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Promoting Higher
Education for All

The right to higher education

and gender equality

Briefing note compendium

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The right to higher education and gender equality

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Disclaimer

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The content and style of the briefing notes have been maintained as per each author's preferences.

Foreword

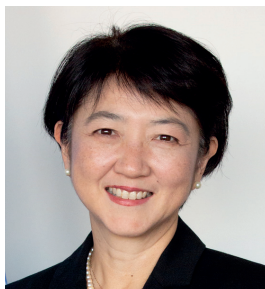
Gender equality is a global priority for UNESCO. Guided by the UNESCO strategy for gender equality in and through education (2019-2025), UNESCO focuses on transforming the entire education system so that all learners can fulfil their rights and potential through education and on specific interventions to support girls' and women's empowerment in and through education.

Despite progress made to advance gender equality, there are still numerous challenges to be addressed, including in education. Around the world, 118.5 million girls and 125.5 million boys are out of school. Women still account for nearly two-thirds of illiterate adults, and these limitations affect their chances of accessing higher education. While female participation in higher education is greater than male participation – globally, 88 men for every 100 women are enrolled in university – women remain under-represented in leadership positions within higher education institutions and in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields. Globally, only 28% of engineering and 40% of computer science graduates are women. In contrast, men are

less likely than women to participate in the humanities and have higher dropout rates than women. Very little is known about non-binary students, staff and faculty in higher education.

Gender disparities in higher education participation and achievement also vary by location, wealth status, race/ethnicity and other parameters. An intersectional lens needs to be applied to understand the barriers to higher education and generate interventions that promote participation in higher education regardless of gender or other characteristics. Identifying gendered norms and expectations is important for understanding the mechanisms that impact access, achievement, and completion in higher education, particularly for the most vulnerable and marginalised.

Higher education is a human right, a public good, and fundamental for the achievement of equitable, just and sustainable societies. This consultation on the right to higher education and gender equality opened a space to discuss challenges, opportunities, and good practices to ensure the capacity of higher education to promote change and achieve gender equality within and beyond education.



Maki Katsuno-Hayashikawa

Director, Division for Education 2030



Francesc Pedró

Director, UNESCO IESALC

Introduction

Rethinking the many implications of gender equality on the right to higher education also constitutes a step forward in promoting the right to higher education for all. Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) commits that by 2030, all nations will have equal access to affordable, high-quality education, including higher education. Achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls (SDG 5) will require work and commitment across many policy areas and sectors.

Gender and the right to higher education should be viewed from an intersectional perspective, not only to identify the current barriers to realizing this right, but to highlight the many connections and layers that connect with gender equality. Considering an intersectional gender lens also allows for ideas and solutions to address the many limitations for people to access and successfully finish higher education to be proposed.

In this context, UNESCO IESALC and UNESCO's Section on Education for Inclusion and Gender Equality came together to conduct a thematic consultation on gender and the right to higher education, held virtually in January 2023. The consultation gathered higher education academics and professionals from different regions to learn from their perspectives on the key challenges and opportunities towards achieving the right to higher education for all in the region. This consultation was part of a series of regional and thematic consultations held between April 2022 and January 2023.

UNESCO and the right to higher education

Guaranteeing the right to education has been a sustained commitment for UNESCO. Following the recognition of education as a basic human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Art. 26), UNESCO's 1960 Convention against Discrimination in Education sets legally binding provisions for its 109 ratifying States¹. The Convention is recognized as the cornerstone of the Education 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education, which is reflected in the agenda's human rights-based approach. UNESCO's dedicated work on the right to education has aimed at monitoring and advocating for this right, as well as supporting its implementation in the national frameworks of its Member States. Considering merging challenges to secure access to and inclusion in education for all, UNESCO has called for a reframing of the right to education to reflect the realities of our ever-changing societies².

As a fundamental part of the right to education and in light of the growing commitment to lifelong learning, UNESCO has enhanced its focus on the right to higher education. UNESCO IESALC in conjunction with UNESCO offices and partially supported by the Open Societies Foundation are working on the right to higher education³ in order to increase awareness and advocacy on the topic as an imperative of social justice based on equality of opportunities and human rights. This work is a collaborative commitment that includes conceptual and policy papers, a series of national case studies, and regional and thematic consultations. This multi-pronged project aims primarily to introduce a social justice perspective of the right to higher education to the international agenda.

1 <https://www.unesco.org/en/education/right-education/need-know>

2 <https://www.unesco.org/en/education/right-education/evolving>

3 <https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/the-right-to-higher-education/>

Aim of this compendium

The thematic consultation on gender was held as part of a consultation process involving five regional consultations and four thematic consultations on the right to higher education. Overall, the consultation meetings covered: Africa, Arab States, Asia and Pacific, Europe and North America, Latin America and the Caribbean, Disability, Gender, Refugees and Forcibly Displaced People, and Rethinking Merit.

As part of the consultation, participants were requested to submit a 2-page briefing note in response to two prompt questions provided in advance of a closed online meeting:

1. What are the challenges to the right to higher education from your perspective/area of expertise (geographic, legal, normative, societal, educational, etc.)?
2. A future aim is to work towards a series of Guiding Principles on the Right to Higher Education. These would be global guidelines that would be used in and adaptable to

various contexts. They would reflect existing legally binding instruments (not create new standards). They would provide guidance to States and other higher education stakeholders on how to uphold and advance the right to higher education. What would you consider essential for inclusion in these Guiding Principles?

The briefing notes were shared among participants in advance of the consultation meeting. During the meeting, participants provided a summary of the key aspects presented in the briefing note. Participants had the opportunity to elaborate on their answers to the two initial questions, followed by an open space for discussion among participants.

This compendium presents the briefing notes shared by the seven participants who were part of the thematic consultation on gender and the right to higher education.

Their details are listed in the following table:

Gender thematic consultation (listed in alphabetical order)	
Gillian Cowell	Director, Education and Head of Gender and Inclusion, Education and Society, British Council (United Kingdom)
Aisha Khurram	Humanities, Ethics and Politics Student, Bard College Berlin; Youth Representative to the United Nations for 2019, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Student Delegate (Afghanistan/Germany)
Angel Mbutia	Secretary, Gender and International Relations, All-Africa Students' Union (Kenya)
Martin Perea	Human Rights Secretariat of the Province of Cordoba (Argentina)
Bhavani Rao	Dean, School of Social and Behavioural Sciences; Director, Amrita Multi Modal Applications and Human Computer Interaction (AMMACHI Labs) and Centre for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality (CWEGE); UNESCO Chair on Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham (India)
Patricia Ruiz Bravo	UNESCO Chair in Gender Equality in Higher Education, Pontifical Catholic University of Peru (Peru)
Francois Staring	Policy Analyst, Higher Education Policy, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (France)

Key findings

Access to higher education, when analysed from a gender perspective, is one of many important issues relating to the right to higher education. The gender perspective is affected by a wide range of sociocultural variables that are deeply ingrained and have a significant impact on people in society. A multi-sectoral ecosystem approach shows how gender and the right to higher education intersect with issues ranging from justice, safety, health, food security and labour market transitions. In addition, to ensure that everyone has the chance to pursue higher education, strong, clear, and powerful links must be made across all educational levels. Furthermore, a lifelong learning perspective is crucial.

