTE interventions in reducing these SRHR-related harms, the economic rationale for scaling such interventions is compelling. Broadening the lens further, a 2024 WHO report estimates that the annual global cost of failing to address adolescent health, education, child marriage, and road traffic injuries amounts to US$4.1 trillion, or an average of 7.7% of GDP across developing economies[59]. These figures reinforce the urgency of investing in comprehensive, cross-sectoral strategies to mitigate long-term economic losses while improving adolescent health and wellbeing through GTE.

THE RETURN ON INVESTMENT IS CLEAR: GTE SUPPORTS MULTIPLE RESULTS WITH KNOWN POSITIVE ECONOMIC VALUE. IT ALSO PREVENTS COSTLY NEGATIVE OUTCOMES

To fully realise the transformative potential of GTE, further investments are needed, not only in scaling effective interventions, but also in strengthening the evidence base on their economic returns. While this brief has presented robust and growing evidence of GTE's positive impacts on education, health, gender equality, and social wellbeing, additional research is essential to quantify returns on investment across diverse implementation models and contexts. Emerging findings suggest that coordinated, multi-sectoral interventions, including school support and gender-responsive parenting programmes, have the potential to deliver more than a four-fold return on investment[60]. Strengthening the investment case through rigorous cost data and cost-benefit analyses to calculate the specific return on investment of GTE interventions will enable governments and donors to make more informed decisions and embed GTE within national strategies. In the current global aid environment, where funding for gender equality is particularly under pressure, this evidence is critical. Donors and policymakers must recognise that promoting gender equality in schools is not only a moral imperative but also a financially sound strategy to support long-term national development. Investing in both the implementation and evaluation of GTE programmes will ensure their benefits are fully realised and sustained over time.

GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION: TRANSITIONING YOUNG WOMEN TO WORK

SHARON TAO, LEVEL THE FIELD

Young women are more than twice as likely to not be in employment, education or training, a huge cost to individual lives and in economies and societies. Harmful gender norms bar girls' and women's work through a range of pull factors (girls are socialised to prioritise marriage and parenthood) and push factors (hiring bias, lack of safety in transit, unequal pay). Addressing these barriers requires a mind-shift change for girls and boys as they grow up to be tomorrow's workers, employers and leaders. Gender-transformative education can achieve this shift by teaching all children and young people the value and benefit of equality.

Definition of Gender-Transformative Education

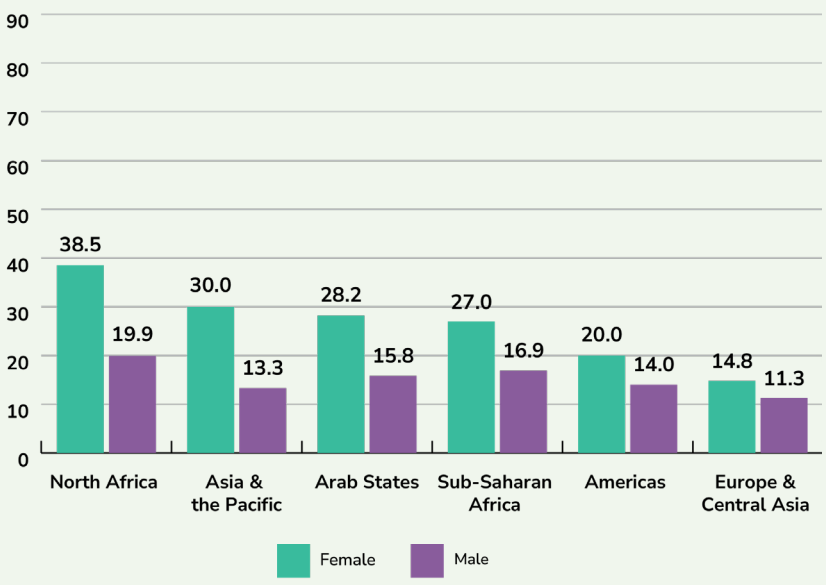
Gender-transformative education is learning to understand, recognize and challenge root causes of gender inequality and injustice. The "transformation" is in people's attitudes, beliefs and behaviours and in the education system – from gender unequal to equal. Gender-transformative education seeks to utilize all parts of an education system – from policies to pedagogies to community engagement – to transform stereotypes, attitudes, norms, and practices. The goal of gender transformative education is a world in which a person's gender does not impact their access to power, resources and opportunities.

UNGEI (2024), Your Gender-Transformative Education Glossary

INTRODUCTION

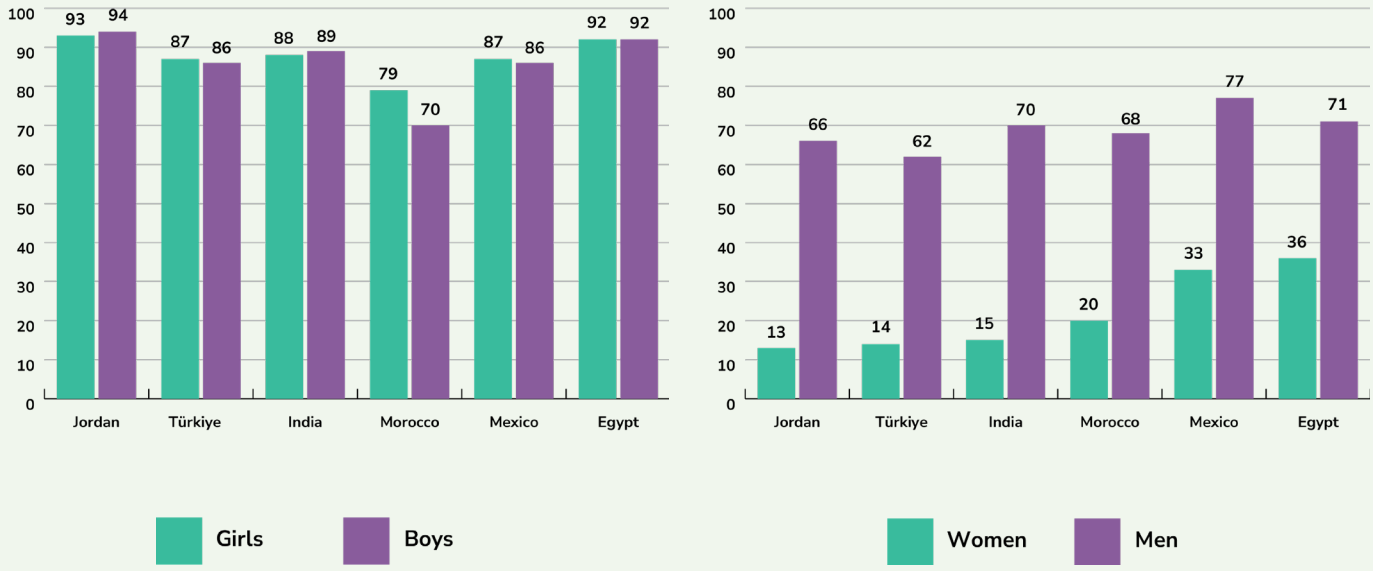
COVID-19 led to a rise in global youth unemployment. A rebound in economic growth and labour demand led to a decrease to pre-pandemic levels in 2023. (ILO, 2024)[1] However, several sub-regions in Africa and Asia saw a rise in the number of unemployed youth (aged 15-24) as well as youth not in education or training (see figure 1). **This phenomenon - of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) - is significant.** NEETs hold great promise but are not contributing to their nation's growth or developing their capacity to do so. **Equally concerning is the fact that the proportion of NEETs is significantly higher for girls**. As figure 1 demonstrates, the overall proportion of young women who are NEET is more than double that of young men (28% girls vs 13% boys, globally). In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) in particular, two out of every three NEETs are female (ILO, 2024). **This means that there is twice as much wasted potential for girls and young women.**

Figure 1. 2023 Global rates of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) (ILO, 2024)



An even starker example of wasted potential occurs when girls complete secondary education but do not move on to (paid) employment. Figure 2 demonstrates how in six countries (Jordan, Türkiye, India, Morocco, Mexico and Egypt) there were relatively high secondary completion rates for both girls and boys in 2023. However, for these same countries in 2024, the labour force participation rate for educated girls and women was remarkably low, particularly in relation to boys and men[2].

Figure 2. A high rate of secondary education does not always translate into employment for girls



These figures demonstrate that **it is not enough to have parity in education because of the significant disparity that remains in opportunities for young women to enter (and stay in) the labour market.** This disparity is the result of unequal infrastructure, opportunity and resources. Harmful gender norms underpin these barriers and are a barrier in themselves (for example, leading to hiring biases, wage inequality and unequal unpaid care work).

This brief will examine and explain these barriers. It will examine gender-transformative education as a tool that can be used both in school and with employers and labour markets to shift harmful gender norms for a world in which all young people are equal - in resources, opportunities, power and safety. Such a gender equal world will result in faster economic growth, fairer and safer societies, healthier families and equal contributions of labour, both inside and outside the home[3].

