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Global Education Monitoring Report

FAWE
FORUM FOR AFRICAN WOMEN EDUCATIONALISTS
FORUM DES ÉDUCATRICES AFRICAINES

Gender equity in access to education in Africa

Key messages

Despite significant progress, important gender disparities persist in terms of access to and completion of secondary education, particularly among rural and impoverished households.

- **There has been progress.** Africa reached gender parity in primary school enrolment in 2021 and is close to achieving it in lower secondary school enrolment. However, in 2024, there were still only 93 girls for every 100 boys in upper secondary education, and 94 women for every 100 men in tertiary education.
- Among those of upper secondary school age, more girls than boys are enrolled in Northern Africa, but in Central Africa, 79 girls are enrolled for every 100 boys, and in Eastern Africa, 71 girls are enrolled for every 100 boys.
- **The gender gap in out-of-school rates has closed.** Between 2000 and 2024, the out-of-school rate for girls fell from 47% to 28%, compared with a fall from 39% to 27% for boys. This reduced the gender gap from 8 percentage points to just 1 point.
- **Girls are catching up with, or even surpassing, boys in completion rates.** The eight-percentage-point gender gap in lower secondary completion in 1990 was eliminated by 2022. However, this measure focuses on those who complete on time. Taking late completers into account reveals that there is still a five-percentage point gap in lower and upper secondary completion rates.
- **Boys are more likely to complete each level of education late.** In 2024, 37% of boys, compared to 23% of girls, were at least two years over-age in lower secondary education due to late entry and repetition. Boys can afford to stay in education for longer, which explains why different conclusions are drawn for timely and ultimate completion rates.
- **Location and wealth continue to shape educational opportunities.** In the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Senegal, there was parity in urban areas; however, in rural areas, fewer than six girls complete upper secondary school for every ten boys. In Angola, Mozambique and pre-war Sudan, the richest households were similar, but among the poorest, no more than 3 girls completed upper secondary school for every 10 boys.

Recommendations

No single policy will work on its own to close the gender gap. Countries should address social, financial, and educational barriers to girls' participation through comprehensive policy packages.

- **Legislation can reduce the number of girls who drop out.** For example, making lower secondary education free and compulsory in 14 African countries increased girls' attainment by 1.6 years and raised secondary school completion rates by 14 percentage points. However, many reforms, such as those concerning school re-entry after pregnancy, remain on paper because implementation capacity is weak.
- **Reducing costs improves girls' participation.** Across Africa, cash transfers, scholarships and school meals have been shown to boost enrolment, attendance and completion rates, particularly among girls and poorer students. In Mali, for example, the national social safety net programme Jigisemejiri doubled the enrolment of girls of upper secondary school age.
- **Safe and supportive learning environments are important.** Investments in school safety, sanitation, transport and infrastructure have increased girls' participation. In Mozambique, a randomised intervention training school staff to address gender-based violence and encouraging girls to report incidents reduced violence and increased enrolment.

GENDER EQUITY IN ACCESS TO EDUCATION IN AFRICA

THE GLOBAL PICTURE

Africa has made important strides in access to education, but gender gaps remain in secondary and tertiary education. Girls are disadvantaged by late enrolment and repetition, while girls in rural and poor households face extra layers of disadvantage.

KEY MONITORING MESSAGES

PARITY

GENDER GAPS IN ENROLMENT HAVE CLOSED

Africa reached gender parity in enrolment in primary education in 2021 and is on the cusp of achieving it in lower secondary education. But in 2024, there were still gaps at higher levels:

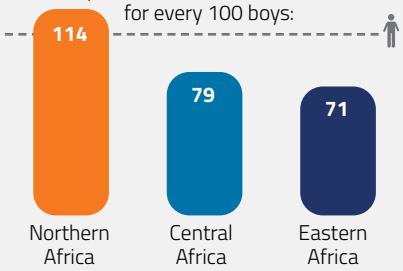
93 girls enrolled for every 100 boys in upper secondary education

94 women enrolled for every 100 men in tertiary education

REGIONAL GAPS

PROGRESS IN ENROLMENT REMAINS UNEVEN ACROSS REGIONS

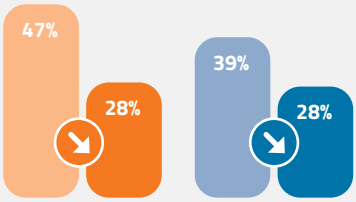
Number of girls enrolled in upper secondary education for every 100 boys:



EXCLUSION

GENDER GAPS IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL RATES HAVE CLOSED

The out-of-school rates of the primary and secondary school age population has fallen from 2000 to 2024:



TIMELY COMPLETION

GIRLS HAVE CAUGHT UP WITH, AND OFTEN SURPASSED, BOYS IN TIMELY COMPLETION

Primary

Girls were **9 percentage points** behind boys in 1990 and are **6 percentage points** ahead in 2024

Lower secondary

Girls were **5 points** behind in 2000 but the gap **was eliminated in 2022**

Upper secondary

Girls were **5 points** behind in 2000 and **1 point** behind in 2024

LATE ENTRY

BOYS ARE MORE LIKELY TO ENROL LATE, REPEAT GRADES AND COMPLETE SCHOOL LATE

Share of lower secondary students in Africa at least two years over-age

Boys	Girls
37%	23%
11% globally	8% globally

If late completers are included, then girls still lag behind boys by 5 percentage points in lower and upper secondary completion

INEQUALITIES

LOCATION AND WEALTH CONTINUE TO SHAPE BOYS' AND GIRLS' EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES

In the DRC and Senegal:

- Parity in urban areas
- Fewer than **6 girls** complete upper secondary school for every 10 boys in rural areas.

In Angola, Mozambique and pre-war Sudan:

- Parity among richest households
- At most **3 girls** complete upper secondary school for every 10 boys among poorest households

POLICY LESSONS BEYOND 2030

GOVERNANCE

LEGISLATION CAN REDUCE GIRLS' DROPOUT

Making lower secondary education free and compulsory in 14 African countries:

- increased girls' attainment by **1.6 years**
- raised secondary completion by **14 percentage points**

But many reforms, such as those on school re-entry after pregnancy, remain on paper with weak implementation

AFFORDABILITY

REDUCING COSTS IMPROVES GIRLS' PARTICIPATION

Across Africa, cash transfers, scholarships and school meals consistently **boost enrolment**, attendance and completion, especially for girls and poorer students

In Mali, the **national social safety net programme** Jigisemejiri doubled the enrolment of upper secondary school age girls

LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS MATTER

Investments in school safety, sanitation, transport and infrastructure have **increased girls' participation**.

In Mozambique, a randomized intervention **training school staff** to address gender-based violence and encouraging girls to report incidents reduced violence and increased enrolment.

#YourStoryCounts

Gender equality lies at the heart of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and is expected to be achieved in and through education. Fulfilling everyone's right to 'inclusive and equitable quality education' is therefore a key goal in itself and as a means to broader societal goals.

With the deadline of this agenda approaching, the *Global Education Monitoring Report's* three-part Countdown to 2030 series aims to demonstrate and explain progress, and to inform the design of a more pertinent international education agenda after 2030. The series looks at the current agenda from three angles: access and equity (2026), quality and learning (2027), and the relevance of education (2028/9).

The 2026 GEM Report examined which countries expanded their education systems much faster and more equitably than others by looking at those that started from similar initial levels for a select set of access and equity indicators. For a subset of countries, the report analysed the key reasons behind their specific trends, comparing these to research findings on the general factors that have played a key role in improving educational participation and reducing disparities in the long term.

Africa is the region lagging furthest behind in most areas of educational development and still has some of the largest gender disparities in participation and completion, even if these have declined since 2000 and they vary considerably by education levels, countries and population groups. This concise report provides a systematic overview of gender participation gaps in Africa, highlighting the remaining challenges and selected interventions that have improved conditions for girls.

