

Gender Equality Essentials #1



Girls' education

Key numbers

Despite real progress in the last decades, there is still a long way to go ensure equality between girls and boys in terms of education.



Worldwide, **122 million girls** are out of school.¹



With 826 million girls aged 6–18 worldwide, **one girl out of seven** does not go to school.



If the situation were the same in Belgium as it is globally, that would mean **120,600 Belgian girls** would be out of school.



15 million primary-age girls will never get the chance to learn to read or write compared to 10 million boys.²



Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for close to 30% of all out-of-school children globally. **1 out of 5** African children do not attend school (19.7%). Only half of children attend upper secondary school.³



Girls still are marginalised in school in many low-income countries: fewer than two out of three girls complete their primary education and only one out of three girls completes secondary school.⁴



Each year, **12 million girls** under the age of 18 are married, which jeopardises their education.⁵



One third of all out-of-school primary-age children have a **disability**.⁶



On the institutional and legislative level, only 54% of countries have ratified the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education.



At the primary and secondary level, the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), “Quality Education,” recommends **12 years of free education**, but only 33% of countries fully guarantee this, and 20% of countries do not guarantee free education in their legislation at all.

What drives school dropout?⁷

Everywhere in the world, every single day, girls experience violence and discrimination in all their forms. They are disproportionately affected by armed conflicts and climate change. Their rights are violated with impunity, due to a system of gender norms that undervalue them and justify the violence they experience.

Gender inequality also affects the way girls access education opportunities. They face multiple forms of discrimination that push them out and keep them out of school.

When gender and age intersect with other identities, such as disability, class, ethnicity, location, migration status, and religion, for example, girls are impacted differently.

In addition to facing discrimination based on gender, age, and other identities, girls also face barriers like poverty and the lack of support systems to help during tough times. Poor quality of education infrastructure and services further prevent them from staying in school.

Harmful gender norms and attitudes limit girls' educational opportunities. Girls' education is less valued, and they are assigned the majority of domestic work. When they are in school, they are pushed out by many factors, including the legitimisation of school related gender-based violence.

- **Harmful gender norms constrain girls' and women's role to the domestic sphere – they are expected to become wives and mothers primarily**, which can lead to education not being prioritised by parents, caregivers, or girls themselves, when resources are scarce. Instead, learning how to be a good housekeeper and getting married are prioritised because being attached to the domestic sphere is the main social expectation for girls and young women, which can lead to school dropout.
- **Harmful gender norms and boys' attitudes towards girls** tend to justify, normalise, and minimise the impact of boys' and men's sexual harassment and assault against girls and women. This can lead to parents' reluctance to send their daughters to school because they fear for their safety, and believe it poses threats to their reputation and honour. Violence can also lead to girls' dropping out of schools after incidents of harassment or assault because of the psychological (e.g., fear, depression, loss of self-confidence) or physical (e.g., injury, pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and infections) consequences of violence.

Poverty is a major barrier to girls' education. Families living in poverty and with limited support systems (social protection) can perceive school dropout as the only way, or a good solution, to deal with financial difficulties.

- **Lack of financial resources** within the family, especially during crises (e.g., climate induced disasters, epidemics, conflicts, economic crisis), means that parents cannot afford the costs of education, as well as the potential income loss from no child labour. **One adolescent girl in three from the poorest households around the world has never set a foot in a classroom.**⁸
- **Perceived returns on investments:** Because of low quality education, high rates of youth unemployment, and low participation in the labour market, families perceive the benefits of education as minimal, which discourages them from keeping girls in school.

Child marriage and teenage pregnancies are drivers of and consequences to school dropout. Child marriage is associated with fewer girls staying in secondary school.