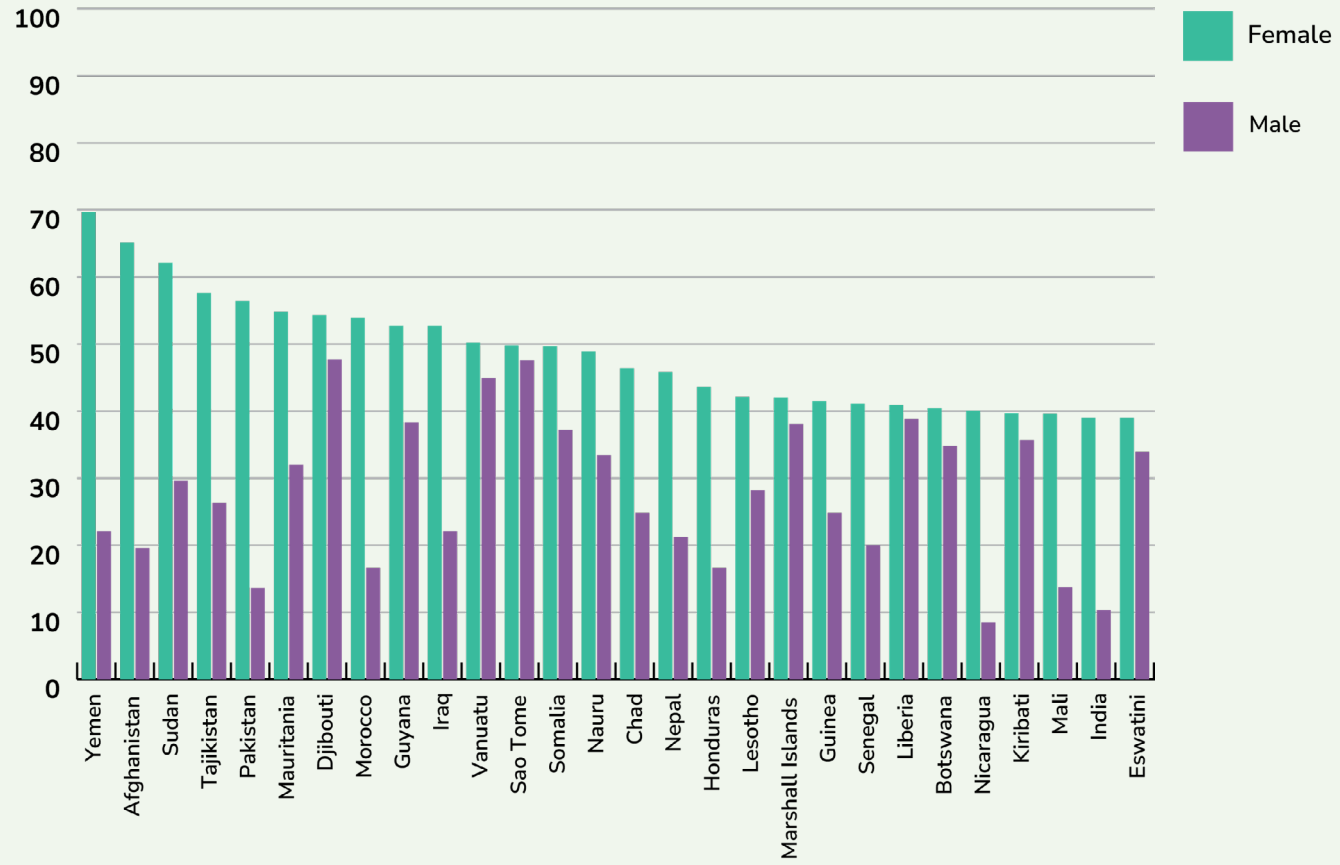
2. Gender norms and how they relate to being NEET

Social norms are invisible 'guard rails' that shape and narrow people's thinking, actions and opportunities. Gender norms are a sub-set of social norms that "describe how we are expected to behave, in a given social context, as a result of our gender."[4] **Gender norms often underpin the unequal treatment of girls and boys, which can result in the different levels of power, respect, resource and safety they are afforded**[5]. It is these unequal gender norms that impact: 1) the number of girls who are able to remain in and complete formal or non-formal education/training; 2) the supply of young women into the labour force; and 3) the supply of opportunities for young women within the labour market – all of which affect the female NEET rate within a country or region.

For example, in the sub-region of South Asia, the rate of young women in NEET status (48%) is nearly four times as high as young men (16%). In Arab States, the NEET rate for young women is 51%, almost 2.5 times higher than the 21% rate for young men[6]. These disparities are indicative of the differing levels of power, respect, resource and safety afforded to boys and girls, which result in their differing abilities to engage in education or employment. Figure 3 illustrates the 28 countries that have the highest female NEET rates globally, in which 40-70% of 15-24 year old girls in their populations are not in education, employment or training. In 20 of these countries, the gender gaps that favour males are significant, signalling gender norms that have prompted significantly unequal treatment of boys and girls. The countries with the largest disparities include Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Morocco, Sudan, Tajikistan, Iraq and India[7].

Before discussing why this wasted potential is so disproportionate, it is important to first unpack the different types of disengagement from employment and education/ training that exist, particularly in LMICs. Box 1 highlights the different types of work that are conducted and the employment status that is associated with them. Unpaid work is included here, as many girls and women contribute disproportionate amounts of time and effort providing domestic labour that is not visible, regulated or formally compensated. **Therefore, although many women and girls may be categorised as 'unemployed', they are most certainly working.**

Figure 3. Countries with the largest female NEET rates

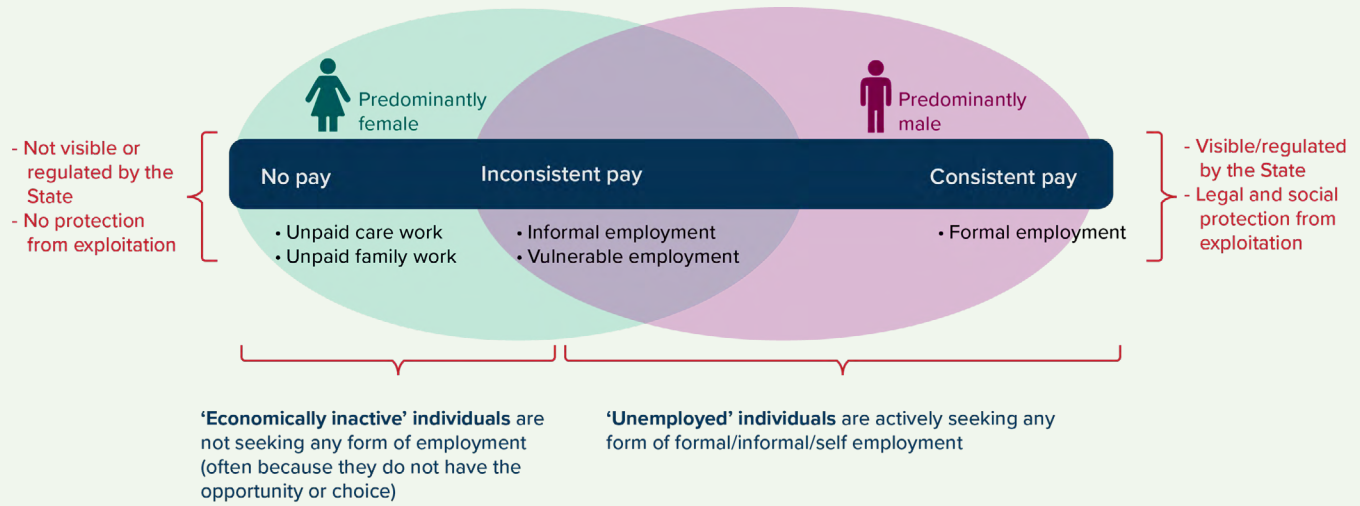


Box 1. Different types of labour that are affected by gender norms

1. **Formal employment** – which entails adherence to national labour legislation, income taxation, and entitlement to employment benefits like paid leave, sick pay and social protection (ILO, 2023)[8]
2. **Informal employment** – which may entail less consistent income and lacks contracting and legal/social protection
3. **Vulnerable employment** – a subset of informal work in which workers face a high risk of exploitation, inadequate earnings, and unsafe working conditions that undermine their fundamental rights[9]
4. **Self-employment** – in which one is directly accountable for remuneration and outcomes of a business[10]
5. **Unpaid care work** - refers to non-market, unpaid work carried out in households and includes direct and indirect care activities (such as cooking, cleaning, fetching water and fuel, caring for elderly, etc.)[11]
6. **Unpaid family work** – in which one contributes to the business operated by a person from the same household, without receiving remuneration[12]

Figure 4 maps these different types of labour along a spectrum that ranges from having 'consistent pay' (to the right) via formal employment that is regulated and taxed by the state, through to 'no pay' (to the left) for work that has no visibility or regulation, as it is done within the home or family structures. The figure also notes the two types of NEETs who have not been able to enter the formal or informal labour market[13]. 'Unemployed' NEETs are individuals who are actively seeking formal, informal or self-employment; and 'economically inactive' are those who are not seeking any form of employment at all. Many young women fall into this category because although they are doing care work, they are not seeking formal/informal employment, often because they do not have the opportunity or choice to do so. This is again where harmful gender norms come into play.

Figure 4. The spectrum of employment options in low- and middle-income countries



The following sections examine specifically *how* harmful gender norms undermine girls' ability to be in education, employment or training, leading to a discussion about what can and should be done about it.