DESPITE SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS, GENDER DISPARITIES PERSIST IN SECONDARY AND TERTIARY EDUCATION

Globally, gender parity has been achieved in enrolment ratios at all levels of education except at tertiary level, where more girls than boys attend higher education institutions. In 2000, there were 9 girls enrolled for every 10 boys in primary and secondary education, but parity was achieved between 2009 and 2015 (**Figure 1**)[1].

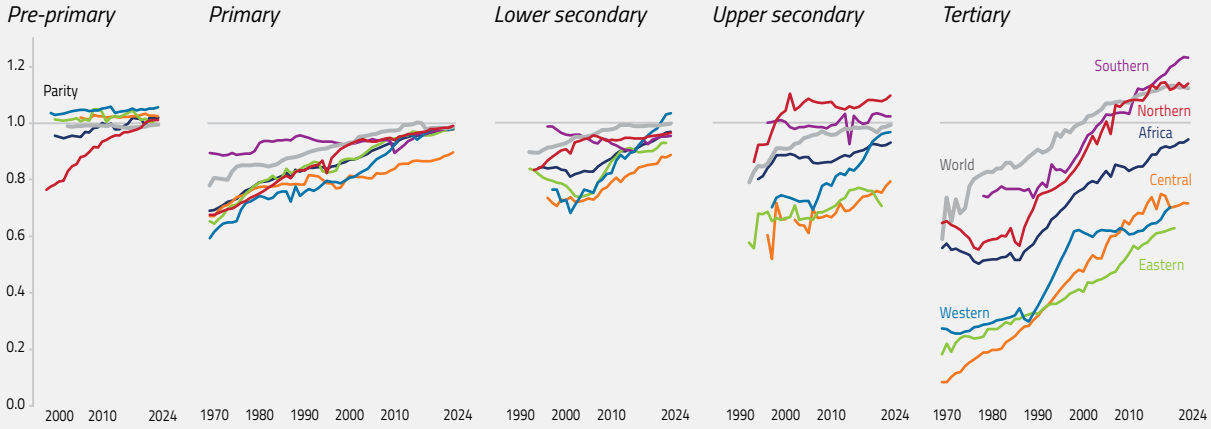
Africa has followed a similar trajectory, but from a much lower starting point. In 2000, 96 girls were enrolled in pre-primary education for every 100 boys. Parity was achieved by 2009. This trend was largely driven by the rapid progress made in Northern Africa, where there were only 76 girls enrolled for every 100 boys in 1998, the lowest among African regions, but parity has been reached since 2018.

In primary education, the number of girls enrolled for every 100 boys increased from 69 in 1970 to 86 in 2000. Parity was only achieved in 2021. In lower secondary education, 84 girls were enrolled for every 100 boys in 1995. However, by 2024, parity had still not been achieved, with fewer than 97 girls enrolled for every 100 boys.

FIGURE 1.

Gender gaps in enrolment have narrowed across Africa, although disparities persist in upper secondary and tertiary education.

Adjusted gender parity index of the net enrolment rate in pre-primary education and the gross enrolment ratio in primary, lower secondary, upper secondary and tertiary education, world and Africa, by region, 1970–2024



Source: UIS database.

1 The analysis is based on the gender parity index (GPI), which is SDG global indicator 4.5.1. The GPI is defined as the ratio of an indicator's value for females to its value for males. A value of 1 indicates parity, although values between 0.97 and 1.03 are also considered to represent parity. Values below 0.97 indicate a disadvantage for females and values above 1.03 indicate a disadvantage for males. To facilitate interpretation, the text explains that a GPI value of 0.95 in the primary gross enrolment ratio means that 95 girls are enrolled for every 100 boys, and a value of 1.05 means that 105 girls are enrolled for every 100 boys.

The situation is more challenging in upper secondary education. No progress was made during the 2000s, with an average of 88 girls enrolled for every 100 boys during the decade. Since 2009, improvement has been continuous but slow: in 2024, there were still only 93 girls enrolled for every 100 boys. Additionally, significant variation exists within the continent. Northern Africa has more girls than boys enrolled; there is parity or near parity in Southern and Western Africa; and there is extreme disparity at the expense of girls in Central Africa (79 girls for every 100 boys enrolled in 2024) and Eastern Africa (71 girls for every 100 boys enrolled in 2022).

Such disparities are exacerbated in tertiary education. Following stagnation in the 1970s and 1980s, there was steady improvement. The number of young women enrolled for every 100 boys increased from 52 in 1987 to 85 in 2008, after which progress slowed. In 2024, this figure stood at 94 young women for every 100 young men. However, the variation between regions is even greater than in upper secondary education. There are many more young women enrolled than men in Northern Africa (114) and in Southern Africa (123). In contrast, there are far fewer young women enrolled than men in Central Africa (72), Eastern Africa (63 in 2021) and Western Africa (70 in 2020).

AFRICA FACES THE LARGEST OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHALLENGE

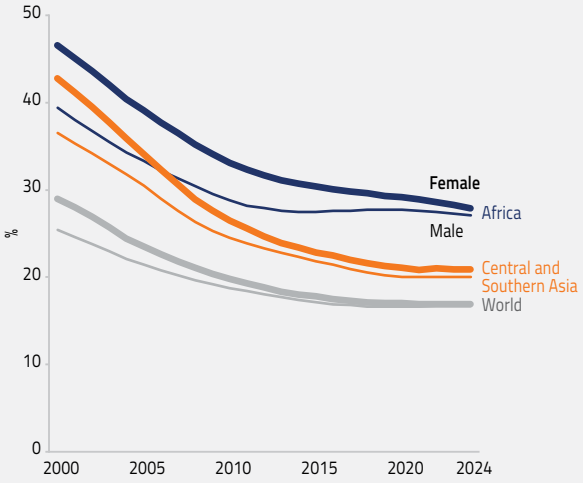
Despite significant progress in school enrolment since 2000, it is estimated that 273 million children and young people were not in education globally in 2024. Sub-Saharan Africa and Central and Southern Asia account for 80% of the global out-of-school population, but the burden of exclusion is increasingly concentrated among children of primary age and adolescents of lower secondary age in sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2026).

Estimates based on a model jointly developed by the *Global Education Monitoring Report* team and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) combine administrative records and household survey data to provide comprehensive, comparable estimates of school participation. Participation improved substantially for both sexes across all school age groups in Africa between 2000 and 2012 – by 1 percentage point per year for boys and 1.3 points for girls – but slowed down dramatically between 2012 and 2024, to 0.1 percentage points per year for boys and 0.3 points for girls. As improvements for girls consistently exceeded those for boys, the gender gap in school exclusion narrowed considerably over the past 25 years. The out-of-school rate among girls of primary and secondary school age fell from 47% in 2000 to 28% in 2024, while the corresponding rate among boys declined from 39% to 27% (**Figure 2a**). Although Africa has closed the gap, the continent still exceeds the global average of 17% by 11 percentage points.

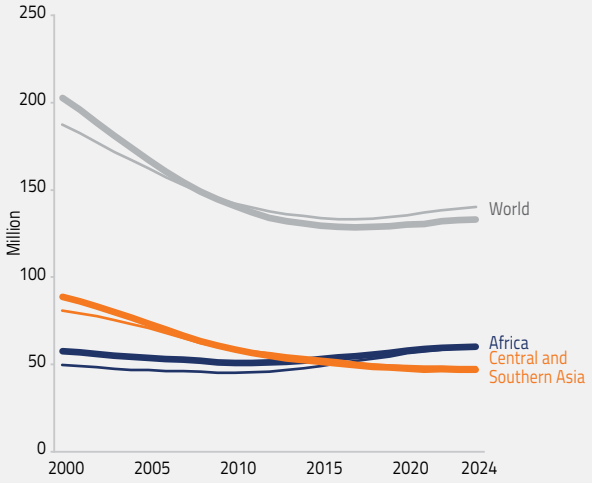
FIGURE 2.