Participants in this consultation emphasised that gender equality in higher education is crucial because it serves as a cornerstone for ensuring that more women and people from all gender identities take leadership positions and participate more actively in shaping education policies and practices. Although more women than men are enrolled in higher education globally, women are not equally represented in the academic labour market. The same holds for the representation of professors, students and staff who identify as members of the lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, intersex, queer/questioning and more (LGTBIQ+) community. The value of higher education as a public good, in this sense, is an important game changer in addressing gender inequalities in the current global situation and in times of war and conflict.

Participants drew attention to the gendered forms of segregation in higher education. Vertical segregation is associated with the glass ceiling holding women back from attaining leadership roles, while horizontal segregation refers to the under-representation of women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics

(STEM) fields and men in areas associated with health or social sciences.

To address some of these issues, participants stressed the necessity of collecting and analysing sex-disaggregated data. This will help better understand how education can act as a mechanism to build more egalitarian societies from an intersectional perspective. Understanding who is engaging in higher education at different levels and in different fields helps to identify connections with primary, secondary education and vocational training to highlight the points that contribute to these results.

To improve the lives of all people, it is crucial to provide both education for life and education for living at all levels of education. Particularly, higher education can provide strong support for curriculum development, research and innovation and deeper community engagement. Promoting gender sensitisation with schools and families and engaging industries in the conversation on gender equality is very important to generate synergies, participation, and inclusion in higher education. Including men in any conversation on gender equality to break down gender stereotypes and transform the way people think about traditional gender roles constitutes a starting point for greater inclusion by improving higher education opportunities for all.

This consultation took place after the de facto authorities in Afghanistan banned girls and women from accessing education. As a result, Afghan women's enrolment in higher education has dropped from over 100,000 women to zero, a situation that was unanimously condemned by the participants who called for an immediate revocation of the ban and the return of this fundamental human right to girls and women in the country.

Gender equality in Higher Education - Maximising impacts

By **Gillian Cowell**, Director, Education and Head of Gender and Inclusion, Education and Society,
British Council, United Kingdom⁴

1. What is the current situation related to gender equality in higher education, and what can be done to ensure the right to higher education?

Gender equality opportunities

- Gender inequality is reflected in higher education (HE) systems worldwide, but Higher Education Institutions can be important sites where gender equality can be shaped or challenged. There is huge potential for higher education to influence wider society.
- Higher education benefits women as individuals and in society. Evidence shows that women with Higher Education have higher levels of income, agency and potential for career progression than those who have completed lower levels of education. In societies where women have greater access to HE there are wider benefits to the economy, health and education.
- International and national legal, regulatory and policy frameworks exist around women's equality, that are relevant to higher education institutions and systems and can support progression on gender equality. These include

international frameworks such as the SDGs and CEDAW as well as domestic legislation which is applicable to HE – such as the law on the elimination of sexual violence in Indonesia and anti-harassment laws in Egypt.

- Higher Education systems, through proactive policies to address gender inequalities can also contribute to global skills shortages, enhancing the diversity of experience, particularly in technology-related fields e.g. by creating opportunities for women in STEM

Gender equality challenges

- Higher education can perpetuate gender inequalities that are present within wider society. Reproducing discrimination against women, often by “default rather than design”, including in recruitment, promotion, pay, access to resources, assessment approaches and curriculum.
- Considering intersectionality is important. Not all women have the same experiences and data shows that for women with other characteristics including low socio-economic background, ethnicity, disability - discrimination is compounded. Data and research on this is lacking.

⁴ This briefing note, in response to the UNESCO Right to Higher Education Consultation draws on the British Council's report [Gender Equality in Higher Education: Maximising Impacts](#) published in 2022. Drawing on a literature review and interviews, the report explores the role of higher education in transforming society in relation to women's equality and empowerment and looks at how gender inequality is reflected, reinforced and challenged in higher education worldwide. The briefing note also draws on the British Council's working supporting Higher Education to address gender equality through policy dialogue, [partnerships](#) and collaboration within the sector globally including on gender equality frameworks in India and [Brazil](#) and through [Women in STEM scholarships](#).

- Enrolment and progression for women in higher education vary considerably across countries. There are higher numbers of women than men across the globe accessing HE – but this varies by region and reverses at the higher levels of study.
- Barriers to higher education are gendered and include economic, safety and gender norms including the disproportionate burden of caring responsibilities faced by women.
- Women are consistently and significantly under-represented in positions of power and leadership within the HE sector globally. This is more pronounced among minority groups based on race and ethnicity. There is a need for more data and research on this globally.
- There is significant and persistent gender disparity in subject selection and STEM subjects have global and persistent issues of under-representation. This is particularly important given that STEM areas attract significant investment and job opportunities.
- Teaching and learning environments can reinforce gender inequality, with gender-responsive pedagogy a potential response. The shift to online teaching has differential impacts on men and women – both positive and negative.
- Curriculum content is gendered and often not gender-sensitive – reinforcing existing inequalities.
- Men as a group remain advantaged at every stage of their academic careers – this is influenced by attitudes and norms and constructions of leadership, as well as recruitment, selection and promotion practices
- A lifecycle approach looking beyond tertiary education can be successful. It's important to

consider the gendered issues at primary and secondary education in terms of pathways to HE as well as career opportunities beyond.

- Sexual and gender-based violence exist within higher education but data is lacking – risks are increased for students compared to the wider population and for international students.

What can be done to ensure a Right to Higher Education

1. Prioritise gender mainstreaming – gender audits, gender analysis, explicit gender objectives in HE institutional plans and programmes. Use analysis to understand, identify and remove barriers to HE – based on gender including economic or financial barriers. Develop and implement gender equality frameworks for Higher Education.
2. Ensure an intersectional approach – ensuring that the experiences, needs and barriers to Higher Education of specific groups of women are understood, met and addressed.
3. Put a greater focus on violence against women –develop and draw on international, national and institutional level frameworks and policies for tackling this in the sector. This should recognise the impacts on both staff and students including those on international study, placements or assignments who are at greater risk
4. Address women's under-representation in higher education leadership. Commit to long-term action to address patterns of impediment to women's equal leadership in HE, for which there are established good practice models that can be adapted for cultural context as required
5. Tackle subject segregation, especially in STEM – addressing cultural gendered assumptions

and being inclusive of women in all their diversity. Proactive initiatives, including building women's networks and roles models in STEM and scholarships aimed at women can be effective.