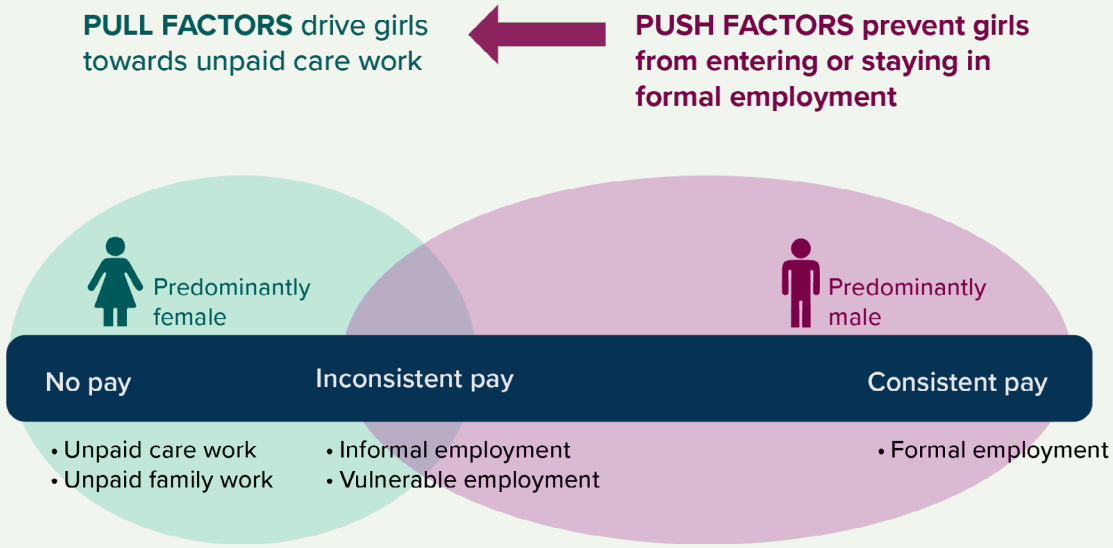
3. How gender norms push and pull girls away from formal sector employment

Harmful gender norms underpin the often negative experiences that push women and girls away from the formal labour market, such as not receiving the same wages as men for the same work, or finding that the spaces to, from and within employment are exclusionary or unsafe, particularly with regard to sexual harassment. These situations can be deemed as 'push factors', as they often prevent girls from entering and/or staying in formal sector employment. Moreover, **gender norms can also shape what can be perceived to be *positive* experiences that pull girls towards the world of unpaid care work**, such as familial and social approval for getting married and having children, which in some contexts, can entail substantial degrees of social status. These situations are conversely deemed, 'pull factors', as they drive women and girls towards prioritising the informal work associated with caring for family over formal work associated with employment. Table 1 provides an overview of these 'push and pull' factors and figure 5 illustrates how they work together to cement girls' NEET status by preventing them from completing education/training and transitioning into the labour market.

Table 1. Gendered push and pull factors

PULL FACTORS	PUSH FACTORS
1. **Girls receive familial and social approval** for getting married and starting a family	1. Limited opportunities to complete education leads to insufficient qualifications for some jobs
	2. Hiring practices underpinned by biases favour men
2. Girls are expected to be the primary caregiver, which means they forgo work or struggle if employment is not accommodating	3. Wage inequality between men and women for the same work
	4. Working conditions do not accommodate care responsibilities
	5. Spaces to, from and within work can exclude or be hostile to women/girls

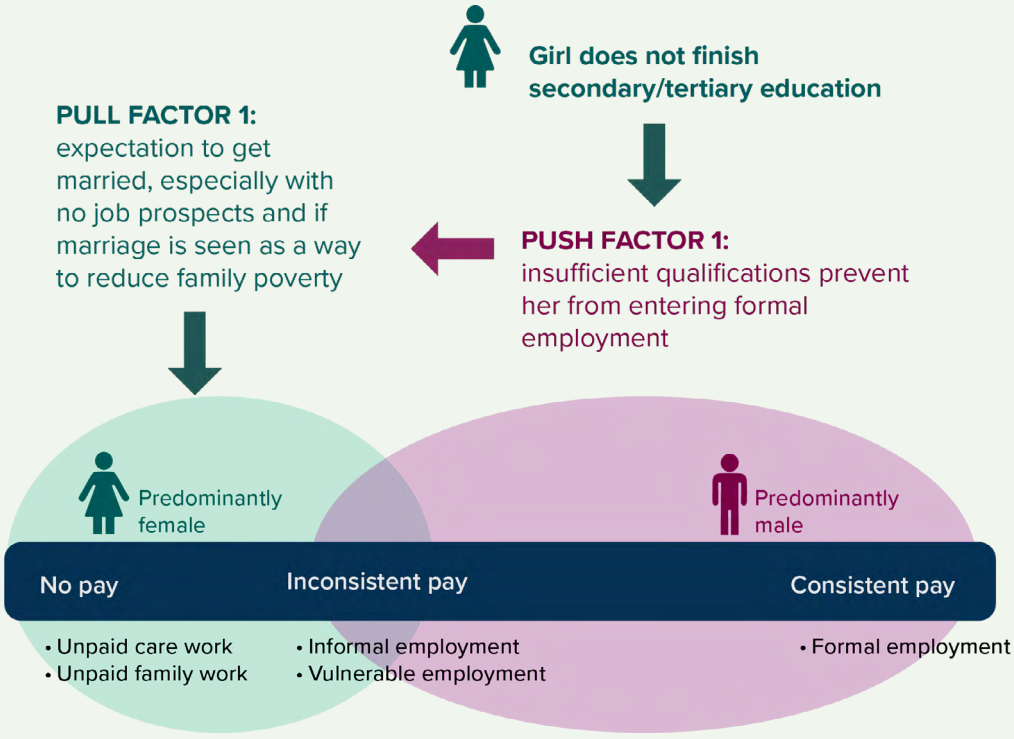
Figure 5. How these factors work together



The following sections examine each of the push and pull factors in table 1 and provide scenarios from different contexts that demonstrate how they often intersect to prevent girls from entering and staying in formal sector employment.

4. Scenario 1: How gender norms limit young women's education and entry into the labour market

Figure 6. How push and pull factors work together to prevent girls from entering the labour market



In examining the first push factor that drives girls towards NEET status, it is notable the degree to which girls do not complete secondary/tertiary education or vocational training in LMICs. For example, as of 2021, only 38% of girls from low-income countries completed lower secondary school, as compared to 43% of boys[14]. For girls living in rural areas, these completion rates are even lower: in Niger, girls' lower secondary completion rates are 0.3%; in Central African Republic - 1.4%, in Chad - 3.8%, and in Mozambique - 3.8%[15]. Harmful gender norms largely underpin these statistics, as multiple barriers within the home, school and system - such as child marriage, SRGBV and teachers'/ parents' prioritisation of boys - prevent girls from finishing their education (see box 2 for examples from South Sudan). As figure 6 illustrates, this drop-out then precludes girls from many jobs within the formal labour market. **When out of school and with no job prospects, adolescent girls also become more susceptible to the first pull factor noted in table 1, which is the expectation to get married**, particularly if they haven't been forced to marry already.

Box 2. The compounding gender norms that affect girls' ability to stay in school in South Sudan