- **Child marriage is both a cause and consequence of school dropout.** Girls may drop out of school to get married because girls' education is less valued by communities and families. Girls are expected, rather, to gain lifelong security through marriage. Equally, **girls out of school are more at risk of child marriage as they have few economic opportunities without education.** In addition, once married or in union, the likelihood that they go back to school is low because of competing domestic chores and childcare. Each year, 12 million girls under 18 years old are married,⁹ thus jeopardising their education.
- **Early or adolescent pregnancies** are also linked to girls dropping out of school and constitute an important obstacle to girls' education. Globally, in 2022, an estimated 13 percent of adolescent girls and young women gave birth before age 18, which can put an end to their education.¹⁰ While trends vary across regions, early marriage and childbirth is positively associated with dropout which, in turn, negatively impacts economic opportunities of young girls.¹¹

Poor investment in education infrastructure and services exclude girls from quality education as their needs are not met

- **Insufficient education infrastructure** translates into a lack of school capacity to provide girls with an adequate and inclusive learning environment. Schools should be safely accessible to all children (distance, safe transport, disability access) and toilets should be adapted to girls' needs (privacy, safety, equipment for menstrual hygiene management). There should also be enough classrooms, teachers, and equipment for all children.
- **Poor quality of education services:** In some contexts, schools do not have qualified teachers, and even if teachers are qualified, they may not have been trained and supported to respond to the diverse needs of students (gender, disability, ethnic diversity) to encourage them to participate and think critically and to diagnose and respond to difficulties. Low quality education can lead to increased rates of failure, repetition, and dropout among children. This might discourage school attendance as parents' and caregivers' perceptions of school quality discourage them from keeping girls at school. Inadequate salaries can also fail to attract competent teachers, or budget limitations prevent teachers from being paid altogether. These factors negatively affect teacher motivation and teaching practices.

Although girls' education is strongly backed by universal access to education in laws and policy worldwide, important gaps remain in the **enforcement** of these laws and policies.

- **Gaps in policies and poor enforcement of laws and policies contribute to school dropout rates for girls by failing to ensure that education is free** for all children and that schools are safe, inclusive, and provide quality services. The gaps in legislations that protect girls' reproductive health rights, protect girls against child marriage and gender-based violence, and the absence of legislation providing economic support for low-income families impact school dropout rates for girls by failing to provide adequate protections and support.
- **A number of countries also ban pregnant girls and adolescent mothers from accessing school**, creating a legal barrier for some of the most marginalised and excluded girls in the world.

Consequences on girls' and women's rights



The lack of access for girls to education is a **violation of one of their human rights**, as recognised by the Convention on the Rights of Children. In addition, school dropout is strongly correlated with the violation of many other rights, and increases the vulnerability and exclusion of girls:

- Dropping out of school is sometimes caused by child marriage or early pregnancy, but **child marriage or early pregnancy** can also be a consequence of school dropout. Keeping girls in schools is one of the most effective ways of delaying marriage and pregnancies for adolescents.
- Illiteracy or limited education can lead to **low earnings in adulthood** and difficulty to access decent and sustainable income.
- Education is an important tool for strengthening girls' and adolescent girls' **agency and self-esteem**, which helps empower them to make decisions about their own lives as well as within their families and communities. Therefore, lack of access to education is a missed opportunity to contribute to gender equality.



Girls' education in emergencies

Armed conflicts, climate-induced disasters and protracted crises put additional pressure on girls' fundamental right to education and exacerbate existing disparities in access to quality education and skills training for girls and women. In emergencies, girls are often at a higher risk of dropping out of school than boys. **Girls in crisis-affected countries are nearly 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than those living in countries not in crisis**, all in all, an estimated 39 million girls and adolescent girls in countries affected by armed conflict or natural disasters lack access to quality education. **Among them, refugee girls are half as likely to be in school compared to refugee boys**¹². During crises, the risk of early marriage, early childbearing, and family expectations for domestic labour also increases for girls, which in turns pushes them out of school. In armed conflicts, schools may be closed, attacked or even used by conflict parties, despite international humanitarian law protection.

In the coming decades, climate change will be the greatest threat to girls' education: currently, **4 million girls have dropped out of school because of the consequences of climate change**¹³. School facilities can be destroyed by extreme weather and close due to water scarcity, food insecurity, and movement of the population, effectively preventing children from attending school.

Without school, girls lose both educational opportunities and the protection schools provide against domestic violence, early and forced marriages, and early pregnancies. **Keeping children in school saves lives**. Faced with instability, education provides children and girls in particular, the chance to acquire knowledge and skills and also offers them protection, a sense of normalcy, and supports their well-being and overall development.