The decline in out-of-school rates has slowed down and the out-of-school population has been growing in Africa since 2010

a. Out-of-school rates, by sex, 2000–24



b. Out-of-school numbers, by sex, 2000–24

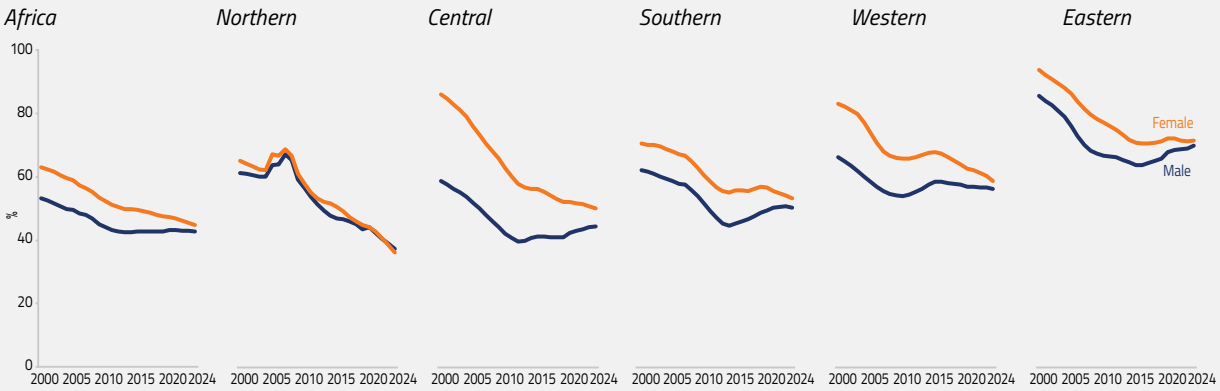


Source: GEM Report and UIS estimates based on the VIEW out-of-school rate model.

FIGURE 3.

Gender gaps in out-of-school rates among youth of upper secondary school age have narrowed across Africa, but high levels of exclusion persist

Out-of-school rate among youth of upper secondary school age, by sex and region, Africa, 2000–24



Source: GEM Report and UIS estimates based on the VIEW out-of-school rate model.

The slowdown has been so significant that the out-of-school population has been increasing in recent years. After falling from 107 million in 2000 to 96 million in 2010, it increased to 120 million by 2024, of whom 60.1 million were girls and 59.9 million were boys (**Figure 2b**). These estimates do not capture countries affected by conflict, where data collection systems are often weak to begin with and break down during and after crises. In 2024, among the 10 countries most affected by conflict, 5 were in Africa: Burkina Faso, Mali, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan. The 2026 GEM Report estimated that the continental out-of-school population was underestimated by 9.7 million.

Among children of primary school age and adolescents of lower secondary school age, gender parity in out-of-school rates has largely been achieved across Africa, with differences between girls and boys of less than one percentage point in 2024. Among youth of upper secondary school age, however, girls (45%) were slightly more likely than boys (43%) to be out of school. Nevertheless, this gender disparity is overshadowed by the scale of exclusion (**Figure 3**). This pattern is observed more or less across all African regions. The largest gender gap, at 5 percentage points, is found in Central Africa (40% vs 35% in 2024), although this is also the region that has made the greatest absolute progress: the gender gap was 22 percentage points in 2000. The greatest relative progress has been achieved in Western Africa, where the gap narrowed from 14 to 2 percentage points during this period. The smallest gaps are found in Northern Africa (1 percentage point at the expense of boys), which is also the region with the lowest youth out-of-school rate (29%), and in Eastern Africa (1 percentage point at the expense of girls), which is also the region with the highest youth out-of-school rate (56%).

THERE HAVE BEEN SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN COMPLETION RATES, PARTICULARLY AMONG GIRLS

In the SDG 4 monitoring framework, completion rates are measured among individuals three to five years above the official graduation age, in order to account for delayed progression resulting from late entry or grade repetition. In contrast to out-of-school rates, completion rates have increased more consistently over the past 25 years, and the gender gap has narrowed substantially. The gender gap in the primary completion rate was nine percentage points in favour of boys in 1990. This gap was eliminated by 2011 and, as of 2024, has reversed: girls are six percentage points more likely than boys to complete primary school within three to five years of the official graduation age (74% vs. 68%).

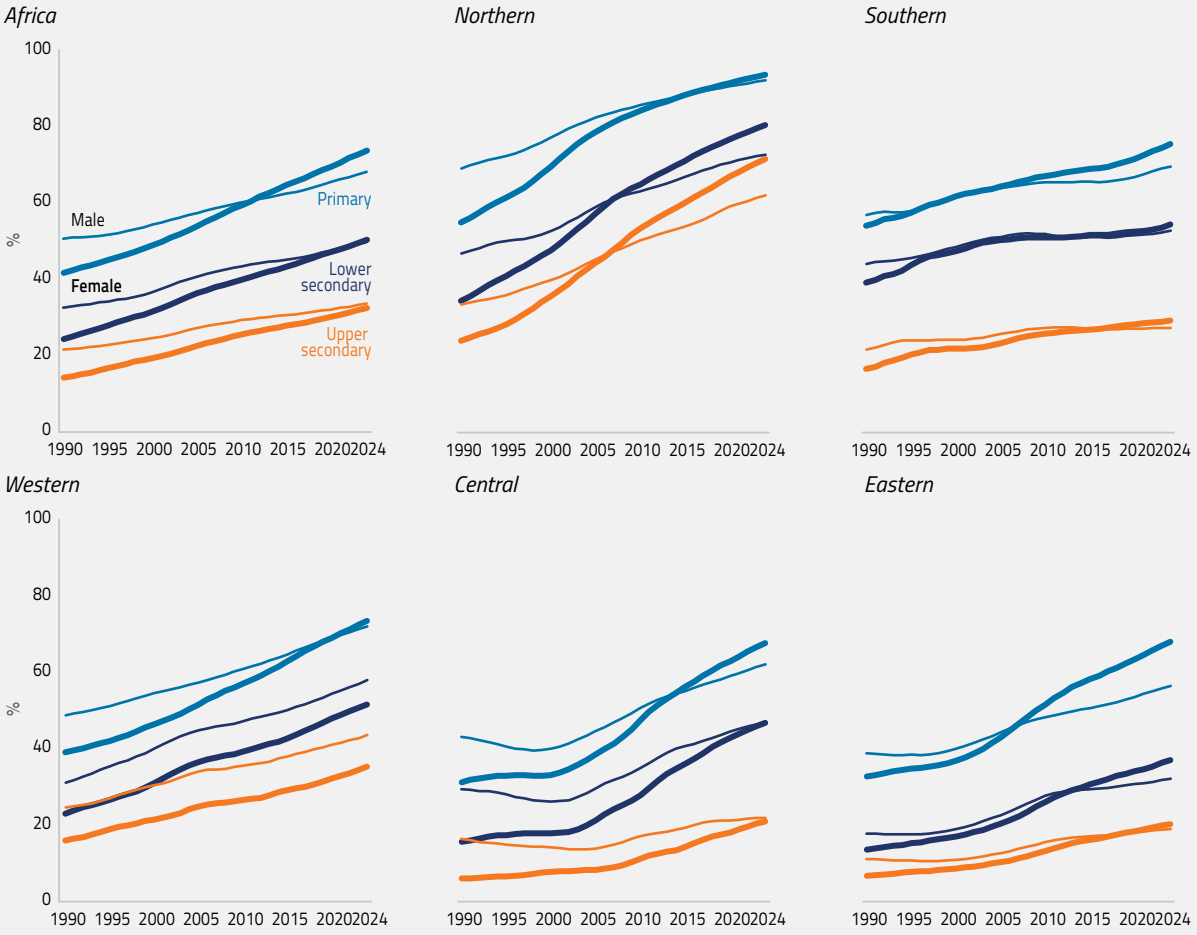
The gender gap in lower secondary completion rates fell from eight percentage points in favour of boys in 1990 to five points in 2000 and three points in 2015. It was eliminated by 2022, with around 50% of girls and boys completing lower secondary school within three to five years of reaching graduation age.