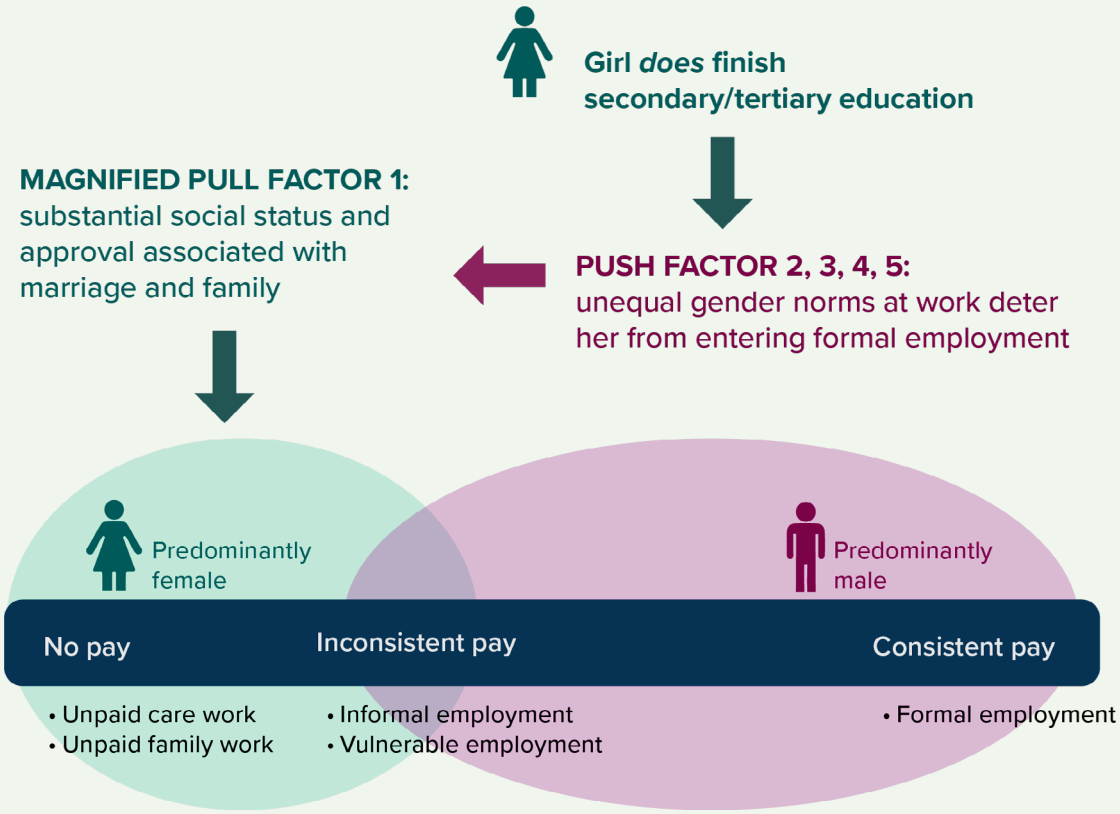
61% of all school-aged girls in South Sudan are out of school and the barriers that contribute to this are multiple, intersecting, compounding, and are largely underpinned by gender norms. For example, poor families commonly prioritise boys' education due to widespread perceptions that educating girls is of less importance[16]. Moreover, gender norms assign girls to do excessive household chores, thereby affecting their school attendance and time for study[17]. **Sexual violence, which is a result of asymmetrical power dynamics between women and men, is widespread** - over 26% of 15–22-year-olds in Juba had experienced sexual violence, mostly consisting of rape or attempted rape[18]. In addition to this, 52% of girls 18 and under are married,[19] which includes: **1) planned marriages initiated and negotiated by male family members; 2) marriages resulting from an unintended pregnancy; and 3) forced marriages resulting from sexual violence, rape or kidnapping by the future husband or their family**[20]**.** All of these types of marriage are forced with little-to-no say from the girl herself, which reflects the extremely unequal power dynamics between men and women, and fathers and daughters. The end result is a high rate of wasted potential, with 32% of young women not in education, employment or training. This last recorded NEET rate was for 2008; however, recent statistics show that although more young women may be in employment in 2023, 73.4% of them were in vulnerable employment that was highly exploitative and unsafe[21].

5. Scenario 2: How gender norms pull educated young women towards marriage over employment

Gender norms in some contexts ascribe significant value and social status to being married – so much so that girls complete tertiary education in order to improve their marriage prospects over employment prospects (see figure 7). India provides an example of this situation, in which female education levels have been on the rise over the last decade, yet the percentage of women in the workforce has decreased during that time. A recent report has shown that rising education levels for women are largely driven by higher returns in the marriage market, not by improved job prospects[22]. Families of sons are increasingly looking for educated daughters-in-law – not so that they can earn income, but so they can produce highly educated children. Researchers note that having an educated wife is now considered a status symbol, however, preferably one who does not have work ambitions. This situation demonstrates how some gender norms have positively shifted so that more girls are able to complete tertiary education; however, unequal gender norms still limit girls' post-education opportunities and agency, because power dynamics still favour a man working for pay outside the home and a woman working in the home for no payment.

This phenomenon – in which young women are able to complete tertiary education yet are pulled toward 'economically inactive' NEET status (although doing unpaid care work) – accounts for a notable amount of wasted potential that significantly limits India's economic growth. Economists note that if India's increasing working-age population is to spur significant economic growth, the country must address the stagnant size of the female workforce. Currently, only 1 in 4 working-age women are in the workforce, making India's female labour force participation rate one of the 15 lowest in the world[23]. However, as noted in figure 7 and in the following sections, **harmful gender norms in many workplaces can compound the pull factor of marriage, as they deter many women and girls from entering and/or staying in formal sector employment.**

Figure 7. How magnified pull factors pull girls away from the labour market

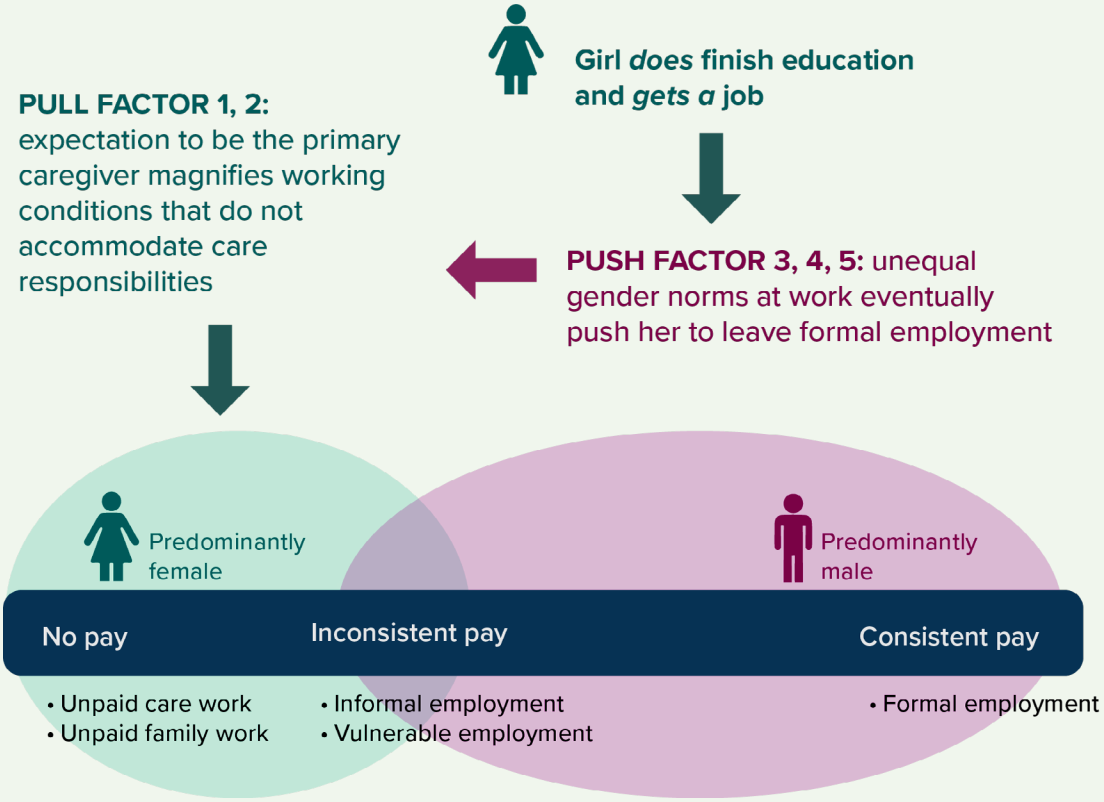


6. Scenario 3: How gender norms eventually push women to leave work

As discussed, harmful gender norms can prevent young women from entering/staying in employment in a number of ways. These include: a) hiring biases that favour men; b) wage inequality between men and women for the same work; c) working conditions that do not accommodate care responsibilities; and d) spaces to/from/within employment that are exclusionary, hostile and/or unsafe for women. Moreover, because of hostile labour markets, girls and women are often discouraged by families from engaging in employment or are sequestered in the home under the guise of protection.

The following sections elaborate on each of these push factors and how they intersect with pull factors to prevent girls from entering and staying in formal sector employment.

Figure 8. How push and pull factors work together to prompt women to leave the labour market over time



a. Hiring biases that favour men

Table 2 provides an overview of five employer biases that restrict the employment of women[24]. Although a number of these hiring biases pose barriers to labour market entry for young women, many of the biases also continue to affect women who have been able to enter, leading to attrition over time.