Common misconceptions

Misconception 1: “The only/main reason why girls don’t go to school is because they are considered inferior to boys.”

Harmful gender norms are an important factor that contributes to the lack of access to education for girls, but it is not the only one at stake. It is a myriad of factors that contribute to school dropout. Socio-economic factors and the lack of adequate policies and infrastructure interact with gender discrimination to create an unfavourable environment for girls’ education. It is the combination of all these factors that create difficult barriers for girls to stay in school.

Misconception 2: “The main barrier to girls’ education is parents’ lack of awareness and willingness to educate them.”

Parents and caregivers living in poverty, and in places where there is a lack of essential services and social protection, often have the best interest of their child at heart. The realities of those families are complex, as they are facing many constraints (infrastructure, lack of resources, social and gender expectations at the community level)

that shape the decisions they make about their children. Therefore, it is important not to oversimplify explanations about why parents and caregivers make decisions that lead to harmful practices. By conducting a contextual analysis, it becomes possible to understand the factors hindering parents and caregivers from sending their girls to school and effectively address those factors.

Misconception 3: “We should invest in girls’ education because it’s good for the economy.”

The main reason that we work on girls’ education as an NGO is because it is a fundamental human right, and one of the most important steps towards girls’ empowerment and full realisation of all their rights. The economic benefits that can be derived from girls’ education are positive by-products (economic empowerment of girls, prosperity of societies allowing them to invest in key areas and protect girls’ rights), but they should not be presented as the only/main reason for working on access to education.