The gender gap in upper secondary completion rates was seven percentage points in favour of boys in 1990. This fell more slowly to five percentage points in 2000 and four percentage points in 2015. As of 2024, the upper secondary completion rate for boys (34%) is still just one percentage point higher than for girls (33%). Northern Africa and Western Africa represent the two extremes. In 1990, there was a nine percentage point gap in favour of boys in both regions. By 2024, however, the situation had reversed, with a nine percentage point gap in favour of girls in Northern Africa, while the eight percentage point gap in favour of boys in Western Africa had remained virtually unchanged in 35 years (**Figure 4**).

FIGURE 4.

Girls' completion rates have caught up with boys in lower and upper secondary education across Africa

Completion rate by education level, sex and region, 1990–2024



Note: Regions are presented in descending order in terms of the girls' upper secondary completion rate in 2024.

Source: GEM Report team estimates based on the VIEW completion rate model.

These average trends mask the diversity of country trajectories in closing the gender gap in upper secondary completion rates. Focusing on the 50 countries worldwide that were initially most disadvantaged for girls in 2000 (34 of which are in Africa), it is clear that they have experienced markedly different outcomes despite starting from a similar position. For instance, among the African countries where, in 2000, 40 to 50 young women completed upper secondary school for every 100 young men, The Gambia achieved parity (103 in 2020), while Angola (87 in 2022), the Central African Republic (79 in 2021) and Senegal (88 in 2023) had made fast progress. However, Burkina Faso (51 in 2019), Guinea-Bissau (59 in 2019), Mozambique (61 in 2022) and Togo (52 in 2017) had made slow or zero progress (**Figure 5**).

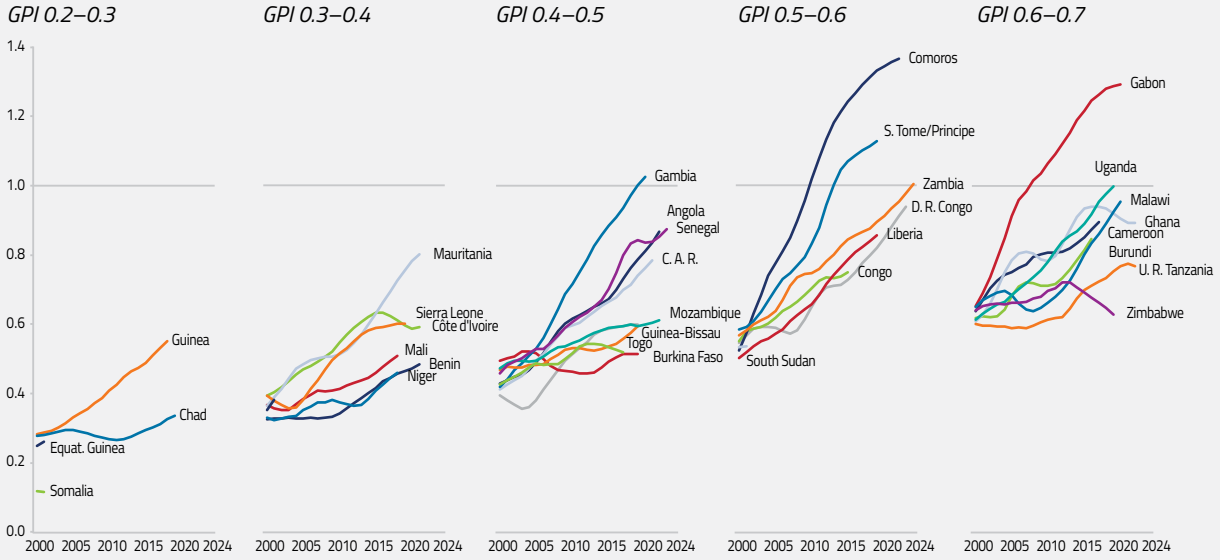
Note that these estimates of the completion rate (SDG global indicator 4.1.2) do not tell the full story of the gender gap. Although the completion rate for those three to five years above the official graduation age can be defined as 'timely', many in poorer countries complete each education level later still. In low-income countries, an 'ultimate' completion rate calculated for those up to eight years older than the official graduation age is 11 percentage points higher in primary education and 9 percentage points higher in lower secondary education than the timely completion rate.

There is a very strong gender pattern. Girls are more likely to complete 'on time', which partly reflects the fact that they have a stronger incentive to progress without interruption: the likelihood they leave school increases with age because of pressures to marry and have children early (World Bank, 2018). This means that the gender gap has not yet been fully eliminated. When those who complete each level of education very late are considered, the reverse gender gap in primary completion disappears, while there is still a five percentage point gap between boys and girls in lower secondary (61% vs 56%) and upper secondary completion (40% vs 36%) (**Figure 6**).

FIGURE 5.

Countries with large gender gaps in upper secondary completion have followed different trajectories

Adjusted gender parity index for upper secondary completion, by initial level of disparity in 2000, 2000–24

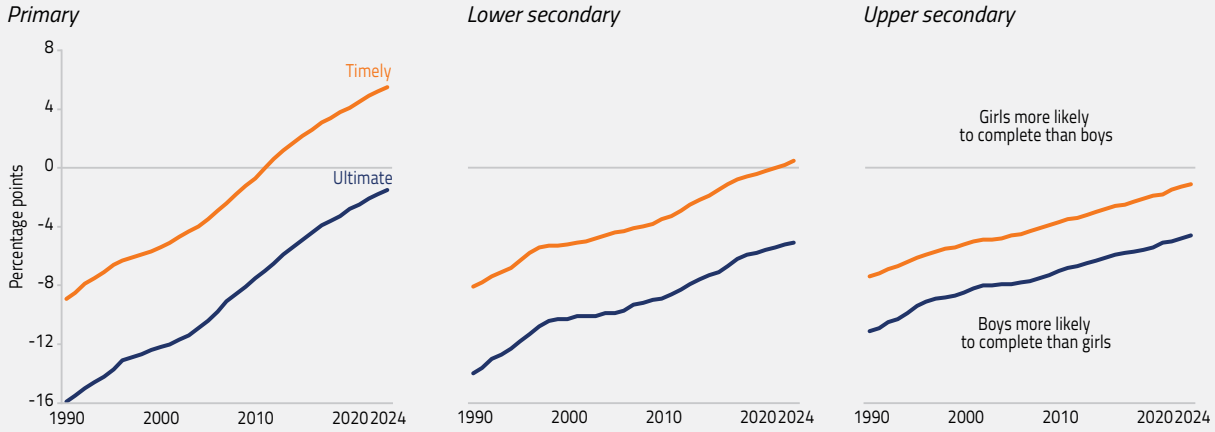


Source: GEM Report team estimates based on the VIEW completion rate model

FIGURE 6.

Allowing for very late completers, there is a five percentage point gender gap in secondary completion

Gender gap in timely and ultimate completion rate, by education level, 2000–24



Source: GEM Report team estimates based on the VIEW completion rate model

Incorporating very late upper secondary school completers, who are mostly male, makes a big difference in the gender gap in upper secondary completion. For example, while the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Malawi have gender parity in timely completion, the official definition of SDG global indicator 4.1.2, a very large gap emerges if very late completers are included: just about 75 young women ultimately complete upper secondary school for every 100 young men. On average, the average adjusted gender parity index is lower by 0.09 as we move from the timely (official) to the ultimate completion rate (**Figure 7**).