6. Take a gendered approach to on-line learning and collaboration – On-line learning can open up opportunities for women to access HE when they previously could not. However, it's important to understand the gendered issues in on-line learning and collaboration including access to equipment and skills, on-line gender-based violence to ensure access and opportunities for collaboration, learning and networking, engaging with women in communities.
7. Strengthen organisational leadership and commitment to address gender equality in strategy, policy, quality assurance and delivery – ensure leadership commitment to gender equality and institutional courage in addressing this through positive action.
8. Recognise and promote gender studies and women's higher education institutions globally -use this to build expertise and knowledge of what works to address gender gaps and promote gender equality across all sectors including HE.
9. Assert the centrality of equality and inclusion to the definition of quality and excellence in higher education - Definitions of quality and excellence in research, curriculum content, pedagogy, programming, candidate selection and policy must be underpinned by gender equality standards
10. Focus on systems change – work at international and national levels in order to transform Higher Educations systems and the linkages with other levels of education to deliver to enable fair access and

outcomes. This should include public policy interventions alternative pathways to higher education, particularly for groups who have less access to formal pathways.

2. A future aim is to work towards a series of guiding principles on the right to higher education. What would you consider essential for inclusion in these guiding principles?

- There is a significant need for sex disaggregated data to understand the benefits and impact of higher education on gender equality, gender gaps in the sector in terms of access, achievement, employment outcomes, career progression and income. States and the Higher Education sector should put in place mechanisms to collect, analyse and take action based on equality data including the intersection of gender with race and ethnicity, disability, socio-economic status etc.
- Recognition that the "capacities" of people to access Higher Education are not innate and fixed but are shaped by social factors including socio-economic status, gender, disability, ethnicity. States take purposeful action at all levels of education so that individuals have the opportunity to realise their capacities and that barriers and structural inequalities are removed to enable pathways into Higher Education. Given that globally girls are more likely to be excluded from completion of secondary education – it is urgent that this is addressed.
- Finance should not be a barrier to Higher Education. This is particularly high for women and girls in low-income families – where the education of boys is prioritised. States need to ensure that there are free or affordable routes

to complete Higher Education for families with low incomes.

- Higher Education must be a safe learning environment for all. Sexual and gender-based violence is a key barrier to access, completion and outcomes in Higher Education – therefore States and the Higher Education Sector need to ensure existing policy framework on the prevention of SGBV are applicable to and adhered to with Higher Education Institutions.
- The principles on the right to Higher Education should be coordinated with other established UN guiding principles agreements such as the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and Women’s Empowerment Principles.

Gender equality and higher education:

The Afghan case

By **Aisha Khurram**, Humanities, Ethics and Politics Student, Bard College Berlin; Youth Representative to the United Nations for 2019, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Student Delegate, Afghanistan.

Women's education in Afghanistan: Challenges

The struggle for Gender Equality in Afghanistan has been a long and difficult one. Nonetheless significant progress has been made both in transforming the higher education sector and improving the situation for female students and faculty members since 2001 up until 2021.

Female education in Afghanistan has experienced numerous ups and downs throughout the history. It has never been considered stable or suitable even before the Soviet invasion and civil war. However, during the first Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001, female students were completely deprived of educational opportunities. Due to the Taliban's perception and their interpretation of Islam on female education, no women were permitted to attend educational institutions at that time, resulting in complete erasure of women from the society. However, a new era of progress and hope began for Afghan women in 2001 after the establishment of the Republic government and the support of the international community.

Afghanistan went from zero female students in 2001 to 103,855 girls attending public and private universities by 2021. The Strive for 20 years on building infrastructures, including education, was going to bring a stable situation for women in terms of education and marketplaces. However, the collapse of

government and Taliban takeover in August 2021 has set the country back on a fragile path, and Afghan women are once more deprived of education.

After the collapse of government last year, girls have been immediately banned from attending high school, while Taliban repeatedly promised the international community that the ban on high school was temporary. They have just recently announced an indefinite ban on higher education for women all over the country on December 20th, 2022.

The ban on women's access to higher education happened less than three months after thousands of girls and women sat through the university entrance exam across the country with many aspiring to pursue their dreams and goals in their favorite field of education.

Today, Afghanistan is the only country in the world where women and girls' access to education has been banned and politicized. And after twenty years of progress, the country went from almost 104 thousand female students enrolled at higher education institutions to zero.

However, despite the magnitude and enormity of the crisis that women and girls are facing in Afghanistan, there are still opportunities that we need to seize and maximize in order to help Afghan girls return to their classrooms.

What can be done to ensure Afghan women's right to higher education:

1. Supporting institutions in safe haven/ neighboring countries:

Mobilizing opportunities and resources in regional countries where Afghan girls will be able to continue and complete their education will provide an alternative solution to the ongoing and ever increasing educational crisis in Afghanistan.

UNESCO is encouraged to initiate and dedicated scholarship programs for the women and girls within the region and especially in the neighboring countries of Afghanistan where most Afghan families have fled in order to secure their daughters' future.

This approach will also promote Afghan women's self-reliance through increased access to opportunities for employment, which will help them and their families survive through the harsh poverty and increased inflation in Afghanistan.

2. Online classes behind the closed doors:

Today in the 21st century crises have developed however our global educational system has remained backward and is unable to provide an adjustable system in places where accessing education is difficult.

Considering the fact that there is no restriction and ban on accessing internet or any virtual platform in Afghanistan, it is significant to use the already existing potential and space in order to provide an alternative response to the educational crisis in the country.

There exist a handful of international universities and institutions that are willing to provide online

courses with credits so that female students wouldn't waste the best years of their lives in wait for the humanitarian and political crisis to be resolved in order to access education.

These courses can also be extended into full-fledged online underground degrees in case the ban on women's access to higher education remains in place, however the most significant barriers in front of normalizing and expanding the idea of remote learning/ distant education are electricity shortages and students' inability to afford internet data/packages. In case the logistical needs of students are resolved they will be able to continue and complete their education through alternative and accessible means until the negotiations bear some results with the de facto authorities.

In order to mitigate the gender crisis in education and reduce the huge gap in accessing opportunities It is important to ensure that women and girls have access to the wider world through internet in protracted crises, warzones and refugee camps where women's rights are violated the most, it is important now to think of an inclusive global educational system and certification mechanism that will go beyond borders and nations that ensure no girl is left behind.

An analysis of gender equality policies and practices in higher education institutions and their effectiveness in promoting gender equity

By **Angel Mbuthia**, Secretary for Gender and Int'l Relations of the All-Africa Students Union, Kenya.

Gender equality (or lack of it) in higher education is actually a factor of the same in the lower levels of education. A close study of school enrolment at the lower levels paints a worrying picture. There are perennial challenges within the socio-cultural structures in local communities that still make it difficult for the girl child to access education. In the sub-Saharan regions of Africa, for instance, deeply pastoralist cultures predispose boys to herder lifestyles, which then unwittingly moves the girls to stay-home lifestyles as keepers of the home. Beyond these pastoralist communities, other hurdles facing girls in other parts of Africa include period poverty, where girls' enrolment is directly hampered by their menstrual flow as they cannot access sanitary pads and other items of personal hygiene. Coupled with belief systems prevalent in most communities, teenage pregnancies, as well as heavily patriarchal lineages, girls at the lower levels still face huge challenges in transitioning to higher education.