Table 2. Different types of employer bias that limits women's employment

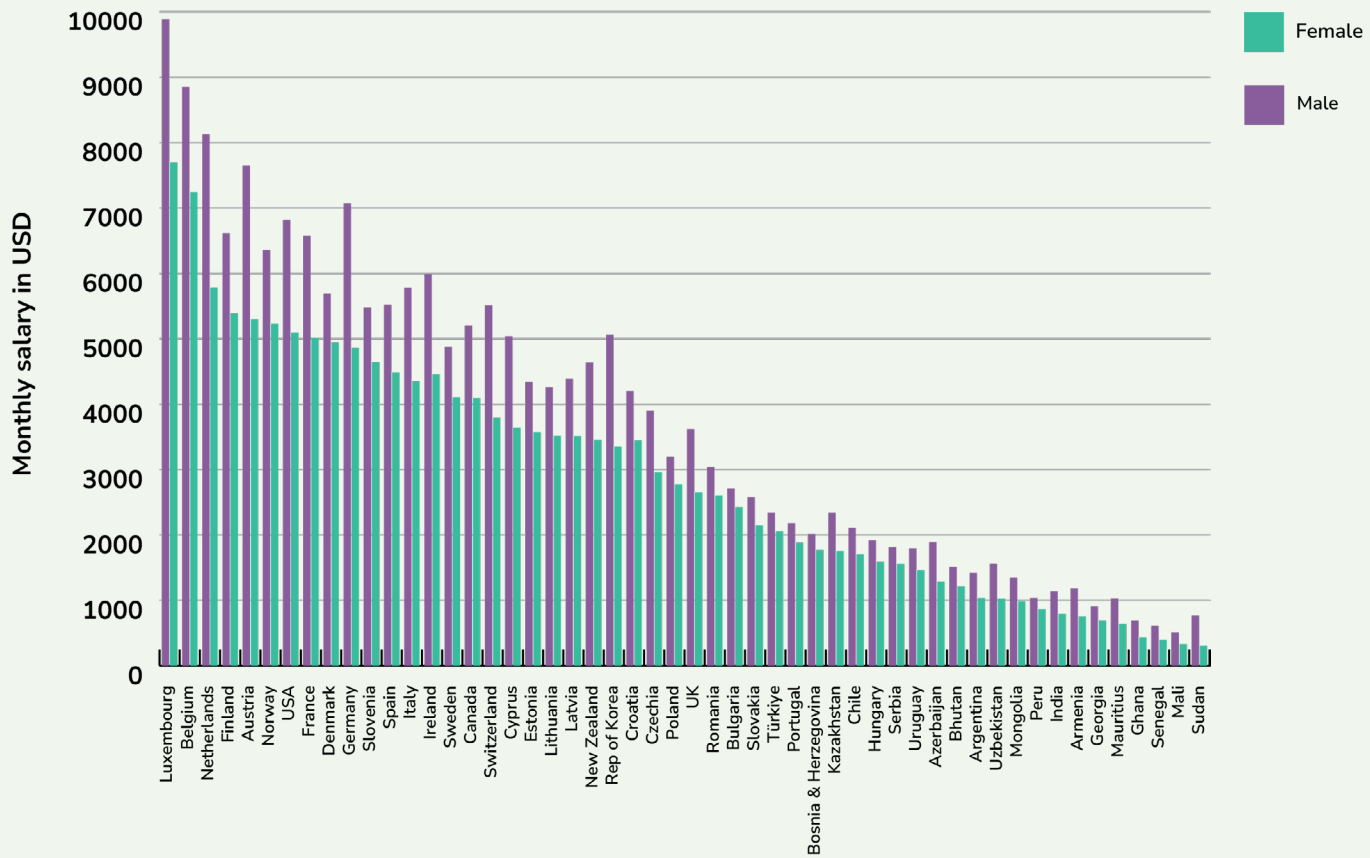
Type of bias	How it restricts employment opportunities for young women
Motivation bias	The assumption on part of some employers is that a man will be the breadwinner in the family, and a woman need not earn.
Appropriateness bias	Some employers do not consider women for non-traditional job roles unless explicitly specified because they inherently believe the job to be unfit for women.
Performance bias	This highlights the belief that women are not as effective as men for the particular job role.
Affinity bias	This bias is evident when recruiters only reach out to men for candidate references and do not actively seek female candidate applications. It also occurs when recruitment panels are composed of a majority of men.
Safety bias	Companies feel that women need to be protected and, therefore, seek to ensure the safety of women by imposing restrictions on them.

Although the research and highlighted biases relate to one particular context, they are still applicable to many other contexts, to differing degrees. In contexts where there appears to be greater gender equality, these biases tend to become more implicit, unconscious or hidden. And as discussed, these biases are not only limited to the hiring process - they also underpin disparities in pay between men and women.

b. Wage inequality for similar work

In LMICs, young women in paid jobs typically earn 44 - 80 cents for every male dollar, based on comparisons of hourly wages and monthly pay[25]. Figure 9 provides a worldwide snapshot of monthly wages of men and women across a select number of global majority and global minority countries whose data were available for the years of 2023 and 2024. It should be noted that earnings refer to gross pay, in cash or kind, and all values are in U.S. dollars, adjusted for purchasing power to allow international comparisons[26].

Figure 9. Global difference in monthly wages between men and women (ILO, 2023/2024)



Although it cannot be assumed that the aggregated average monthly salaries for men and women are for the exact same work, figure 9 still demonstrates the vast gender pay gaps between men and women across the globe. It should however, be noted that the figure does not feature all countries with data for 2023/24, which includes the handful of countries in which the gender pay gap favours women – further discussion and analysis of these outliers is required[27].

That said, the biases discussed in the previous section - particularly performance biases that underpin the perception that women are not as effective as men in particular jobs - likely underscore the persistent gender wage gaps noted in figure 9. Addressing this inequity requires targeted interventions to promote equal pay, make biases explicit and unacceptable, and enforce anti-discrimination laws - critical strategies that are discussed in the following sections.

c. Working conditions that do not accommodate care responsibilities

As discussed previously, care work often goes unnoticed, to the extent that young women are categorised as being NEET despite actively providing care work that nurtures a nation's human capital. The time women spend preparing family members for their job or school can also create barriers to accessing better jobs for themselves, due to lack of time, flexibility, and mobility (Nwosu and Ndinda 2018)[28]. A study of gender and work in Ghana and Gambia found that girls and young women were more likely to engage in unpaid domestic work, and even when they spent time on paid work as a means of contributing to family income, girls still did more paid and unpaid work each day than their male counterparts (Chant and Jones 2005)[29]. More specifically, adolescent girls aged 10-14 have been twice as likely to spend excessive hours (at least 21 hours per week) on unpaid domestic and care work than boys of the same age[30]. **This situation has been described as the 'second shift', in which women perform a second shift of unpaid labour at home *in addition* to their first shift of paid labour at their job**[31]**.** Moreover, working conditions that do not accommodate care responsibilities also compromise the important role of parenting. Mothers working in the informal economy are often compelled to return to work quickly after childbirth, due to the lack of entitlement to maternity leave and insecurity of their work. Strategies that promote equal sharing of care and domestic duties, and investing in accessible and affordable childcare infrastructure, would play a significant role in a comprehensive labour policy for female NEETs and women more broadly[32].

d. Hostile spaces to/from/within employment

Research evidence demonstrates that women and girls modify their lifestyle choices to reduce the risk of violence[33]. Thus, a perceived lack of safety to, from and within a job can act as a barrier to work for women and girls. For example, a survey in northern India found that 95% of women feel unsafe using public transport, and a similarly high proportion report feeling unsafe while waiting for public transport or on the roads[34]. Such perceptions act as a deterrent for women to leave home and engage in the labour market. This situation is particularly pronounced in fragile and crisis contexts. For example, in research located in Cox's Bazar (Bangladesh), it was noted that formal/informal labour markets and public spaces were largely male dominated, thereby creating perceived safety risks, as well as other barriers for Rohingya women to earn income. As a result, adolescent boys often became responsible for income generation for the household, thereby affecting their ability to stay in school[35].

This lack of safety in the spaces surrounding work, not only acts as a deterrent for women, but also acts as rationale for husbands and families to keep women at home. In research conducted in Palestine in 2021, families asserted that they were protecting girls from abuse, exploitation, and harassment in the labour market by arranging marriages[36]. Moreover, Korotayev, Issaev, and Shishkina (2015:3)[37] note that cultures that seclude and control women and girls' mobility outside of the home "… will have lower rates of female participation in activities outside of the immediate household."[38] This again **puts pressure on boys and men to earn income for families and points to how gender equality is not a zero sum game. If women and girls were afforded the same levels of power, respect, resource and safety as boys and men, divisions of labour both inside and outside the home could be divided more equally and fairly, so that all parties would benefit.** Although such a scenario would require the shifting of many deeply entrenched gender norms, it is worth exploring how and why equal opportunities for women and men would benefit everyone, particularly in relation to NEETs.

7. How gender equality reduces wasted potential

Given the multiple factors that push, pull and keep young women in NEET status, it is worth exploring the counterfactuals of these situations. Specifically, **what would happen if: 1) girls could complete secondary and tertiary** education or training at the same rate as boys; **2) women and men had the same opportunities** for safe, secure and non-exploitative work, were paid equally for the same job, and were provided equal flexibility for care responsibilities; **3) young women's status and value were not predicated on marriage and motherhood**, but rather what they could contribute to society; and **4) men and women, and boys and girls, divided care work equally within the home.**

These counterfactuals illustrate **what gender equality could look like, which would not only reduce the wasted potential of a disproportionate number of female NEETs, but would also lead to additional benefits for men, families and society overall.** These broader benefits include:

Economic growth: Greater female labour participation increases national income and productivity. A better use of talent and skills could add $12 trillion to global GDP by 2025[39]

Fairer and safer societies: Gender equality reduces conflict, and exclusion within communities and as such, countries tend to have lower violence rates, have more stable democracies,[40] are more prosperous and better prepared to adapt to the impacts of climate change[41]

Healthier families and better outcomes for children: When mothers have income and autonomy, children are better nourished, better educated, and healthier[42]. Moreover, active fatherhood correlates with better cognitive and emotional outcomes for children[43]

Less pressure on men and boys: Gender equality helps men and boys break free from the pressures of being the sole breadwinner, having to be 'strong', or suppressing emotions[44]. In workplaces with gender equality, men are more likely to take leave, pursue flexible schedules, and live more balanced lives[45].

Given these compelling benefits, the following section explores both short- and long-term strategies that not only reduce the high proportion of female NEETs, but also work towards achieving gender equality, more broadly.