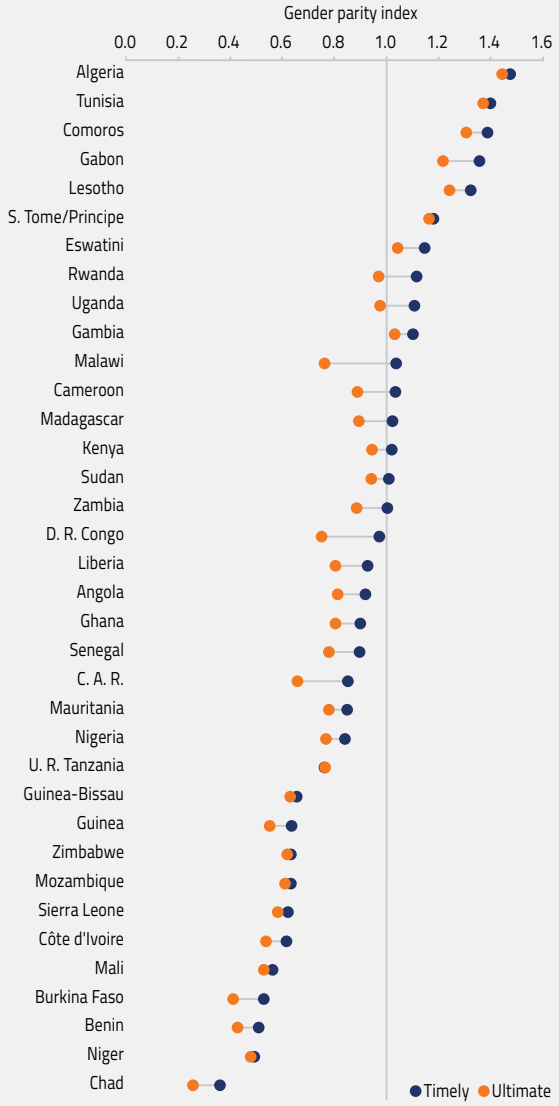
Accounting for delayed alongside timely completion also provides a more nuanced picture of progress towards gender parity. When analysing the pace of progress among countries that started with a large gender gap in upper secondary completion in 2000, most countries remain in the same relative progress category under both measures,

but the assessment changes in some cases. Burundi and Zambia, for example, shift from having achieved parity to having achieved 'fast progress', reflecting the tendency of boys to complete upper secondary school later (**Figure 8**). The progress assessment is also downgraded for Cameroon, as well as for the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Malawi, as shown above.

FIGURE 7.

Allowing for very late completers reveals large disparities in upper secondary completion in some countries

Adjusted gender parity index of timely and ultimate upper secondary completion rates, 2018–24

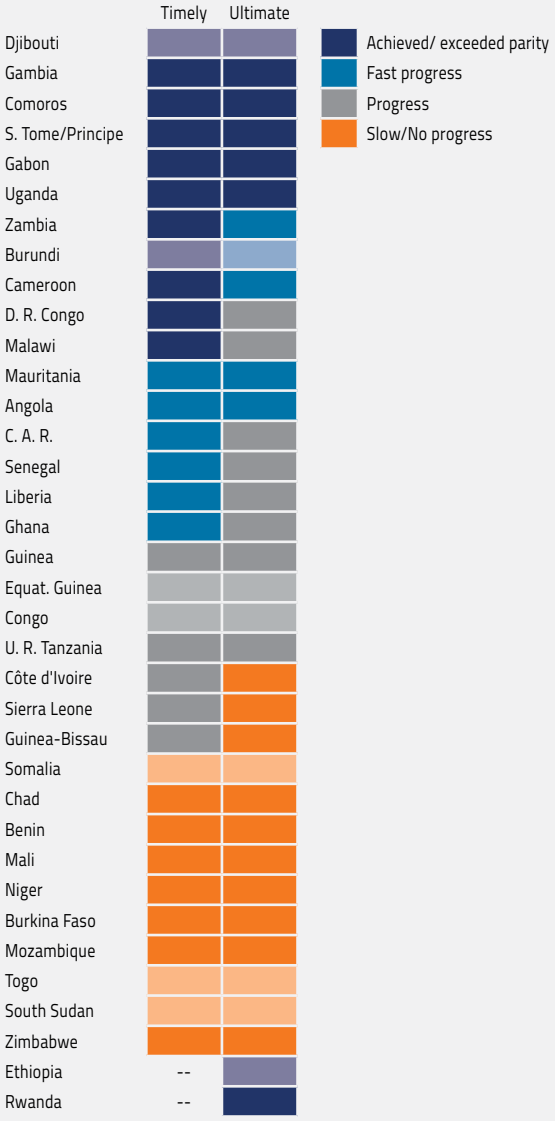


Source: GEM Report team estimates based on the VIEW completion rate model

FIGURE 8.

Comparing timely and ultimate completion reveals differences in progress towards gender parity

Country classification based on the share of the 2000 upper secondary completion gender gap closed, timely and ultimate completion rate, selected African countries, 2000–24



Note: The countries included in this figure are 34 African countries among the 50 countries with data that had the largest gender disparity in timely upper secondary completion at the expense of girls in 2000. In addition, Ethiopia and Rwanda have been included because they are among the 50 countries with the largest gender gap in ultimate upper secondary completion. The progress classification categories are defined as follows: Achieved parity = Country has an adjusted GPI of 1 or above. Fast progress = Country closed 65% of the initial gap; Progress = Country closed between 35% and 65% of the initial gap; Slow / No progress = Country closed less than 35% of the initial gap. Pale colour suggests that the data used for the assessment date from before 2018.

Source: GEM Report team estimates based on the VIEW completion rate model

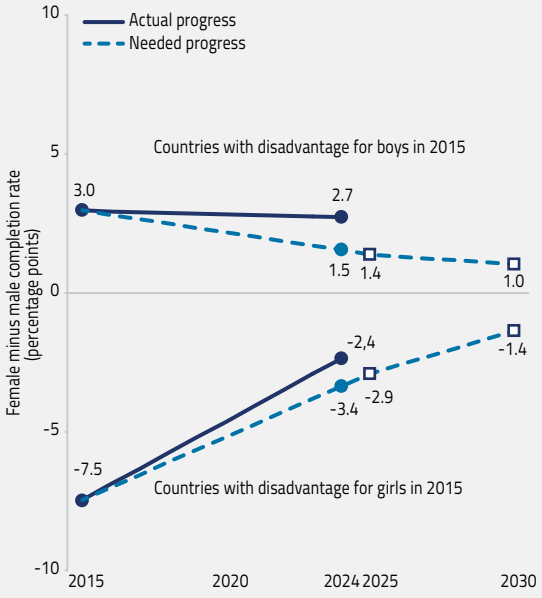
ON AVERAGE, COUNTRIES ARE ON TRACK TO MEET THEIR SECONDARY COMPLETION GENDER PARITY TARGETS

While the above analysis is based on an objective assessment of progress, it is also important to evaluate progress relative to countries' own targets. Following a commitment in the Education 2030 Framework for Action, countries have shared their national targets (or benchmarks) for 2025 and 2030 on eight indicators, including the gender gap in secondary completion, with the support of the GEM Report and UIS. These targets reflect countries' starting points, contexts and ambitions. Rather than comparing countries against a single global target, these benchmarks provide country-specific reference points for assessing whether progress is on track (UIS and GEM Report, 2025).

FIGURE 9.

Progress towards national gender parity benchmarks has been faster where girls were initially disadvantaged

Baseline (2015), latest available estimate (2020–24) and benchmark values (2025/2030) for the gender gap in upper secondary completion, actual and needed benchmark trajectories, Africa



Source: GEM Report and UIS estimates for the SDG 4 Scorecard.

Although only 46% of countries have set targets for closing the gender gap, there are still enough to extract useful lessons. Countries where girls started at a disadvantage have made relatively rapid progress, reducing the average gap from 7.5 to 2.4 percentage points by the latest observation. This is faster than the collective target these countries had set, which projected a reduction to 3.4 percentage points. This means that these countries are on course to meet or surpass their target if current trends continue. By contrast, the few countries where boys were initially disadvantaged have progressed much more slowly. Their average gap narrowed only marginally, from 3.0 to 2.7 percentage points, whereas it should have fallen to 1.5 percentage points if the countries were to be on track (**Figure 9**).

LATE ENTRY AND REPETITION HAVE CLEAR GENDER DIMENSIONS

Late enrolment and repetition contribute to a high proportion of over-age students in primary and secondary education in Africa, which is significantly higher than in other regions of the world. While the proportion of lower secondary students who are at least two years older than the official age for their grade has decreased over time, it remains exceptionally high. In 2024, 37% of boys and 23% of girls in lower secondary education were overage in Africa, compared to global averages of 11% and 8% respectively. These statistics indicate a clear gender dimension.