Plan International's response

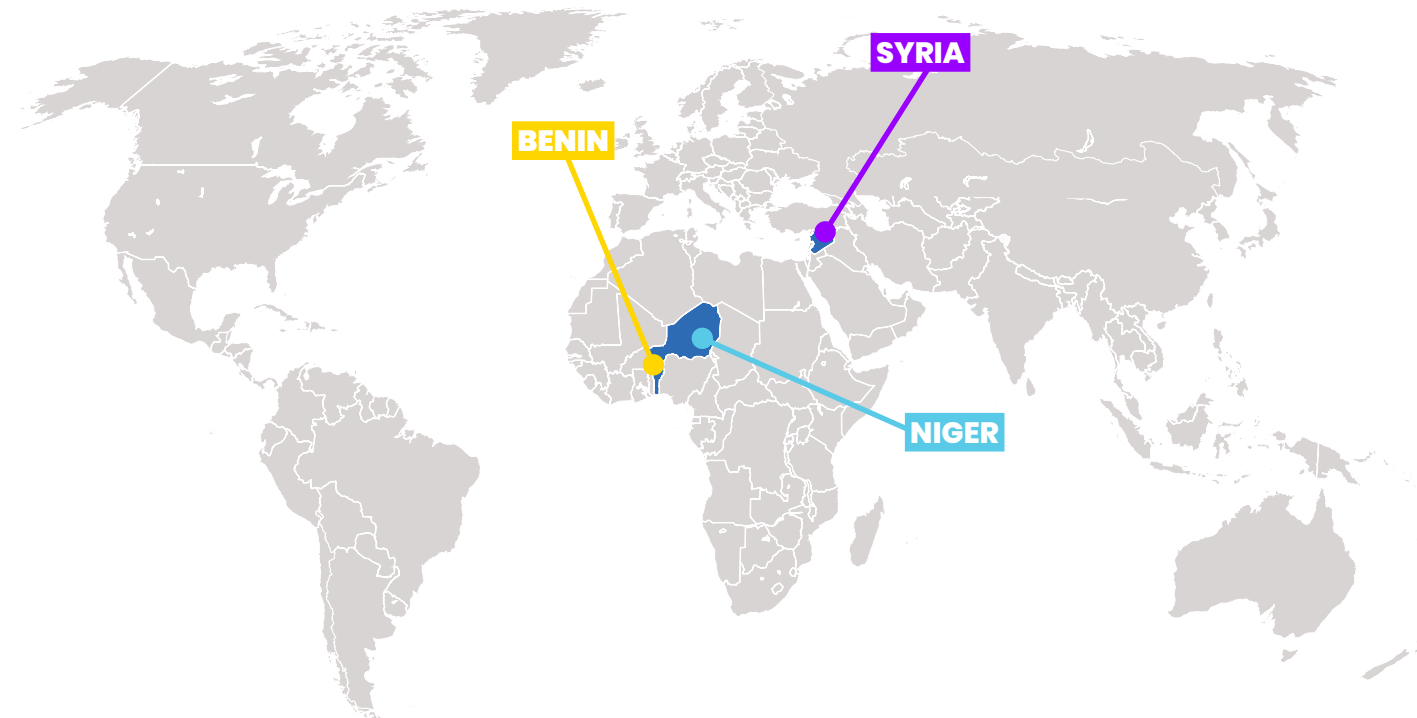


Plan International relies on **gender-transformative, rights-based, empowering approaches** to ensure girls' right to education is realised. Programmatic strategies that rely on integrated approaches and aim at working at all levels (girls, adolescent girls and the duty-bearers, such as parents, teachers, community members, and institutions) are promising to promote inclusive, quality education. Our inclusive quality education projects typically work on different levels:

- **Raising awareness** among parents, caregivers, community members, and leaders, as well as the girls themselves about the importance of education and gender equality.
- **Alleviating the financial barriers** to girls' education, for example by distributing school supplies and menstrual hygiene management kits to girls (in-kind or via vouchers), and work with families, communities, and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to develop and support social protection schemes and mechanisms, and financial support for vulnerable families.
- **Preventing violence against girls on the way to schools**, for example by working with villages to provide transportation for children to schools and by working with schools, local authorities, and police to promote safety for girls on their way to school. More generally, by promoting protective environments in all communities we work with.
- **Preventing violence and harassment in schools**, for example by working with and training teachers and school staff to eliminate physical punishment and protect girls from harassment and violence in schools, by developing safety guidelines, and anti-sexual harassment policies.
- **Ensuring that school infrastructures are qualitative, sustainable, and inclusive**, for example by equipping schools with teaching materials and equipment, building classrooms that are inclusive and accessible, building toilets for girls and boys, and setting up mobile education units in emergency contexts.
- **Improving quality of education**, working with the relevant authorities to ensure that school curricula is gender-responsive¹⁴ and training teachers to strengthen their skills.
- **Raising awareness** on the effects of climate change and developing schools' capacities for planning, adaptation, and protection, so that children and adolescents have the necessary knowledge and skills to protect themselves.
- **Influencing policy change**, by advocating and working with decision-makers to prioritise and increase strategic investment in inclusive, safe, equitable, quality education.

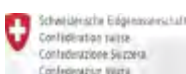
Concrete examples

Through its programmes across the world, Plan International Belgium promotes inclusive quality education and helps alleviate barriers that prevent the most vulnerable and excluded children, particularly girls, from accessing and completing education. **Three illustrative programmes** that promote an inclusive, quality education for girls are:



Support for Governance & Relay Initiatives for Quality Education (AGIR)

The **5-year AGIR project** in **Benin** has been working to improve the quality of education and to develop an inclusive, non-discriminatory educational environment for 34,000 pupils including 17,000 girls in 170 schools in the Atlantic and Atacora departments. The project involved parents, elected representatives and civil society organisations working in the education sector and carried out various awareness-raising and advocacy actions were also carried out, addressing themes such as school safety and HIV/AIDS. For example, schoolgirls received training on the monthly cycle, school kits were distributed to learners, and classrooms, latrine blocks, and drinking water points were built or rehabilitated.



Local partners

Action Education and Dedras

Economic empowerment & social emancipation of adolescents & young people (10–24 years old)

In the Maradi and Dosso regions of **Niger**, Plan International Belgium and Plan International Niger, along with local partners, are working on a **4-year project** to ensure that 11,500 adolescent girls and young women, and 9,000 adolescent boys and young men, become economically and socially autonomous. To achieve this, access to inclusive and quality education is key. The project strengthened girls' access to inclusive, quality education through vocational training and savings and credit associations and study grants which have been awarded to 150 girls - 75 in Dosso and 75 in Maradi.



