

Addressing social norms and gender in support of equity in education



About this brief

This brief discusses the influence of social and gender norms on education, with particular focus on equity. It summarizes findings of relevant research and offers policy and programmatic recommendations to address challenges and inequities in education that stem from harmful social and gender norms.

Background

Although gender parity has been attained in some countries at primary level, gender parity in secondary and tertiary education is still a huge challenge, with girls usually at a disadvantage. Only in some middle- and higher-income countries do boys tend to have a higher school drop-out rate than girls. Overall, even if girls complete their education, they still tend to have poorer learning outcomes than boys, particularly if they have a disability or are from a marginalized family or community.

Poor educational opportunities not only deny girls one of their basic rights; their community and nation also remain undeveloped. UNICEF's Gender Action Plan (2014–2017) highlights that girls' education "can be a powerful transformative force, for girls themselves and for entire societies". It explains that girls' education, especially at secondary level, "is a consistent factor that can positively influence not only girls' lives, but practically every desired development outcome: from reducing child and maternal mortality, to ending poverty and achieving equitable growth, and changing social norms".

Social and gender norms matter in achieving gender equity in education. They can provide educational opportunities but also put up barriers. Far too often they act as barriers to girls, limiting and de-valuing girls and their contributions and setting them on the path to a lifetime of deprivation (UNICEF Gender Action Plan, 2014–2017).

Conceptual approach

Social norms

Social norms are rules or expectations of behaviour in a cultural or social group. They are widely observed patterns of behaviour to which individuals conform. They are dynamic and can change over time, with new norms emerging to replace old ones.

While many norms are generally supportive of well-being and development, others may be oppressive or even harmful to some community members, or only beneficial to certain members. Social norms persist because of social approval when they are followed or disapproval when they are violated.

Gender and equity

The following are definitions of the key concepts of gender, gender identity, gender norms and gender equity:

Gender is a term that refers to social or cultural distinctions associated with being male or female. It is widely recognized as the most fundamental cultural frame for organizing social relations, going beyond biological differences between men and women.

Gender identity is the personal and social construction of male and female identity.

Gender norms are socially learnt roles and responsibilities assigned to both sexes in a given culture along with the societal structures that support these roles.

Gender equity refers to fairness in relations between girls and boys, and women and men, leading to a situation in which each has equal status, rights, levels of responsibility and access to power and resources.

By looking at all these concepts, we can analyze the state of education regarding access and equity in relation to social and gender norms. In doing so, we can identify the support needed in order to shift social and gender norms and reach gender equality in education.

According to the World Education Forum Declaration (2015), the equity principle requires “necessary changes in education policies” and a focus “on the most disadvantaged, especially those with disabilities, to ensure that no one is left behind”. Thus, in this brief, we examine equality in education, specifically fairness and inclusion in education policy, provision and outcomes.

A social norms evidence-based approach to equity in education

In 2014, in a multi-country study on social norms and education conducted in Uganda, Nepal, Ethiopia and Vietnam, researchers found that social norms play a significant role in influencing educational opportunities. Girls in all countries continued to drop out of school due to early marriage or pregnancy, lack of accessible secondary schools, or because of parental reluctance to invest in higher education for girls (Watson, 2014).



In Uganda, Vietnam and Nepal, the study found that communities remained unconvinced that an educated girl makes a better marriage partner. In Ethiopia, differences in household responsibilities allocated to boys and girls contributed to disparities in their school enrolment.¹ In Kenya, several overlapping values, norms and practices acted as barriers to education, including different costs and benefits associated with educating girls, cultural beliefs, traditional gender-based division of labour and gender-based violence (GBV).² Violence, including violence in schools, has a detrimental impact on both girls and boys, staff and parents, whether they are survivors or perpetrators.

Recent guidance on addressing social norms in education, including gender, highlights that harmful social norms are present in both demand for education and its provision. On the demand side, harmful social norms interact with other socio-economic and cultural factors in reinforcing the social exclusion of some children, especially girls. They also prevent communities from fully participating in efforts toward education equity. On the supply side, misconceptions and prejudices held by policy makers, development practitioners, educators and teachers can undermine efforts to build holistic, inclusive and child-friendly schools that serve the best interests of every child.



1 Outhred, R., Ismail, L., Stubberfield, C., Nugroho, D., & Beavis, A. (2013). Review on social norms and equity in education: Country Case Studies. UNICEF.

2 Ibid.

Taking a social norms approach to equity in education requires an understanding of the two-way relationship between norms and equity. On the one hand, as discussed, social norms can be a barrier to equity in education. On the other hand, access to equitable education can assist in changing social norms, particularly gender norms.

The social norms approach works in two ways. Firstly, it involves a process of identifying and understanding social norms. This is followed by a process of engaging with communities to change or replace harmful norms.

During the first process, people's beliefs about girls' education need to be identified. These beliefs can explain preferences relating to girls' education. During the second stage of the process, there is a need to identify the referents (key people) whose expectations matter to an individual. For example, a teenage girl's parents, siblings, classmates and friends may be influential in her decision to quit or stay in school.

On the whole, research findings on influencing social norms have been encouraging. Studies (for example Bicchieri, 2006) have documented the processes involved in social norms change that show how collective agency (where people act together) can change expectations of individuals and the community as a whole.

Studies have also shown that a relationship exists between increased levels of female education and gender equality (e.g. Malhotra et al., 2003). Moreover, a study on pastoralists in northern Kenya noted changed attitudes among educated girls, particularly in relation to sexuality and early marriage (Lesogorol, 2008). However, it is unclear how much education can challenge or contribute to changing gender norms, particularly in areas where the quality of education is poor and gender inequalities are entrenched.

What works: a summary of the evidence

Retention of girls in school: Girls' secondary education is more consistently and strongly associated with increased decision-making (Malhotra et al., 2003).

Increasing access to communication can lead to changes in gender norms: Plan International (2010) found that providing girls with access to information communication technologies (ICTs) and mass media shifted their attitudes on gender norms.

Communication and actions relevant to social norms change both in and outside formal learning institutions: Marcus et al. (2014) note that schools can help create young people's gendered identities. When schools practice gender quality, like ensuring female representation in school leadership and administration, or in teaching traditionally male-stereotyped subjects (such as science and physical education) to girls and boys, they can build more positive gendered expectations. They also point out that teachers need to be trained in gender issues and should commit to using non-sexist teaching materials to avoid upholding traditional norms of masculinity and femininity in the classroom. At the same time, informal education and community engagement can play an important role in shifting social and gender norms so that both girls and boys have an equal opportunity to develop to their full potential.

Multi-level interventions targeting girls and their referents are effective: In order to change social norms, individuals and their referents should be targeted with messages and actions to support girls' education.

Recommendations for action

1. Efforts to address social norms on the demand side, for example through communicative processes, must be complemented by efforts to rectify supply side constraints to equitable and inclusive education.
2. Continued investments in education for all is essential, including investments in the quality of education.
3. Continued support is needed for policy approaches that encourage gender equality in education. Gender-based violence in schools must also be addressed.
4. Meaningful participation of communities is essential to shift norms towards gender equality. This means engaging with local leaders and identifying positive role models who can influence acceptance of new or changed norms.

References

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