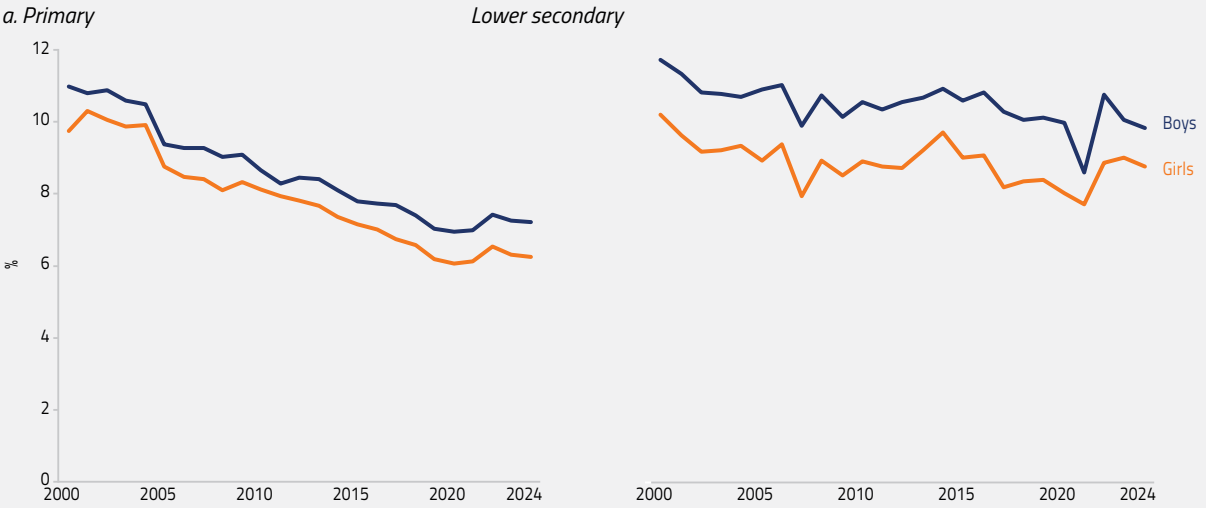
Part of this delayed progression originates at school entry, as boys are more likely than girls to start primary school at an age older than the official starting age in most African countries. Although repetition rates at primary level have declined substantially across Africa since 2000, particularly in Central and Northern Africa, they remain high by global standards, at 6% for girls and 7% for boys compared to a global average of 3%. At lower secondary level, the proportion of repeaters has remained relatively stable at around 10% since 2000.

As in most regions of the world, boys are more likely than girls to repeat a grade, although the gender gap is smaller in Africa than elsewhere (**Figure 10**). The gender disparity is most pronounced in Northern Africa, where 11% of boys in lower secondary education are repeaters compared to 6% of girls, and in Southern Africa, where the respective figures are 12% and 8%.

FIGURE 10.

Boys are more likely to be repeaters in primary and lower secondary education

Share of students who are repeaters, by education level, Africa, 2000–24



Source: UIS database.

LOCATION AND WEALTH AFFECT BOYS' AND GIRLS' ATTENDANCE AND COMPLETION

The average progress towards gender parity does not mean that all children have an equal chance of accessing and completing each level of education. Gender disparity may be higher in rural areas (and, less commonly, urban areas) and in poorer households (and, less commonly, richer households). To demonstrate this variation, the upper secondary completion rate was calculated alongside two gender disparity measures: the relative gap (gender parity index) and the absolute gap (in percentage points) between girls and boys. These were calculated for two pairs of groups: rural and urban (location), and the poorest 20% and richest 20% of households (wealth).

These two disparity measures may produce inconsistent results. As the upper secondary completion rate is still very low in rural areas and among the poorest households in many African countries, the absolute gap (i.e. the difference in completion rates between boys and girls) may be small, but the relative gap (i.e. the ratio of girls' completion rates to boys' completion rates) may be large. For instance, in Togo, the gender parity index for the upper secondary completion rate is 0.61; however, it is much lower in rural areas (0.45) than in urban areas (0.67). However, the absolute gap in the upper secondary completion rate between girls and boys is 15 percentage points, but this gap is smaller in rural areas (5 percentage points) than in urban areas (18 percentage points) (**Figure 11**). In other words, a small difference in percentage points can correspond to a large relative disparity.

In the case of the gender parity index (**Figure 11a**), girls are at a greater disadvantage in rural areas in many countries, including Benin, Togo, Mozambique, the United Republic of Tanzania, Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea-Bissau and Senegal. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Senegal, urban areas see parity between boys and girls, but in rural areas fewer than six girls complete upper secondary school for every ten boys. In a few countries where more girls than boys complete upper secondary school, there is a slight tendency for boys to be more disadvantaged in rural areas, for example in Eswatini and Lesotho.

These gaps are wider — and in some cases extreme — in terms of wealth. In the poorest households, at most three girls complete upper secondary school for every ten boys in Angola, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Mozambique, and Sudan (pre-war). However, there is near parity between boys and girls from the richest households in Angola, Mozambique, and Sudan.

Absolute gender gaps in upper secondary completion rates show the reverse pattern. These gaps are smaller in rural areas and among the poorest households, reflecting their low overall completion rates. **Figure 11b** shows large absolute gender gaps of 10 percentage points or more in urban areas in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo, and among the richest households in Benin, Kenya and Zambia.

FIGURE 11.

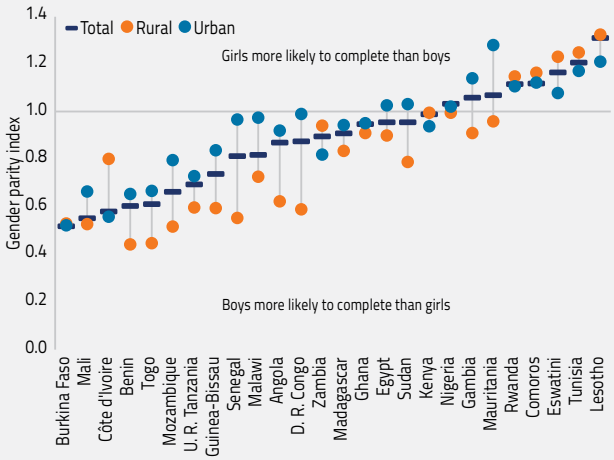
In most countries, the disparity between girls and boys in rural areas and among the poorest households is higher than the average for the population as a whole.

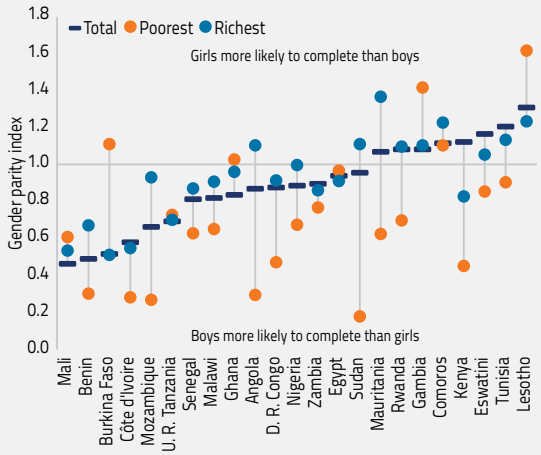
Upper secondary completion rate gender gap measures by two household characteristics, selected African countries, 2020–24

a. Relative gap (gender parity index): girls vs boys

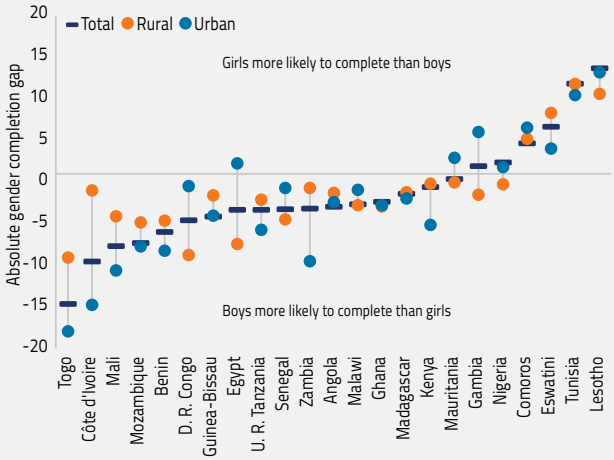
b. Absolute gap (percentage points): girls minus boys