Due to the foregoing, it is therefore no surprise that at the tertiary level, access to education is still heavily biased towards the male student, even where his female peers at lower levels may have been better performers. It is a critical situation to say the least, because this then becomes a causative factor for the gender disparity later at the workplace and within the legislative and elective frameworks. Among the remedial items I see as solving this anomaly may include greater investment in girl child

facilities in semi-arid areas of Kenya. Indeed, food security would play a major role, because a casual view across the country shows that relatively food-secure communities like Kisumu, Kakamega and Kiambu counties in Kenya have higher girl child enrolment, which based on exam results, are in fact close to matching boys. It is often an ignored factor that in places that experience biting food scarcity, women and girls form the backbone of the daily search for food and water and miss out on opportunities to advance in education. Given a chance, I would invest heavily in community empowerment via agriculture and food production, mechanized production and more stable lifestyles away from pastoralism. Besides this, another area of focus has to be in mentorship, eradication of period poverty and community education in girls' empowerment. I do not believe that any Kenyan or African community deliberately sets out to disenfranchise their girls, which means that a change in belief systems and patterns only has to mainstream the place of girls in the overall progress of any community.

In recent times, my personal experience has been that more and more educated girls within families are returning home to uplift their parents, build homes and develop their communities. Indeed, a conversation with ageing parents' points to a newfound belief that educating girls is in fact proving to be truly beneficial. Female students are also breaking the glass ceilings by taking on leadership places

in universities, going ahead to become union presidents and now challenging the status quo by daring for spaces in national politics after campus. Therefore, any mentorship already has a foundation laid for its launch.

As a side note, we have to point out that gender equality in education cannot merely be a balance of numbers but must be seen to include the quality and level of that education. For example, there may be the temptation to embrace tokenism by having many girls taking non-marketable courses to balance out the number of boys. In my view, access to higher education has to include girls taking up the challenging courses including Medicine, Engineering and the sciences. A guiding principle in gender equality in higher education is equity, so that the resultant workplace entry has both genders pushing innovation and creativity to develop the economy.

As already stated, a key guiding principle for me would be equity, in order that any conscious effort aimed at creating gender parity in higher education is not based on tokenism but real progress. Other guiding principles for me would be those of diversity and consistency. In the sense that where we push for the progress of a marginalized gender, we also have to stay consistent so that it doesn't become merely short-term posturing, especially in election season. In Kenya for example, the rolling out of Free Primary Education in 2002 increased the enrollment of girls into schools. The preference to educate the boy over the girl with excuse of having to pay for school fees was no longer tenable to families. If subsequent governments build on this momentum to roll-out policies that impact enrollment of girls into schools, the consistency would show both in higher education access and workplace gender parity.

In this age of technology and innovation, it is not sustainable to ignore global trends in gender parity in education, employment and election to high office. Whatever needs to be done, its implementation is long overdue. Granted that given the different geographical and socio-cultural differences in the country, the regions cannot move at the same pace on this, but having discussed the causative factors, I believe there is already a foundation upon which the new order can be launched. Investing in gender equality has to start from somewhere, and that may start from building of more schools, addressing teenage school dropouts, greater legislation to outlaw child labour as well as more administrative action at the community level to support and grow more enrolment. The bigger problem overall is that we have paid lip service to all this, without concerted efforts to actually deliver at the policy and implementation level. Which brings me to my final guiding principle of HONESTY if we have to give a shot in the arm to gender equality in higher education, a dream I hold so dear.

Gender identity and access to higher education

By **Martín Perea**, Bachelor of Political Science, master's degree in Gender, Society and Politics - FLACSO. Human Rights Secretariat of the Province of Cordoba, Argentina.

On Gender Identity and Access to Higher Education

The Gender Identity Law (National Law 26,743), passed in 2012, meant for Argentina and Latin America a step toward the recognition of the rights of trans, transvestite, transgender, transsexual, non-binary, queers, and other non-cisgender identities⁵. It implied the recognition of gender identity as a right, but also a review of the sex-generic paradigms followed to create multiple public policies, among which are those aimed at the full exercise of the right to education.

Multiple studies show that the percentage of trans people in Argentina who have not been able to complete their secondary education is higher than that of the rest of the population (it is estimated that this level is only completed by 25% to 35% of trans people.) This reality is the result of multiple forms of structural gender violence, including school discrimination by classmates, teachers or deans, or early expulsion from the household.

Although Argentina and other countries in the region have had laws related to Comprehensive Sexual Education (National Law, 26,150) for several years, discriminatory behaviors continue to persist, and they hinder access and academic success of trans people in the educational system. In this way, in most cases, expulsion from the secondary education system becomes the main obstacle to take part in higher education.

The presence or lack of educational completion programs or policies focused on this population is specific to each country, so it is difficult to split the analysis of accessibility to higher education for this population when the main access requirement is the completion of secondary studies.

In this sense, the design of educational policies from a gender approach must consider this reality in the field of higher education. On the one hand, it should be considered that there are still persistent barriers for trans people throughout their educational journey. On the other hand, it should consider that those people who can access higher education should not be expelled due to the structural violence that condemns all of those who do not identify themselves with their birth-assigned gender.

In this respect, it is essential to emphasize the exercise of rights in an interdependent form, especially with regard to higher education and gender identity.

In Cordoba, Argentina, in the last 5 years the first trans people have graduated from university and higher education degrees, demonstrating a path of transformation that also makes the existing obstacles visible. These educational accomplishments have occurred ten years after the Gender Identity Law was passed, which involved a social transformation that had a strong impact on educational institutions and their institutional practices. Something to

⁵ The term "cisgender" is used to refer to those people who self-identify with their birth-assigned gender.

highlight is that although Argentina offers free higher education, this right is not exercised in the same way for everyone, and gender inequalities are made visible in a cruel form along the educational journey of trans people.

Based on local experience, some questions arise about access to higher education for this population. What are the existing barriers for trans people in educational systems? What kind of educational journey can be made without the recognition of one's own identity? Is free higher education enough to address the gender inequalities faced by trans people? Is it possible to think about access to higher education without identity recognition laws? Is the right to higher education possible for a population whose right to initial and secondary education has historically been violated?

These and many other questions must be asked in the context of every region, based on their normative and policy frameworks. These questions cannot be answered without listening to the voices of the people who experience violence daily. Their testimonies should be a guide and a teaching tool for every action within the framework of educational policies that seek to combat gender inequalities.

Within the framework of the design of guiding principles on the right to higher education, the full exercise of the right to gender identity or self-perceived gender identity must be part of global guidelines. There is no right to education without recognition of one's own identity. Gender identity as a right is exercised publicly, in front of other people, with other people. Limiting this recognition to private life and outside educational institutions is undermining that right. The design of any type of educational policy, program, plan, or action must include this right.