Local partners

Alternative Espaces Citoyens (AEC), ANTD, ASO-EPT

Syria Earthquake Response

The major earthquakes that struck Turkey and northern **Syria** on February 6, 2023, exacerbated existing vulnerabilities linked to the region's protracted conflict. Strengthening the educational capacities of teachers and educational staff is part of the **2-year emergency services** provided by Plan International. Non-formal education was also provided to 480 children, equally divided between girls and boys, through remedial classes or self-study programmes.



Local partners

INTERSOS, ADRA

For more on Plan International Belgium's intervention, see our Annual Report 2022–2023 in [Dutch](#) and [French](#).

Key terms

- **Out-of-school children and youth:** Children in the official primary school age range who are not enrolled in either primary or secondary schools are known as out-of-school children.
- **Drop-out:** A pupil who has enrolled at the beginning of the school year and left before the end of the school year, and was not enrolled elsewhere. A student who leaves school definitively in a given school year. This definition may vary by country or state/region.
- **Literacy rate:** The total number of literate persons in a given age group, expressed as a percentage of the total population in that age group.
- **School-related gender-based violence:** Explicit acts or threats of physical, emotional, and sexual violence occurring in and around schools perpetuated as a result of unequal gender norms and power dynamics. It includes bullying, corporal punishment, verbal or sexual harassment, non consensual touching, sexual coercion, assault, rape. Male and female teachers and students can be both victims and perpetrators, but women and girls tend to be more affected due to unequal power relations that are at the source of gender inequalities.

References

- ¹ Global Education Monitoring Report and Unesco Institute for Statistics (GEM-UIS Database), 2023: [Out-of-school children](#)
- ² ibid
- ³ ibid
- ⁴ Worldbank. [Missed Opportunities, the High Cost of Not Educating Girls. World Bank Open Knowledge Repository](#)
- ⁵ Global Partnership. [Girls' education: the path to progress](#)
- ⁶ Plan International. [Overview: Inclusive Quality Education](#)
- ⁷ In this section, we provide an overview of the main reasons why girls drop out of school around the world. However, it is important to keep in mind that these reasons vary depending on the context.
- ⁸ Unicef, [1 in 3 adolescent girls from the poorest households has never been to school](#)
- ⁹ UNFPA, ["Cost of ending child marriage", Transformative Result: ending GbV and all harmful practices](#)
- ¹⁰ Unicef. [Early childbearing and teenage pregnancy rates by country](#)
- ¹¹ M. Delprano and A. Frola, ["Zones of Educational exclusion", International Journal of Educational Development](#)
- ¹² Plan International. [On International Day of Education, we must prioritize girls in crisis](#)
- ¹³ Plan International Belgium. [Les filles à l'avant-garde de l'action climatique](#)
- ¹⁴ Gender-responsive education policies aim to address and remove barriers to equal participation for girls and boys in schools. These policies ensure fair access to opportunities and promote equality and eliminate gender-based discrimination within the educational system. For more on gender-responsive education see UNICEF's [Gender responsive education: toolkit for teachers, teacher educators, school manager and curriculum developers in Africa](#)

About Plan International Belgium

Plan International Belgium is an independent humanitarian and development organisation founded in 1983, which defends children's rights and the equality of girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child. But this potential is often stifled by poverty, violence, exclusion, and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected. Working with children, young people, our supporters, and our partners, we strive to create a just world by tackling the root causes of the problems faced by girls and all vulnerable children. In more than 80 countries, we defend girls' rights from birth to adulthood. So that every girl can feel safe. So that she can tell the world who she is and what she wants. So that she can fulfil her dreams. So that every girl can be free.

About Gender Equality Essentials

Gender Equality Essentials are a collection of concise, informative guides designed to shed light on the critical issues impacting girls' rights and gender equality globally. Each guide provides an overview of a specific theme, ranging from girls' education and child marriage to girls' leadership and beyond. By providing these resources, we aim to empower peers, advocates, policymakers, and our broad community with the knowledge and tools necessary to drive meaningful change. Until every girl is free.

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