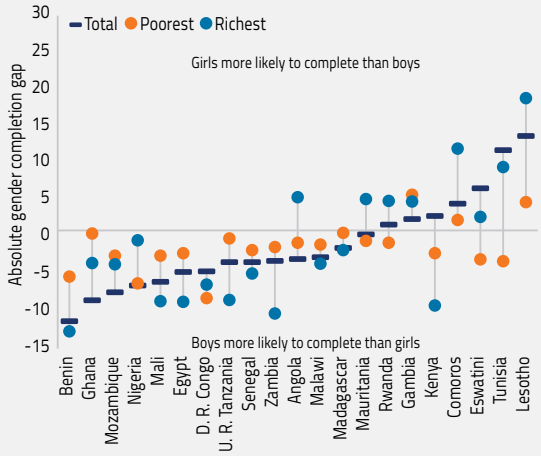
By location





By wealth





Source: WIDE database.

SEVERAL FACTORS EXPLAIN PROGRESS TOWARDS PARITY

Gender disparity in access to education does not result from individual choices, but rather from political, economic, social and cultural mechanisms, as well as education policies and practices that exclude children, adolescents and young people. Such disparity is also best understood as the interaction between sex and factors such as poverty, geography and the norms associated with belonging to a social or demographic group. It is also influenced by the institutional design and structural characteristics of educational pathways (Baxter et al., 2022). Analysis is required to determine who progresses and when, who can return if their studies are interrupted, and who is expected to pursue further education and career opportunities.

This brief review shows how African education systems have addressed gender-based exclusion. Institutional reform, demand-side support, community engagement, safe school environments and more credible progression routes and many other interventions can make a difference. These measures are most effective when combined and implemented as part of a coherent, equity-oriented strategy, rather than as isolated interventions.

The 2026 GEM Report included an analysis of the factors that explain why some countries expanded their education

systems faster than their peers at each level, taking into account both education-related and non-education-related factors. This approach has been adapted here to address the question of what might explain why some African countries have reduced gender disparities in access to education. However, unlike in the global report, much of the evidence in Africa originates from short-term, donor-funded interventions. These are indicative of what matters. However, they should not be taken as evidence that they have played a role in closing gaps, given their small scale, nor as evidence that developing policies in this direction would necessarily be sustainable in an African context.

SOCIAL NORMS AND LIVELIHOODS

In Africa, gender-based exclusion in education is inextricably linked to norms surrounding marriage, motherhood, work and mobility. In sub-Saharan Africa, 31% of women aged 20 to 24 were married before the age of 18 in 2024, compared to a global average of 19% (Child Marriage Data Portal, 2025). Even where child marriage has declined, teenage pregnancy remains high and often causes girls to leave school due to stigma, childcare responsibilities and poverty.

School environments need to alleviate and not exacerbate these pressures. Pregnant girls and young mothers bear the cost of lack of childcare, nursing spaces and school support. They also face the stigma from their peers, teachers and communities (Mukabana et al., 2024). A belief that girls need to maintain their 'purity' can also lead some families to keep older girls out of school (Nartey et al., 2025). In South Africa, teenage mothers have reported stigma and moral judgement rooted in beliefs that they have violated social expectations (Naidoo et al., 2019; Ngqola and Prinsloo, 2025). Moral judgement, shaming, and the assumption that motherhood and schooling are incompatible continue to make returning to education difficult, even where policy permits it, and push many girls to drop out. In Ghana and Zimbabwe, cultural norms present parenthood as the dominant option for girls and make it clear that pregnant girls should not be in education (Kissi and Issaka, 2023; Muzingili and Muntanga, 2024).

Policy response

In 14 African countries, introducing free and compulsory lower secondary education increased attainment by 1.6 years for girls and 1.4 years for boys compared to free education alone. It also made students 14 percentage points more likely to complete some secondary education (Martin et al., 2025). Changes in legislation alter the framework within which families, schools and local authorities make decisions but alone may be insufficient if implementation capacity is lacking.

Re-entry policies for pregnant girls have expanded significantly. A 2025 survey found that 9 in 10 Eastern and Southern African countries were facilitating re-entry and 7 in 10 had measures targeting boys and young men to reduce risk factors (UNICEF, 2026). Yet in sub-Saharan Africa, an estimated six million pregnant and parenting girls aged 10 to 19 were out of school in 2024 and fewer than 5% of girls actually returned to school after pregnancy (UNICEF, 2024). Uganda, where more than 40% of girls report having their first child before the age of 18 (Plan International, 2024), has issued guidelines on preventing and managing teenage pregnancy in schools. However, limited monitoring capacity and lack of support prevent young mothers from returning (Opok, 2024). Zambia replaced an outright expulsion with a re-entry policy in 1997 but teenage pregnancy grew in the years since (Kakanda-Sinkala, 2026). In Sao Tome and Principe, the Education Policy Charter and the National Education Plan promoted gender equality and sexual and reproductive health in education. Their implementation is credited with decreasing girls' secondary education dropout rate from 24% in 2014 to 5% in 2017 (LARTES-IFAN Ch. A. Diop and FAWE, 2024a).

Community engagement helps to raise the social legitimacy of girls' education. In Côte d'Ivoire, for example, Mothers' Clubs for girls' Education have been credited with reducing primary school dropout rates among girls. In 2022, girls attending schools with these clubs were 1.2 percentage points more likely to progress to the next grade (Côte d'Ivoire Ministry of National Education, 2017; UNICEF, 2023). In Ethiopia, girls' clubs increased awareness of girls' rights and harmful traditional practices; however, financial and institutional constraints limited their impact (Chuta et al., 2025). The Back2School project in Ethiopia, Kenya and the United Republic of Tanzania involved communities in planning and implementing an accelerated learning programme (Makoude, 2023). In Kenya, discussions on school safety, infrastructure and attendance were held alongside training for teachers and parents. As a result, 20 primary schools enrolled over-age, out-of-school girls, while 5 schools helped girls escape early marriage (Makoude, 2024). In northern Nigeria, the Pathways to Choice project, which provided after-school safe spaces in 18 communities with the aim to prevent child marriage, had a strong impact on school retention (Cohen et al., 2023).

A range of initiatives under the Sahel Women's Empowerment and Demographic Dividend programme demonstrate the effectiveness of inter-sectoral approaches in keeping girls in education. These initiatives include community midwives distributing sexual and reproductive health products with the support of local health authorities in Chad, targeted food support in Côte d'Ivoire, scholarships in Cameroon, cash transfers to families in Niger, direct cash transfers to girls in Guinea, and boarding arrangements involving host families in Niger and reception centres in Burkina Faso (UNFPA, 2025).

EDUCATION COSTS AND FINANCING

In countries where there is gender bias in schooling decisions, education costs and household resource constraints are channels of gender disadvantage. These costs interact with gender norms, domestic labour, care responsibilities, and household expectations regarding the benefits of educating girls and boys. Whether they are unpaid or provide supplemental income, domestic labour and caregiving responsibilities pull girls out of school (Yumkella et al., 2022). In Ethiopia, 94% of surveyed girls who engaged in paid domestic labour reported having dropped out of school at least once (Yadeta, 2015). In Lesotho, 69% of rural and 58% of urban secondary school age girls who had dropped out described education as too expensive, compared to 32% of boys in both rural and urban areas. Conversely, older boys in pastoralist communities often leave school to herd livestock (Mosia, 2022).

Norms around work shape educational aspirations and retention. Nearly half of surveyed students in Chad stated that gender-related social norms influenced women's career choices and professional pathways, and nearly half of in the Democratic Republic of the Congo believed that domestic chores negatively affected girls' education (LARTES-IFAN Ch. A. Diop and FAWE, 2024b).