What can be done to ensure the right to higher education?

By **Dr Bhavani Rao**, Dean, School of Social and Behavioural Sciences; Director, Amrita Multi Modal Applications and Human Computer Interaction (AMMACHI Labs) and Centre for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality (CWEGE); UNESCO Chair on Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, India.

1. What can be done to ensure the right to higher education?

There are multiple and multi-faceted barriers to girls attaining higher education, particularly in developing nations. These can include issues such as lack of access and opportunities, lack of self-confidence, not understanding the importance of higher education, compounded by her contextualized environment. Socio-cultural factors, health-related issues, safety, security, and economic components combine in myriad ways to form obstacles that girls and women are rarely able to overcome on their own. To add to this, disruptions from natural hazards and pandemics like Covid-19 drive these fault lines deeper.

While the Indian population's education as a whole has steadily increased over the past decades, there are still many barriers to access even elementary education in rural areas, which in turn, decreases the chances of girls ever attending higher education. Socially, many families will withdraw girls from school by grade 10 to ensure they have the best chances at marriage. This is due, in part, to the fact that their families believe that their best chance in life is ensuring they make a good match. In other areas, girls may have access to a school and a family that encourages her to pursue education, but the infrastructure of the school may not have something as simple as a toilet, which prevents

her from attending school. These are just a few examples. A more robust and holistic approach to gender equality in education would be to consider the interconnected systems that create obstacles for girls entering higher education or translating their degrees into careers.

There is a clear and demonstrable connection between access to higher education and economic and personal stability in adulthood, a belief that is commonly held across India. In producing the recently published UNESCO book entitled, *A Braided River: The Universe of Indian Women in Science*, we found that rather than low enrollment of young women in universities, there is a paradox of a 'gender inclusive, segregated university.' Comparing annual enrollment rates at multiple Indian universities, we found that many departments had more girls enrolled than boys. However, the subjects that women are enrolled in are largely relegated to non-professional, non-market, non-prestigious subjects, constrained in their choice of subject to so-called 'feminine appropriate' disciplines and subsequent careers. This is largely because subject and career choices in India are often family-driven, where the values of the parents dominate (e.g., their daughter's safety or how certain careers might affect her marriageability).

So it is with most gender-related issues in our society, the norms around girls and women

in education are complex and intersectional with a number of other issues. We have seen in our work across the country a general belief that a woman's career (and therefore a girl's education) is of secondary importance to men's. It is still expected that the husband or another male relative will be the primary breadwinner, and it is still quite common for women to take up domestic responsibilities at the expense of her own career development. Therefore, a pseudo-freedom is granted to girls to study whatever they like up to marriageable age, but not to pursue this into a life-long career. The consequences of this mentality are extended career gaps among women due to child-rearing, pronounced horizontal segregation in career development, and minimal representation of women in the highest levels of professional advancement.

2. A future aim is to work towards a series of guiding principles on the right to higher education. What would you consider essential for inclusion in these guiding principles?

Given decades of global conversations on the critical need to increase women's access to higher education and representation in the professional workforce, why does the issue persist? Unfortunately, there is no straightforward answer. The same complex web of interdependent factors that comprise the barriers women face continue to hold, while mounting evidence suggests that existing solutions require a paradigm shift. Strong arguments are being made that the majority of interventions meant to promote women in higher education and professional work have been guided by an inconsistent understanding and oversimplification of gender inequality and the problems women and girls face.

To this end, we have based our community outreach and development work on the following tenets:

1. Gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls is an essential contribution to progress across all the SDGs.
2. Women have a vital role to play in achieving sustainable development, which requires their full and effective participation in sustainable development policies and programmes, and in decision-making at all levels. This, in turn, can only happen effectively if women have the necessary skills and opportunities to engage in this work.
3. Increased participation of women in higher education and professional work must include more women occupying critical roles in science and technology communities. This will ensure that women, and society as a whole, enjoy the benefits of participating in scientific research, and that science itself has the best minds engaged in innovation. The same is arguably true for all professions.
4. Finally, it is essential that women no longer face institutional and/or social barriers that inhibit full participation in any aspect of the global economy. By denying women equal opportunities to participate in the economy, we sacrifice half of the population's profitable work as well as the potential genius and innovation that would otherwise be wasted.

One crucial element of this conversation that is, unfortunately, largely overlooked in the space of gender equality (but is ironically present in detractors to our cause), is the importance of family stability and the preservation of traditional, cultural values and beliefs. The phrase, "do not throw the baby out with the bath water," comes to mind here. India is home to one of our most ancient cultures, whose

longevity in many ways is due to a strong sense of strong community identity, personal enlightenment, and social progress. Too often, conversations around gender equality and development feel stuck in a Western value system of extreme independence, personal freedom, and unregulated and unsustainable consumption. There are aspects of Indian culture that offer alternatives to this lifestyle that are in line with our SDGs and a gender equality ethos. We should be willing to recognize that family responsibilities and the urgent need to raise the next generation of children will require BOTH parents (and the extended family and community) to invest in the development of the child. Rather than perpetuating an education and corporate culture that transforms women into men, may we consider a more harmonious form of development that forward linkages to women's careers that does not come into conflict with the natural capacity and role for childbirth and child rearing, while also developing men's sense of domestic responsibility as a true partner in the family.

One of our primary goals as an educational institution is to ensure that we are protecting and sharing these values for the next generation as they face the onslaught of our new digital and online age. We believe that there are two primary kinds of education: 1) Education for Living. This is the conventional understanding of education that focuses on gaining employable skills for income generation. We also recognize the need for 2) Education for Life. These skills are essential for developing a strong and confident mind that is resilient in the face of obstacles and compassionate in the face of global challenges of poverty and suffering. To account for this second kind of education, Amrita University has introduced the Live in Labs programmes that take students into India's villages for multiple

weeks. While there, the students take part in sustainable development projects, but also form close relationships with the people whose lives are vastly different from their own. Such approaches can introduce a new perspective for what it means to travel for education and to be exposed to influential educational experiences. We typically celebrate the students who are awarded internships with international leaders in education like the Harvards, Oxfords, etc. There are clear benefits to such exposure to the world's most advanced institutions. We would like to introduce an additional form of exposure, to an arguably more real and life-altering institution: the Universities of life, into our own villages that form the heart of our nation. I believe this is a more sustainable and compassionate approach to education.

Any rectification of this problem will require the support and conversion of many members in a girl's family, along with a shift in corporate culture as well. To this end, we have introduced a series of Gender Sensitization Workshops to raise awareness of the negative consequences of gender inequality in education and the workplace. So far, we have designed two distinct versions of this programme, one for government service officers and another for university students and faculty. In both, the primary target for the workshop has been men and boys, with the understanding that the burden and responsibility of such a fundamental social change does not fall only on women and girls, but must involve everyone in the community. Working with men and boys also allows us to tackle issues of gender-based violence, mental health issues related to the burden of patriarchal norms, and the formation of communities of men who become champions of gender equality.