8. Strategies to reduce girls' wasted potential and build a society that benefits everyone

As discussed in section two, the disproportionate number of female NEETs across the globe is generally the result of: 1) the number of girls who are unable to remain in and complete formal or non-formal education/training; 2) the limited supply of young women entering the labour force; and 3) the limited supply of opportunities for young women within the labour market. All of these situations are the result of harmful gender norms that prompt unequal treatment of girls and boys, which can be seen in the different levels of power, respect, resource and safety afforded to them.

Gender Transformative Education (GTE) provides a systemic and sustainable solution, as it entails all actors within the education system, including families and communities, being supported to actively and continually challenge unequal gender norms and power dynamics. Because GTE works at a systemic level, it has the potential to shift harmful gender norms for all children and system actors year after year, generation after generation. This means that GTE not only **shifts the harmful norms that cause educational drop-out of the most disadvantaged,** particularly marginalised girls; but it also **supports boys to see the value of gender equality, and as such, reduce the violent and territorial behaviours that pose barriers for women and girls** – either as partners or leaders. Moreover, as generations of young people graduate, **GTE also starts to shift the gender norms that affect wider society, including those that push and pull girls away from formal sector employment.**

For example, when harmful gender norms shift through GTE, the immediate barriers that prevent girls from remaining in and completing secondary/tertiary education will shift amongst students, families and school actors (push factor 1, noted in table 1). This includes challenging the gender norms that ascribe girls disproportionate amounts of unpaid care work, as well as norms that limit girls' aspirations to marriage and motherhood, amongst others (pull factor 1 and 2). These shifts will positively impact the supply of young women entering the labour force, and after graduates of GTE go on to become employers, the supply of labour market opportunities for young women will also grow. However, in the meantime, more immediate strategies can also be put in place to shift the gender norms amongst broader society and employers that currently limit girls' entry/retention in formal employment (push factors 2-5).

Gender-transformative education is a powerful strategy in itself to address the gap between education and employment for young women. However a combined approach as outlined in Table 3 can reduce wasted potential and support more girls to transition into employment. The strategies are comprehensive but not exhaustive and would require tailoring to specific contexts; but they do provide a starting point for addressing the norms that underpin the wasted potential amongst female NEETs and women in general[46].

Table 3. Strategy options to reduce the high proportion of female NEETs within a context

Strategies	Suggestions for implementation
1. Sustained Social Behaviour Change campaigns targeting all sections of society	Campaigns should target: • Sharing the burden of household duties and childcare • Improving attitudes towards working women • Gender equality and respect for women
2. Implementing gender transformative pedagogies	Moving towards system-wide GTE can begin with the initial step of supporting teachers to implement gender transformative pedagogies. These include: • Teaching positive gender attitudes (such as those above) • Ending gender stereotypes related to particular jobs and/or STEM subjects • Supporting children, particularly girls, to have the resilience and tools to challenge harmful gender norms they may encounter at home and in the community
3. Improving safety for girls and women	Deterring violence against women through: • Enforcing laws and sensitising men on the consequences of committing violence and sexual harassment against women (at home and in the workplace) • Making the reporting, response and redressal systems accessible and victim-centred • Improving safety on public transportation systems where necessary

4. Incentivising female employment	Rewarding/providing recognition for employers who employ more than 50% women
5. Addressing hiring biases	Partnering with industry organisations to conduct workshops targeting recruiter biases in female hiring and the benefits of hiring female employees
6. Eliminating the gender wage gap	Making wages transparent, targeting the biases that underpin gender wage gaps, rewarding employers who eliminate gender pay gaps, etc.

There are also a number of NEET-specific strategies that can be implemented to improve employment prospects for young people, such as 1) in-company training and apprenticeships to address skill mismatches and reduce requirements for tertiary education;[47] and 2) developing integrated policies that recognise the job creation and income-generation potential for young people in informal labour markets (such as addressing the exploitation and unsafe conditions associated with 'vulnerable employment')[48]. It goes without saying that such strategies must recognise the gendered barriers that affect young women differently to young men, so any policy or intervention should be developed with input from young people, particularly girls.

9. Conclusion

This brief has examined how the proportion of female NEETs is more than double that of male NEETs globally; and why young women tend to remain NEET for much longer than their male counterparts. **Behind this significant waste of potential are gender norms that undermine girls' achievements in education, limit their work opportunities, and designate care responsibilities that impact their engagement in meaningful work. Government actors need to be aware of this situation as it entails a significant loss of rights for girls and human capital for the nation.**

This brief has also elaborated upon a number of immediate to longer-term strategies that government actors, education ministers and the wider education sector should consider – primarily, Gender Transformative Education. **Because GTE works at a systemic level, it has the potential to shift harmful gender norms for *all* children and system actors year after year, generation after generation.** As discussed, GTE would not only shift the harmful norms that cause educational drop-out of the most disadvantaged girls; but as generations of young people graduate, it would also start to shift the gender norms that affect wider society, including labour markets.

Work has begun to calculate the return on investment of GTE[49] – understandably, it will take time to develop a robust method to attribute change to such a multi-pronged, multi-impact intervention. However, **for educators, ministers, donors, implementers, and researchers who work in the education sector – and who genuinely want to see *all* children have equal levels of power, respect, resource and safety in order to realise their full potential – a collective voice and prioritisation of GTE is imperative.** For those wanting to contribute and learn more, UN Girls Education Initiative and the Feminist Network for Gender Transformative Education have begun this work and all are welcome to join[50]. **Given its benefits of eliminating girls' wasted potential and producing greater economic growth, fairer and safer societies, stronger families, healthier communities and freer, more fulfilling lives for everyone, this commitment makes sense now, more than ever.**

BEYOND RCTS: DIVERSIFYING RIGOROUS APPROACHES TO MEASURE GENDER NORM CHANGE IN EDUCATION

SILVIA GUGLIELMI, NICOLA JONES, KATE PINCOCK, GAGE/ODI

A vast majority of gender equality focused investments in education remain concentrated on access and attainment. Yet, there is compelling evidence that gender-transformative education (GTE) can achieve multiple goals for children and young people[1-3]. One reason for a lower rate of investment in GTE is that the evidence for its impact is often not easily quantifiable or measurable, especially through randomised controlled trials (RCTs), which have become a 'gold standard' for assessing impact. This brief describes the risks and consequences of using RCTs to measure gender norm change (in education) and proposes alternatives, especially mixed method research approaches and tools.

Definition of Gender-Transformative Education

Gender-transformative education is learning to understand, recognize and challenge root causes of gender inequality and injustice. The "transformation" is in people's attitudes, beliefs and behaviours and in the education system – from gender unequal to equal. Gender-transformative education seeks to utilize all parts of an education system – from policies to pedagogies to community engagement – to transform stereotypes, attitudes, norms, and practices. The goal of gender transformative education is a world in which a person's gender does not impact their access to power, resources and opportunities.

UNGEI (2024), Your Gender-Transformative Education Glossary[29]

BACKGROUND

What are gender norms?

Gender norms are shared social expectations about how individuals should behave based on their gender. They are upheld and reproduced through social interactions, and reinforced by institutions such as families and clans, schools, faith-based organisations, and the media[4]. The nuances and multidimensionality of gender norms, how they change over time, and how they can be addressed in educational settings, can be more thoroughly understood through research that explores the ways in which they function at these micro-, meso- and macro levels[5]. Evidence increasingly indicates that policy-focused research into gender norms requires multiple methods which can investigate both what is happening as a result of an intervention and why change has (or has not) happened[6].

What is an RCT

An RCT is a type of study to test the effectiveness of an intervention. Participants are randomly assigned to either a control group (which does not receive the intervention) or one or more treatment groups (which do), and the outcomes for each group are measured and compared typically pre-intervention, during and after its completion

THE RISE OF RCTs

First used to generate evidence about what works within global development in the early 2000s, randomised controlled trials (RCTs) have now become seen as the 'gold standard' for evaluating interventions and programmes[7-11]. Seen as uniquely scientific and rigorous, RCTs offer a solution to the challenge of attribution by isolating the effects of interventions from other changes in a setting[12]. They offer a clear approach to evaluation amid a high demand within the aid sector for efficiency, accountability and value for money[13-15].

The pressure to produce robust evidence on the efficacy of interventions is particularly salient in the current contracting global development financing landscape, in which donors prioritise results-focused interventions and consequently assess impact in terms of short-term measurable effects, feeding into the demand for RCTs[16,17]. RCTs often focus on the delivery of relatively simple interventions (e.g. X number of awareness-raising or training sessions, cash or in-kind asset transfers, peer vs trained mentor curriculum delivery).

While RCTs have an important role to play in generating evidence on many aspects of girls' education, they are often unable to capture the diverse effects of gender norm change interventions, which occur at multiple socioecological levels, through interlinked processes, and involving myriad stakeholders, and frequently beyond the timeframe of interventions themselves . While the limitations of RCTs for measuring gender norms change applies across sectors, this brief focuses on their use within education.