Policy response

Reducing the direct and indirect costs of schooling is an effective way to increase girls' enrolment and retention rates. Fee abolition increased girls' attainment by 0.5 years in Malawi, 0.6 years in Ethiopia and 1.1 years respectively (Behrman, 2015). Abolishing secondary school fees is estimated to have increased enrolment by seven percentage points in sub-Saharan Africa (Asante, 2024).

In Ethiopia, girls' net attendance rate increased from 19% to 34% after fees were abolished, though there was also a sharp rise in over-age enrolment (Moussa and Omoeva, 2020). In The Gambia, a lower secondary school scholarship programme covering book, uniform and tuition fee costs increased girls' enrolment by 14% and progression to key examinations by 11% (Giordono and Pugatch, 2017). A donor-funded secondary fee exemption programme for girls subsequently increased the number of students taking the exit examination by 55%, with the most significant gains observed in poorer districts (Blimpo et al., 2019). In Ghana, free secondary education increased girls' completion rates by 14 percentage points in districts where uptake was high (Stenzel et al., 2024). In a randomized programme, 73% of scholarship recipients completed secondary school, compared to 43% in the control group eight years later (Duflo et al., 2024). Completion rates were 69% for girls and 57% for boys, with the greatest impact being seen when scholarships covered all entry costs (Duflo et al., 2021, 2024).

Analysis carried out by the GEM Report team and featured in the PEER profiles suggests that while 62% of African education ministries provide some cash or in-kind support to students, 73% operate social policies that support families (UNESCO, 2026). A meta-analysis of 35 African studies found that children receiving conditional cash transfers were 36% more likely to be enrolled, with a greater impact on girls and at transition points (Baird et al., 2014).

The results of cash transfers are affected by their conditionality, reliability and targeting. In Burkina Faso, a pilot programme involving both conditional and unconditional cash transfers increased enrolment. However, only conditional transfers improved attendance and grade progression, particularly among girls (Akresh et al., 2024). In Malawi's Zomba district, conditional and unconditional cash transfers both reduced the dropout rate among adolescent girls, but the effect of the unconditional transfer was 57% smaller and produced no lasting educational benefits. In contrast, the conditional transfer had a more persistent effect (Baird et al., 2011, 2019). In Mali, the national social safety net programme Jigisemejiri increased girls' enrolment of primary and lower secondary school age and doubled it among girls of upper secondary school age (Sessou et al., 2024). In Zambia, regular and irregular cash transfers increased enrolment among girls compared to those who never received support, demonstrating that sporadic assistance can impact participation in economically vulnerable settings (Sampa et al., 2018). In Zimbabwe, the non-governmental organisation CAMFED covered the direct and indirect costs of rural girls attending government secondary schools, provided learning materials and offered academic and life-skills mentoring, reducing dropout significantly after two years (Rose et al., 2022).

School meals are another approach that has impacted education participation. A school feeding programme improved attendance in food-insecure districts, particularly among girls and disadvantaged children (Aurino et al., 2023). In Mali, school meals increased enrolment and completion rates, while reducing child labour among girls. In contrast, general food aid increased labour among boys, highlighting the importance of linking food transfers to schooling (Aurino et al., 2019).

LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Safe, healthy, inclusive and supportive learning environments encourage regular attendance and completion of education among girls. Conflict events occurring within 25 kilometres of a girl's primary school reduce schooling by 0.4 years by adolescence (Tai, 2025). The prevalence of gender-based violence in and around schools, including harassment, abuse and exploitation, makes learning environments unsafe and leads girls to drop out. In 20 sub-Saharan African countries, 29% of girls aged 15 to 19 reported experiencing physical or

sexual violence, with rates ranging from 14% in Ethiopia to 45% in Uganda (Evans et al., 2023). Data from the Violence Against Children Survey in six sub-Saharan African countries also showed that, among girls in and out of school, physical violence in the previous 12 months ranged from 11% in Zimbabwe to 42% in Kenya.

Water and sanitation are critical. In Uganda, for example, only 15% of girls who were menstruating or pre-menstruating reported that soap was available in the bathroom, and 30% said that changing their menstrual protection at school was problematic (Montgomery et al., 2016). Another study found that 39% of girls who had missed school during their menstruation cited lack of privacy for changing as the reason (Miiro et al., 2018).

Policy response

Having a nearby school remains important. The construction of schools has been estimated to have a strong positive impact, averaging 0.38 of a standard deviation. The largest gains have been seen for girls in areas where distance and safety constraints are most severe. A smaller impact on attendance has also been identified, averaging 0.08 of a standard deviation (Snilstveit et al., 2016). In Sierra Leone, rebuilding schools after the civil war increased women's average schooling attainment by around six months (Mocan and Cannonier, 2012). Alternatively, improving transport access can be effective. In Zambia, a non-governmental programme providing bicycles to students walking more than three kilometres to school lowered the probability of girls dropping out by 19% and of them being harassed on the way by 22% (World Bicycle Relief, 2022).

Various water, sanitation and school hygiene interventions have also been shown to have an impact. In Kenya's Nyanza province, for example, schools that received improvements to their water supply, hygiene promotion, water treatment and sanitation saw a 4% increase in the proportion of girls enrolled (Garn et al., 2013). In Mali, the construction of latrines reduced the proportion of girls who dropped out by 0.7 percentage points and increased the proportion who passed to the next year by 1.3 percentage points in remote rural schools where nearly one third of students lacked sanitation facilities (UNICEF Innocenti, 2024). In Burkina Faso, the BRIGHT programme – combining school construction in underserved rural communities with water supply, separate latrines for girls, school meals, take-home rations, textbooks, teacher housing, and community mobilization – increased girls' enrolment by around 20 percentage points, with the effects largely sustained over time (Kazianga et al., 2013, 2019). School health interventions also affect attendance. In Kenya, school-based deworming improved primary pass rates and secondary school entry for treated girls (Baird et al., 2016).

School-related gender-based violence is a significant yet frequently overlooked barrier to girls' education (Smarrelli et al., 2024). Higher exposure to violence has a negative impact on attendance: a study of 14 countries using learning achievement data found that teacher-perpetrated sexual harassment significantly increased absenteeism (Lee and Rudolf, 2022). In Mozambique, randomised intervention training for school staff to address gender-based violence, combined with encouraging girls to report incidents, reduced staff violence and increased enrolment among girls who had been targeted, due to higher reporting rates (Amaral et al., 2024).

Flexible and second-chance pathways are essential where schooling has been interrupted. However, transition rates from such programmes back into formal education varied widely, ranging from 3% to 90%, across 40 programmes (D'Angelo et al., 2025). Such pathways are more likely to promote equity when they lead to recognized qualifications and labour-market value. Rwanda's TVET policy is one example of gender-relevant supply-side planning. It aims to produce male and female graduates with employability skills that respond to labour-market demand. The policy combines equity and inclusion with a better understanding of the skills needed in priority sectors, stronger vertical and horizontal pathways, human capacity development, improved facilities, responsive curricula, employer engagement and sustainable financing.

CONCLUSION

Important progress has been made towards gender parity in Africa over the past 25 years. However, while Africa may soon resemble the rest of the world in that there are more females than males in upper secondary and tertiary education, significant and, in some cases, extreme disparities remain. Firstly, although girls now complete lower and upper secondary school at the same rate as boys, ultimately, there is a five percentage point gap in completion rates because girls are less able to continue their education; late enrolment and repetition disproportionately affect them. Secondly, in rural and poor households, girls are still more disadvantaged in most countries.

There are many social, economic and cultural factors behind these ongoing disparities. The evidence regarding which educational factors need to be addressed is relatively clear: free and compulsory education legislation, inclusive regulations for pregnant learners and adolescent mothers, conditional and unconditional financial support, school meals, proximity to schools, water and sanitation infrastructure, measures to prevent violence, counselling, and second-chance pathways all contribute to retention and meaningful progression. However, there are relatively few robust policy frameworks that address all these factors coherently and in a coordinated manner, and that are implemented faithfully.

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