For the populations where girls and women are still not able to access education, whether through lack of family support or a general lack of infrastructure, the approach to gender equality in education has unique requirements. We have had great success in working with women's self-help groups, providing vocational training for economic development and life skills for personal empowerment. These self-help groups have become community leaders, able to leverage their influence and skills to introduce real, positive change in their villages and towns. These women have become advocates for their girls to pursue higher education and escape the generational discrimination they were born into. Such champions have been invaluable in our pursuit of gender equality in education.

Gender equality in higher education still a pending issue in Peru

By **Patricia Ruiz Bravo**, UNESCO Chair in Gender Equality in Higher Education Institutions, Pontifical Catholic University of Peru (Peru).

Gender inequality in HEIs is expressed at several levels:

- a. Access, student success, and graduation of men and women. On average, men conclude the careers in which they enroll. This inequality starts in basic education, in which there is greater female dropout in rural areas.
- b. In professional specialization areas, there is less participation of women in science-related careers (STEM). Gender stereotypes continue to determine the choices of women, who move away from science.
- c. In the current environment and the culture experienced in HEIs. Several studies have shown the open and subtle discrimination that threatens the academic success of women in higher education. There is a hostile climate against female teachers and students, which affects their academic success, and also their safety and confidence. Women are silenced because their opinions are not listened to, and their contributions are not recognized.
- d. Lower participation of female teachers in different levels of the academic career. Studies show that women are less represented in high rank, status, and recognition positions. There are also fewer women in research groups and in government positions. Power is not easily accessible for them and when they do get there, they face political harassment and cannot make the reforms they had planned.

These and other gaps are explained by the persistence of a patriarchal structure in universities and higher education institutions that is experienced through practices that contradict current equality regulations that are part of higher education institutions statutes.

According to my personal experience and the studies I have carried out as an academic, I see that despite the changes in discourses and norms, gender inequality persists and is recreated under new arguments and alternative modalities that cover up discrimination.

An interesting experience that colleagues from other universities and I have worked on relates to how, despite the regulations against sexual harassment in most higher education institutions, it continues, and punishing the culprits is very difficult. It is a legal chaos that ends up exonerating the accused people on grounds such as “due process”, “lack of evidence”, “expiration of the complaint”, etc. The fear of academic reprisals, social shame, and blaming make it difficult to find a solution. Sara Ahmed’s latest book, entitled “Complaint”, addresses this issue in detail and with a lot of evidence.

In the case of Peru and other countries in Latin America, it is necessary to point out how gender is intertwined with other forms of discrimination such as race and culture. Therefore, it is important to have a decolonial feminist approach that views critically all forms of domination and hegemony stemming from neoliberal thinking.

In the case of Peru, the situation described above is aggravated in the Quechua, Aymara, or Amazonian speaking areas. Women are often deprived of the right to higher education and even secondary education by their parents, relatives, and academic authorities. They are not encouraged to complete their studies and, on the contrary, they are discouraged from pursuing higher education because it is believed that their fate is motherhood and family.

In this regard, it is also important to note that, despite the above, a trend has been observed against this tradition. The girls' mothers insist that they should complete higher education studies so that they "do not suffer like them" and can make a change in their lives. Thus, this will have to be analyzed in future research. This trend has been observed in research on women who work in community kitchens or in agro-export. They state that they raise money to send their daughters to higher education institutions.

Finally, I must point out that there is no awareness about higher education as a right. Sometimes, it is seen more as a possibility that you cannot access if you do not have financial resources. There are a few public universities in the country, and they do not have enough resources to provide quality education throughout the nation.

Guiding principles

Considering the aspects briefly mentioned above, a key element in the case of Peru is that high quality universities and higher education institutions should guarantee that the training they provide meets international standards when granting professional and academic degrees.

In our country some mafias are disrupting the university reform and the institutions that

made sure that a minimum standard was met. Many universities should not be called that, and they are a scam. This must be reported and eliminated. Public universities must be revitalized and must have a proper budget to fulfill their role.

My second point has to do with the humanist and comprehensive education that is being lost due to the excessively high demand related to rankings and indexed journals, and the abandonment of an academic community that debates, educates citizens, and develops a critical spirit in them. Without this mission, that must be put back into the debate, universities become machines that produce individuals but do not generate a society or a community. Solidarity is lost and instead, competition and abandonment of those who "cannot" or do not measure up is exacerbated. All this undermines gender equality.

Finally, it is important to raise awareness of the right to higher education for all as well as gender equality as a principle of justice and democracy.

Gender equality in higher education: state of play and implications across OECD countries, and reflections on potential responses for policy and practice

By **François Staring**, Policy Analyst in the Higher Education Policy Team Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)¹.

Introduction

Tackling gender inequalities in education is a key priority for many OECD member and associate member countries. In the *Declaration on Building Equitable Societies through Education*, adopted on 8 December 2022, Ministers and representatives of 41 OECD member countries and associate countries and the European Union committed to “developing education systems that help every learner to reach their potential by promoting a diversity of learning pathways and innovative learning environments”. They also called upon the OECD to (among others) support countries to “develop effective strategies to promote gender equality and support vulnerable groups in education, including persons with disabilities” (OECD, 2022a, p. 5_[1]).

The OECD *Strength through Diversity: Education for Inclusive Societies* project, has developed an analytical framework for governing, resourcing, developing, promoting and monitoring diversity, equity and inclusion in school education systems. This identifies gender and gender identity and sexual orientation as two of six closely inter-related dimensions of diversity

which education systems should take into account (Cernie et al., 2022_[2]). At present, large differences in the performance of boys, girls, women and men, and gender stereotypes exist across levels of education, with deep social and economic implications for individuals and society (Brussino and McBrien, 2022, p. 14_[3]).

This briefing note reflects on key issues related to gender equality in higher education by zooming in on:

- The current state of play in terms of gender inequalities in higher education across OECD systems.
- The implications of gender inequalities in higher education, and the importance of addressing them.
- Potential responses for policy and practice to tackle gender inequalities in higher education.

State of play on gender inequalities in higher education across the OECD

This section sets out key trends on the state of gender equality in higher education across OECD systems, drawing primarily on data from

⁶ This briefing note was prepared by François Staring, Analyst in the Higher Education Policy Team of the Directorate for Education and Skills (EDU) of the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), ahead of the UNESCO expert consultation on the Right to Higher Education (Gender), taking place online on 27 January 2023. The views expressed in this contribution are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position of the OECD or its member countries.

the OECD's most recent *Education at a Glance* (OECD, 2022b_[4]).

Women are more likely than men to enter and complete higher education...