The notion of RCTs as a 'gold standard' has meant that arguably disproportionate emphasis and investment has been placed on areas of girls' education work where RCTs are possible, such interventions that address school enrolment, progression and retention. In turn, there is a risk that interventions without RCT evidence may be unfunded by donors – while other means of evidence gathering that could tell us more about norms change are neglected. Responding to these concerns, this evidence brief:

- Identifies alternative and/or complementary approaches to RCTs, especially for investigating areas of gender norms change in education that RCTs are less well-positioned to address, such as power relations, intervention spillover effects, stalling and reversals in norms.
- Busts myths about the robustness of alternative research methods and approaches.
- Shares case studies that illustrate how comprehensive and nuanced evidence on gender norms change can be generated, especially through mixed-methods research.

EVALUATING RCTs FOR MEASUREMENT OF GENDER NORMS CHANGE

RCTs offer methodological benefits including internal validity, quantifiable evidence on change (and lack thereof), and minimising bias in assessing the impacts of specific interventions on pre-identified outcomes. Yet in the process, they risk excluding other factors which might impact upon norms change within the 'messy world' of real life, as well as other effects of interventions because they are outside the scope of the experimental set-up. RCTs were originally designed for use in biological research in laboratory settings, rather than real life. Interventions which are premised on comprehensive and holistic approaches, adapted over time to meet the needs of participants, are not well suited to assessment through an RCT, wherein a stable and constant dosage of an intervention is foundational to the design of studies.

Gender transformative education requires identifying and addressing the norms that both contribute to and are exacerbated by educational inequality[18]. While there are circumstances wherein RCTs offer useful insights, specific concerns have also been raised about the use of RCTs for evaluating interventions that aim to shift gender norms. RCTs—without accompanying qualitative research—are particularly poorly placed to explore or explain:

- Unanticipated consequences of interventions (because these are not included in outcome measures)
- Indirect and spillover effects of interventions (because they focus on pre-defined populations)
- The relative impact of other influences (because they look at intervention impacts specifically)
- How norms change and evolve over time following the end of the intervention (because norms do not remain static) unless there is specific provisioning for multi-year post-intervention data collection – which is rare.
- Protective as well as problematic norms (because RCTs are not exploratory)
- Why it is that particular impact pathways are the most effective.
- The power relations which sustain people's beliefs and attitudes, and what can be done to disrupt these relations.
- The effects of interventions during the rapid biological, physical and psychological individual changes that occur during adolescence, the concomitant shifts in young people's social relationships and environments as they mature, and the continually evolving role of norms within this life-course window.

Table 1: Summary of strengths and limitations of RCT-led evaluations for measuring gender norms change

Strengths	Limitations
Quantifiable measures of change Having numerical values for the outcomes of an intervention can help implementers to more easily compare the effects of different types of programme.	**Indirect effects on people outside interventions** Control group 'purity' is challenging in real-world settings. Norms may also shift beyond those directly involved in interventions - but these spillover effects are not usually measured because it is not possible to clearly attribute this to the intervention[19].
Randomised participant selection Selection bias can be avoided, so the selected sample is more likely to be representative of the wider population to which the study aims to be applicable.	**Precise attribution of impact pathways** Because of their focus on pre-defined inputs and outcomes, other explanatory factors in observed changes may be overlooked. RCTs may also overlook the importance of sequencing and additive effects of different programme components.
Useful for large sample sizes RCTs are best used for large samples where it is possible to ensure representativeness and therefore observe statistically significant effects.	**Less effective on smaller samples** Because they need to be representative of a population, RCTs may be unable to generate statistically significant data at a smaller scale – and as a result exclude smaller marginalised groups – e.g. adolescent mothers, ethnic or religious minority groups, persons with different types of disabilities.
Unbiased evidence Because the evidence they generate is free from bias due to blindfolding within the process, it can be used to support evidence-based policy-making.	**External validity and 'scaling up' challenges** Findings from RCTs are specific to the context in which the intervention was undertaken; this is not necessarily evidence that it will work in another setting or with another group in the same way due to historical, cultural, policy, governance and other contextual differences.
Robustness of experimental design Randomising the allocation of participants to control groups, especially when participants are 'blindfolded', can minimise bias but also allow for outcomes to be attributed to interventions rather than other factors (e.g. broader economic, policy or legal changes).	**Ethical concerns regarding treatment groups** There are ethical concerns with excluding people from an intervention which could possibly improve their lives in the name of ensuring there is a control group with which to compare treatment effects. This approach increases the risk of inter-group tensions and conflict. That said, such exclusion often happens in practice irrespectively due to funding limitations for interventions which means that programme implementers are de facto having to exclude some groups.

IMPROVING THE ACCESSIBILITY AND USE OF EVIDENCE ABOUT NORMS CHANGE

By framing RCTs as the gold standard and suggesting that this approach alone can offer scientific rigour to policy and programme design and evaluation, RCTs can crowd out other methods for evaluating the impact and effectiveness of interventions. This risks excluding many implementers from being considered 'evidence-based' in their work[20]. This, in turn, can lead to the exclusion of programmes and interventions which cannot adhere to RCT requirements from the evidence base and from funding opportunities.

As well as not always being the best fit for monitoring and evaluation, RCTs are also not accessible or achievable for all actors in the development space. Because RCTs require large samples, data management, analysis using software, and are usually undertaken at multiple time points, they are expensive to run, and beyond the means of small NGOs and programme implementers. Yet some of the most impactful norm change work happens closest to the ground by these implementers.

Improving research literacy by implementers is fundamental to addressing the dominance of RCTs and diversifying evidence sources. Having a stronger understanding of what different research approaches can tell us can improve the use of existing research, help implementers identify what kinds of monitoring and evaluation are appropriate for different programmes, and avoid unnecessary duplication of studies.

OTHER RIGOROUS APPROACHES FOR MEASURING GENDER NORMS CHANGE THROUGH EDUCATION

RCTs are one among many rigorous ways to measure impact. Alternative or complementary approaches to RCTs can help to address limitations in the evidence they can generate. Not only can a wider repertoire of methods offer rigorous insights into gender norms change; they may also be more accessible to implementers working at a smaller scale. Table 2 provides an overview of complementary methodological approaches and provides examples of the types of insights that can be generated regarding gender norms and education impacts.

Table 2: Complementary methodological approaches and their application to gender norms and education

	Key features	Insights: gender norms and education impacts
Quantitative (plus) approaches	Observational cohort studies, where a group is followed over time (or retrospectively) to observe changes in outcomes can capture the interactions between large macro-level shifts – such as policy or legal changes, economic crises, pandemics, conflict etc. – and the extent to which programme interventions are protective or not of gender transformative outcomes in such contexts.	Longitudinal observational research in pastoralist areas by the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) programme has underscored the critical role that social assistance – in the form of food and cash-based public works as well as school feeding programmes – can have on school attendance. When social assistance was disrupted during the pandemic and during regional and broader national conflict episodes such support was disrupted with correspondingly negative effects on especially girls' school attendance as parents in times of economic insecurity tend to prioritise sons' not daughters' education [21].
	Mixed-methods research that combines quantitative and qualitative work is well positioned to explore multiple dimensions, contradictions, and nuances in observed changes in gender norms over time.	Using relevant methods to answer specific questions can generate a fuller picture of the drivers and pathways of social norms change in a particular setting, as well as possibilities for scale-up and effective adaptation of gender transformative interventions to different contexts.
	Process evaluations, which aim to explain how complex interventions work, often use a mixed method design. They examine the delivery of interventions in relation to the theory of change on which it is premised, and are especially suited for interventions with multiple components or where there is a multidimensional challenge – such as gender norms – being addressed. They can be used independently or alongside RCTs. By using mixed methods, they can generate a comprehensive picture of the multiple and interacting aspects of complex interventions.	GAGE Nepal has undertaken a mixed methods process evaluation of the Room to Read adolescent girls' mentoring programme which works with girls, their parents, their teachers and the local education bureau to encourage girls' retention throughout secondary education and to eschew child marriage[22].
	Longitudinal research undertaken over an extended period of time can offer even deeper and more nuanced insights into complex social issues, and better capture the processes that contribute to change, especially within such a dynamic period as adolescence. They can also enable research relationships to be built on the basis of trust and rapport which can allow for controversial or stigmatising topics relating to norms and their impacts to be explored with participants in an interactive setting.	External validity and 'scaling up' challenges Findings from RCTs are specific to the context in which the intervention was undertaken; this is not necessarily evidence that it will work in another setting or with another group in the same way due to historical, cultural, policy, governance and other contextual differences.