Over the last two decades, we have seen a sharp increase in the number of women entering higher education. Across the OECD, the average gender parity index stood at 1.3 in 2022, meaning that there are 1.3 enrolled women for every enrolled man. The only exceptions are Japan, Korea and Türkiye, where men still outnumber women in enrolment at tertiary level. In Estonia, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Slovenia and Sweden, women are at least 50% more likely than men to be enrolled in tertiary education (OECD, 2022b_[4]).

Women are also more likely than men to complete higher education. In 2011, there was a gap of 10 percentage points between the average tertiary educational attainment rate of 25-34-year-old males (33%) and females (43%) across the OECD. Ten years later, this gap has slightly widened, in favour of women. By 2021, the gender gap in tertiary education attainment between males (41%) and females (53%) had risen to 12 percentage points. Women are also more likely than men to complete their degree on time. Data on the completion rates of students aged 25-35 years old who entered a bachelor's programme (or equivalent) and completed any tertiary level of education shows that 44% of female entrants and 33% of male entrants completed their degree within the theoretical duration of the programme. The figure is similar after allowing three additional years, with 73% for women and 61% for men (OECD, 2022b_[4]).

... but they remain under-represented in STEM fields...

On average across OECD countries, women are still under-represented in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) fields. In 2020, 21% of new entrants to STEM short-cycle tertiary programmes were women, rising to 31% at bachelor's level, 38% at master's level, and 38% at doctoral level. There are large differences between countries, with the share of women in STEM ranging from 17% in Japan to 44% in Estonia. In contrast, women outnumber men in education, health and welfare fields, although this imbalance once again tends to decrease with each additional educational level. Women represent 79% of all new entrants on average in short-cycle degree programmes in health and welfare and 80% in education; at bachelor's level these figures are 79% and 77%; at master's level they are 72% and 77%; and 63% and 69% at doctoral level (OECD, 2022b_[4]).

... as well as doctoral education, research and leadership positions in higher education

Doctoral education is the only level of education where men seem to be doing slightly better than women. In 2020, 49% of new doctoral candidates were women. One of the potential reasons for the slightly higher number of male doctoral candidates is that there is a predominance of STEM-related fields of study at doctoral level (OECD, 2022b_[4]). Women are also under-represented among scientific authors. Results from the latest OECD International Survey of Scientific Authors (ISSA2) shows that, on average across OECD systems, women represented only 40% of all researchers in March 2021 – ranging from 23% in Luxembourg to 56% in Lithuania (OECD, 2021b_[5]). They are also less likely to be in leadership positions in research projects and higher education, and

only represent 30% of lead authors, which suggests that female researchers might have less opportunities than male researchers to advance their careers (OECD, 2023_[6]). In some systems, however, there are promising signs that things are improving for women. In Australia, for example, the number of women in academic leadership positions – that is, associate professor, professor or senior manager – has increased from 21.0% in 2001 to 41.2% in 2021 (Calderon, 2022_[7]).

The importance of tackling gender inequalities in higher education

This section describes some of the major social and economic implications of gender inequalities in higher education, and why it is important for higher education systems to respond.

Women continue to face serious challenges on the labour market ...

Despite having overtaken men in terms of entry and completion rates in higher education, women continue to face serious challenges on the labour market. Between 2000 and 2021, the labour force participation among women aged 25-64 years old, on average across OECD countries, increased only slightly from 59.2% to 64.8%. For men, this figure has remained constant at 80.9% in 2000, and 80.1% in 2021 (OECD, 2022c_[8]). Looking at employment rates by educational attainment among 25-34-year-olds, we see that just 43% of women with below upper secondary attainment are at work, compared to 69% of men. For women and men with tertiary attainment, these figures are 82% and 86% (OECD, 2022b_[4]). What this implies is that younger women with low educational attainment are a big contributor to low

employment rates across the OECD. Traditional views on gender roles among some populations with lower educational attainment likely mean that men with low educational attainment are more likely to take up low-skilled (and often manual) jobs, whilst women are more likely to take up family duties than their peers with higher levels of educational attainment.

The gender wage gap also still stands at 12% on average across all OECD countries in 2021 and dropped by only 2 percentage points compared with 2010 (OECD, 2022c_[8]). Gendered study choices in higher education, and the subsequent sorting of women in less-paid occupations, is one reason underlying this difference. Available evidence for 17 OECD countries shows that the combined STEM fields – in which males are overrepresented – are associated with the highest earnings (OECD, 2022b_[4]). However, “three-quarters of the wage gap is concentrated within firms”, which means that tackling gender segregation in study field and occupational choices alone will not solve this problem (OECD, 2022c, p. 212_[8]).

... but men are also facing social and economic inequalities

The advantages males have traditionally enjoyed on the labour market in comparison to females appears to have led to a proportion of boys and young men attaching less importance to education than girls and young women since they think they will be preferred over girls on the labour market anyway (Staring et al., 2021, p. 60_[9]). However, digitalisation, automation and the green transition are bringing rapid changes to the skills needed by the economy. These changes are decreasing the demand for low skilled and manual occupations traditionally dominated by men. These changes will require *all* citizens to upskill and reskill, which presents

serious challenges for a large sub-group of men with low levels of education who do struggle on the labour market, and are less likely than females to engage in lifelong learning (Staring et al., 2021, p. 165_[9]).

In addition to economic challenges, men with lower level of educational attainment also face a wide range of social, health and wellbeing challenges – which, in turn, come at a high cost for society as a whole, and women in particular. The OECD's *Health at a Glance* identifies a clear link between educational attainment and life expectancy across all OECD countries (OECD, 2021a, p. 82_[10]):

On average across all OECD countries, a 30yearold with less than an upper secondary education level can expect to live for 5.2 fewer years than a 30yearold with tertiary education (a university degree or equivalent). These differences are higher among men, with an average gap of 6.5 years, compared with an average gap of 3.9 years among women.

Another reason why lower educated males have a lower life expectancy than females is that they are more likely than females to be exposed to a variety of risk factors. They are more likely to be exposed to “greater tobacco use, excessive alcohol consumption and less healthy diets – resulting in more deaths from heart diseases, cancer and other diseases” (OECD, 2021a, p. 82_[10]). This is especially the case in central and eastern European countries, where large differences in life expectancy exist between males and females (for example, over 9 years in Lithuania and Latvia, 8.5 years in Estonia, and 7.8 years in Poland). They are also more likely to commit suicide, violent crimes and serve prison time. The “school-to-prison” pipeline for young males coming from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds is a well-known national

trend in the United States, and this causes “great suffering to victims and their families, but the costs associated with imprisonment can also be considerable” (OECD, 2016, p. 132_[11]). Finally, there is some evidence that correlates lower levels of educational attainment among men with a higher likelihood to join extremist movements and commit violence against women (Staring et al., 2021, pp. 146-149_[9]).

Tackle gender inequalities in higher education through policy and practice

The trends in the previous sections show that men and women exhibit gendered behaviour in relation to their tertiary education choices, both in terms of participation (higher for women) and study field choices (STEM fields dominated by men). These decisions have a wide range of social and economic implications, for both men and women. At the heart of any response from policymakers or higher education practitioners should therefore be the shared ambition to tackle gender stereotypes – this includes both norms of masculinity and femininity – across all layers of education and society.

Attract more men to HEAL, in addition to increasing women in STEM

Within higher education, responses from policymakers and practitioners to tackle gender stereotypes in higher education have primarily focused on attracting more females into STEM fields, and there are good reasons to do so. There are skills shortages in STEM in almost all OECD economies, in part due to a substantial under-representation of women. This has led many governments and institutions to set up campaigns to attract more women to STEM (OECD, 2017_[12]), and in some cases even provide them with financial support (Martin,

2021^[13]). However, in order to achieve gender equality in higher education, more action is needed to attract males to health, education, administration and literacy (HEAL) fields as well, which is a much less common (or popular) area of focus for governments and institutions (Reeves, 2022^[14]).

Strengthen the role of higher education in supporting schools to tackle gender stereotypes

By the time secondary school students reach higher education and make their study choice, in most cases “the damage is already done” and it is very difficult for higher education institutions to influence the highly gendered study choices of applicants. There is evidence showing that the gender gap starts as early as in early childhood education and care, and that “overall education systems are not successfully countering these early gaps, and indeed ‘allow’ them to widen over time” (Staring et al., 2021, p. 161^[9]). By the time students reach compulsory education, differences in attainment can already be observed (for example, boys are more likely than girls to repeat grades), and in secondary education these differences widen even more (for example, girls are largely under-represented in more vocationally oriented study fields, and PISA 2018 data shows that girls are starting to perform better than boys in almost all OECD countries, especially in reading) (OECD, n.d.^[15]). Gender stereotypes in the family sphere also have an important influence on students’ educational choices and success, with evidence showing that parents are more likely to expect boys to work in STEM, and girls to work in caring or teaching professions (Staring et al., 2021, p. 74^[9]).

In addition to awareness-raising campaigns on gender stereotyping targeting families,

training teachers on gender neutral teaching approaches, as well as tackling gender stereotypes in textbooks and supporting boys with key challenges they face to succeed at school (e.g. bullying) (Staring et al., 2021, pp. 84-109^[9]), higher education institutions can play a more active role in supporting schools to tackle gender stereotypes. The European Children’s Universities Network, for example, brings together higher education institutions across Europe that are engaged in collaboration with schools (EUCUNET, n.d.^[16]). The activities organised by these institutions include science communication, informing secondary school students on study and career opportunities, and training schoolteachers to enhance the teaching quality.

Strengthening links between higher and vocational education and training

In addition to increasing collaboration between higher education and upper secondary education, we see the emergence of unified tertiary education sectors in some OECD jurisdictions. The Government of Wales, for example, recently announced its intention is to establish a Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER) in 2023, which will be responsible for the strategy, funding and oversight of the further education, higher education, adult education and apprenticeship sectors (Government of Wales, 2022^[17]). In Ireland, too, Minister Harris announced plans to develop a “unified tertiary sector” (HEA, 2022^[18]). Structural reforms such as these have the potential of improve the permeability and transitions between different levels of education and could be used by higher education to attract more males from the VET sector into (professionally oriented) higher education.

Embedding a gender dimension in quality assurance of higher education

In addition to supporting teaching quality in schools, higher education institutions themselves still have a long way to go in increasing the quality of academic instruction. While women are more likely than men to complete tertiary education, there is a wider issue of high first year drop-out and long time-to-completion rates in many higher education systems across the OECD, especially in systems with highly flexible and open enrolment systems (OECD, 2021_[19]). The recent COVID-19 pandemic has also focused attention on teaching quality in higher education and prompted HEIs and public authorities to reflect on how to adapt their internal and external quality assurance systems to improve study success and learning outcomes (Staring et al., 2022_[20]).

- Looking at internal quality assurance systems of HEIs, we see a slow emergence of mainstreaming gender equality in institutional strategies. National and international initiatives such as the Gender Equality Plan eligibility criterion in Horizon Europe play an important role in incentivising HEIs to do so (European Commission, 2022_[21]). Another trend is the emergence of institutionally-based staff professional development centres,⁷ which seek to improve and professionalise the teaching practice of academics (Chalmers and Gardiner, 2015_[22]), (Parsons et al., 2012_[23]). In some institutions, specific training on gender equality, diversity and inclusion is offered to instructors (University of Exeter, 2023_[24]). The pandemic has also led many institutions to support students more actively with the challenges

they face in digital learning – including mental health. Reflections are needed on how staff working in student support units can increase their awareness of the specific challenges facing males and females in higher education.

- Looking at trends in the organisation of the external (and formal) quality assurance of higher education providers and their programmes, we see a trend towards institutional (self-)accreditation and institutions taking greater responsibility for assuring the quality of their own study programmes. This has prompted governments and QA agencies in some systems to set up dedicated structures for the quality enhancement of teaching and learning in higher education. For example, in some European countries (e.g. Germany, Ireland, Norway and the United Kingdom) dedicated national centres for the quality enhancement of teaching and learning have been set up (Zhang, 2022_[25]). These centres could be particularly well-placed to take on a more active role in supporting institutions with the mainstreaming of gender equality across institutions, and in particular training academic on key issues such as gender bias in teaching and assessment.

Funding and mainstreaming of gender equality in education, research and innovation

Finally, higher education institutions could be supported to play a greater role in promoting gender equality in society through education, research and innovation. By doing so, they can help to reshape traditional norms of masculinity and femininity which permeate all

7 Such centres exist, for example, in Ghent University, the University of Helsinki, Université Grenoble Alps, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, RWTH Aachen University, University of Hamburg, Delft University of Technology, Leiden University, Utrecht University, Universidad Autonoma de Madrid.

layers of society and are at the core of gender inequalities in (higher) education). Governments and international organisations can support higher education institutions to develop degree programmes or micro-credentials (to support the upskilling and reskilling of the labour force) on gender equality and inclusion-related topics, as well as funded to monitor, evaluate and disseminate trends on key issues related to gender equality in society (including violence against women, the underperformance and implications of the underperformance of boys and young men in education). GENDER-NET Plus is an example of an international network of 13 countries,⁸ funded by the European Commission, dedicated to establishing collaborations and jointly funding gender equality in research institutions, and in mainstreaming gender equality in research and innovation (GENDER-NET, 2023_[26]).

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The right to higher education

Regional and thematic consultations

These compendiums present the briefing notes shared by participants in a series of regional and thematic consultations on the right to higher education. As an integral component of the evolving right to lifelong education, the right to higher education incorporates access to higher education, participation and student success, and students' post-higher education trajectories.

As the only specialist institute of the United Nations with a mandate for higher education improvement, the UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC) considers it vital to place discussions about the right to higher education on the international agenda and to advocate for policy and regulatory change that leads to higher education for all.



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