	Key features	Insights: gender norms and education impacts
Qualitative approaches	In-depth interviews, in which researchers hold a detailed conversation about their perspectives and experiences, can give insights into why participants think and behave in the ways they do.	Qualitative interviews can tease out for example the positive or negative influence that teachers' attitudes and modelling can have on girls' educational and professional aspirations, as well as the extent to which aspirations constitute wishful thinking or are instead underpinned by a more detailed understanding and plan of the steps needed to reach their educational goals[23]. One-on-one in-depth interactions can also build more trust, leading to respondents sharing more.
	Focus group discussions, where a small group participates in a guided discussion of a topic, facilitated by a researcher, create scope for participants to express themselves on their own terms and nuance their responses.	GAGE Jordan has explored through focus group discussions the complementary role that tailored multi-service centre-based education tuition has played in supporting the educational achievements of refugee and vulnerable host community adolescents, through smaller classes, positive disciplinary approaches and interactive peer-based learning approaches[24].
	Key informant interviews with stakeholders at the community and local level, such as elders, clan leaders, religious officials, and government representatives, can offer insights into contextual factors and changes that have influenced norms in a given setting.	In Cox's Bazar, key informants involved in GAGE research have explained that due to tight restrictions on girls' mobility once they reach puberty attending informal education classes is challenging in the Rohingya refugee camps, but that for better-off families they will tolerate private tutors visiting their home and teaching several girls in a group[25].
	Vignette-based research, where stories featuring a protagonist encountering a relatable issue are used as an entry point to discuss and reflect upon gender norms in a more abstract sense, and are particularly useful when exploring sensitive topics, such as menstrual stigma as a barrier to school attendance.	GAGE research in Ethiopia has used vignettes to explore stigma around and resistance to teaching about comprehensive sexuality education for adolescents, especially young people with disabilities. Findings generated through more abstract discussions about sexuality and gender norms contributed to insights as how best to work with community influencers to de-stigmatise such issues[26]. (See also Box 2)
	Participatory methods, which involve participants in the co-creation of data which are co-owned, can also offer researchers with means of directly engaging with norms transformation through the research. Participatory research challenges traditional power dynamics within the research relationship and can empower participants to address norms and enact change as part of the research process, including defining the research questions, actively engaging in the data collection process and in some cases taking part in the analysis and/or dissemination of findings.	

CASE STUDIES: WHAT KINDS OF EVIDENCE CAN ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES OFFER?

Box 1: Generating rich insights from mixed methods longitudinal research on gender norms and education

The Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) study is a longitudinal mixed methods research programme exploring - through both observational and evaluation research - what works to expand girls' capabilities in the second decade of life and beyond.

Longitudinal findings highlight that in Ethiopia girls as they transition through puberty and into mid-adolescence experience increasing risks of sexual harassment and violence en route to and in school from peers and teachers which can be a rationale for parents pressuring daughters to drop out of school. By contrast, boys remain at significantly greater risk of corporal punishment from teachers which can be so severe as to result in permanent injuries or disabilities[27], and demotivate boys from keeping up with their studies.

The longitudinal findings in Ethiopia have also highlighted how intersecting gender and disability discrimination has hampered the ability of girls with disabilities to stay in secondary education as there are inadequate reporting mechanisms for young people with disabilities to report sexual abuse perpetrated by teaching staff and the ways in which informal support from peers tends to be disrupted in crisis contexts such as during school closures during the Covid-19 pandemic and during periods of armed conflict.

In Jordan gender norms around teaching as a socially desirable profession for women but not for men is reflected in greater motivation and care by female teachers (e.g. staying in regular touch during the Covid-19 school closures and checking that girl students were keeping up with their remote learning in contrast to male teachers who on average made little effort to reach out to boy students, less reliance on corporal punishment for classroom management), and in turn constitutes a factor in shaping poorer learning outcomes for boys rather than girls[28].

Box 2: RCT-plus approaches for understanding gender-based violence in schools

The Whole School Minimum Standards and Monitoring Framework supported by the Global Working Group to End School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV) is grounded within a socioecological approach that recognises the interconnected roles of schools, communities, and families in addressing SRGBV through a comprehensive 'whole of school' strategy.

Evaluations aim to assess the impact of whole of school interventions on shifting attitudes and practices within both the school and the wider community, and to determine whether they are effectively addressing the underlying drivers of SRGBV as intended.

Recognizing that the choice of methods depend on the specific research questions being asked, this framework requires the integration of multiple research methodologies. Quantitative methods can, for example, measure changes in teachers' attitudes between baseline and endline, or track how many schools have developed GBV strategies. Qualitative tools, on the other hand, explore the nuances of attitudes and beliefs, how they evolve over time, what influences these changes, and the processes through which change occurs. Vignette-based discussions are particularly useful for eliciting information about norms because they depersonalise issues, and can help young people to therefore speak more openly.

Using both approaches in a complementary manner can provide deeper insights into the drivers and prevalence of SBGBV, and helps identify where progress is being made in addressing it.

Box 3: Using qualitative research in the context of MEL to explore gender stereotyping and its effects

UNGEI in collaboration with the Partner Coalition for Ending Gender Stereotypes in Schools has developed a set of tools to assess the impact of interventions aimed at ending gender stereotypes in schools.

The evaluation tool includes surveys at baseline, midline and endline that seek to capture changes in attitudes among young people and caregivers, assess teachers' skills in delivering gender-transformative education, measure time spent by young people on household work and studies, and explore their aspirations. However, recognising the limitations of surveys in capturing the multidimensional and complex nature of gender norms change – especially when self-reported - focus group discussions and other qualitative tools are used to triangulate and validate quantitative findings.

To address the structural dimensions of norms change, a participatory readiness assessment is employed to measure shifts in schools' readiness to promote gender equality and deliver education free from gender-stereotypes. Additionally, an analysis of the policy environment supporting GTE is conducted through interviews with key stakeholders and document reviews.

Box 4: Using a socioecological approach and power mapping to understand norms change

The Systems Change for GTE project in Uttar Pradesh, India brings together government officials, researchers, educators, community organizations, families and SwaTaleem Foundation, a grassroots organization, around a collective goal to establish a gender-transformative educational ecosystem within rural and historically marginalized communities in India. Systems change work recognizes that inequities are upheld by interlocking elements - policies, institutional norms, resource flows, relationships, and societal attitudes - which must be addressed together for lasting transformation.

Methodologically, the work integrated quantitative and qualitative approaches within an intersectional framework. Following a power mapping exercise between the actors, it combined improvement science and participatory action research, creating cycles of co-learning, problem identification, and iterative design with adolescent girls, teachers, wardens, local officials, and NGO partners. In doing so, community members became co-creators of knowledge and change.

Together, these data illuminated both systemic blind spots, and pathways for reform. Early insights highlight two key lessons. First, systems change is not a static outcome but a long-term, nonlinear process of transforming the underlying conditions that sustain inequity. Second, participatory strategies act as levers for transformation by moderating resistance, building trust, and creating collective ownership.

While randomized controlled trials (RCTs) have been valuable for measuring the impact of discrete interventions, systems change and gender-transformative education unfold in nonlinear, adaptive, and relational ways that cannot be easily isolated into treatment and control groups. RCTs tend to privilege uniformity and standardization, whereas this project required contextual responsiveness, iterative design, and co-creation with stakeholders across multiple system levels. RCTs also often risk silencing local voices, while this exploratory work deliberately centred the lived experiences and agency of girls, educators, and communities as core to both the research and the change process.

CONCLUSION

In the face of funding cuts to official development assistance (ODA), it is more important than ever that resources are invested in effective interventions. While RCTs are useful for evaluating the effectiveness and impact of certain types of interventions, they often cannot in isolation provide nuance, depth, and insights into gender norms and how they change over time. This is problematic, given the value that gender norms interventions in education have in improving educational outcomes for girls, as well as for boys. However, complementary or alternative research methods and approaches can offer implementers a rigorous and broader repertoire for generating evidence on gender transformative education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. A diverse range of research approaches can and should be used to generate robust evidence on what works to support gender norms change through education. These tools may be not only better suited to understanding key issues - but also more accessible than RCTs – and include:

- Quantitative 'plus' approaches such as mixed methods research that blends and triangulates innovative measures from qualitative and quantitative approaches;
- Qualitative approaches, including longitudinal and participatory work, that can capture changes over time and enable girls to express themselves more authentically as participants gain trust in the process and establish rapport with the research team;
- Process evaluations that focus on exploring in-depth the mechanisms through which change is achieved and identifying key blockages.

2. The growing influence of RCTs also underlines the need for a concomitant shift in how implementers think about evidence. Alongside greater diversification of methods, it is important to:

- Ensure that the existing evidence base on norms is more effectively synthesised and used by implementers. For example, the Child Marriage Research to Action Network (CRANK) provides a shared platform for a coordinated global research agenda on child marriage and coordinates an initiative to support evidence uptake by implementers.
- Minimise reproduction of studies through greater coordination on the evidence needs and research agenda for the field, through initiatives such as the CRANK and Advancing Learning & Innovation on Gender Norms (ALIGN).
- Improve both appetite and literacy across the sector on what different methodological approaches can tell us, including through institutionalising policy maker-researcher platforms. For example, the Child Research Policy Forum in Ethiopia, active for over a decade, provides a platform for researchers to share new research and discuss implications with government officials and other policy-makers and practitioners.
- Collaborate and pooling of resources;
- Invest in independent rather than internal evaluations of interventions so as to improve robustness and minimise social desirability bias among respondents and local stakeholders (who may face conflicts of interest).

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12. This specific category of worker is distinct from unpaid care work, and is not captured in official measures of the economy like GDP
13. It should be noted that there are many factors that make entry into the labour market difficult, which are not discussed in-depth here. These include: 1) young people with low education attainment; 2) insufficient development of vocational and technical training; 3) the mismatch between students' qualifications and employers' needs; 4) insufficient transparency around job offers; 5) the lack of relevant work experience paralleling studies; and 6) urban/rural disparities and weak geographical mobility within the country (see: Mansuy, M. and Werquin, P. (2018) Moroccan youth and employment: gender differences. Journal Of Education And Work).
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