

Girls' right to education

The 1990 World Conference on Education for All, held in Jomtien, Thailand, made it clear that Education for All means educating both boys and girls and that treating both sexes equally – and in the process narrowing the “gender gap” – is a matter of justice and equality. Jomtien marked the beginning of intensified international support for assuring access to quality education for girls, a cause that was reaffirmed ten years later at the World Education Forum in Dakar and by the Millennium Development Goals of 2000.

Traditionally, all societies have given preference to males over females when it comes to educational opportunity, and disparities in educational attainment and literacy rates today reflect patterns which have been shaped by the social and education policies and practices of the past. As a result, virtually all countries face gender disparities of some sort. Given the strong correlations that exist between GDP and educational attainment, all countries have incentives to make the best possible use of all of their human resources.

In discussing education and gender it is helpful to distinguish between “gender parity” and “gender equality”.

Gender parity aims at achieving equal participation for girls and boys in education.

Gender equality is understood more broadly as the right to gain access and participate in education, as well as to benefit from gender-sensitive and gender-responsive educational environments and to obtain meaningful education outcomes that ensure that education benefits translate into greater participation in social, economic and political development of their societies. Achieving gender parity is therefore understood as only a first step towards gender equality.

Discussions of gender differences in education are facilitated by a measure known as the Gender Parity Index (GPI). This measure is defined as the value of a given indicator for girls divided by that value for boys. A GPI value of 1 signifies that there is no difference in the indicators for girls and boys. A GPI of less than 1 indicates that the value of an indicator is higher for boys than for girls, while the opposite is true when the GPI is greater than 1.

For indicators where higher values are desirable (e.g. school participation rates) a GPI value of less than 1 means that girls are at a disadvantage, while a GPI

greater than 1 means that boys are at a disadvantage. For indicators where lower values are desirable (e.g. drop-out rates) a GPI of less than 1 means that boys are at a disadvantage, and a GPI greater than 1 means that girls are at a disadvantage.

UNESCO has defined a GPI value between 0.97 and 1.03 (after rounding) as the achievement of gender parity. This allows for some measurement error but does not imply a judgment about the acceptability of any particular level of disparity.

Discussions about gender equity have traditionally focused on finding ways to help girls catch up with boys in terms of access, completion and long-term educational attainment. By such measures boys globally continue to enjoy significant advantages throughout the developing world. This is why both Education for All goals, as well as the MDGs, have put so much emphasis and invested so many resources over the last two decades in “gender equity” – meaning helping girls catch up with boys.

Many factors have contributed to the increase in women’s participation in education, including the fact that higher levels of education and training are becoming necessary to ensure social mobilityⁱ and to earn higher incomes. The global diffusion of ideas regarding gender equality has also been an important factor, especially in developing countries.

But the situation has become increasingly nuanced. Developed countries now talk about gender gaps that favour females in education, and similar patterns are evident at some levels in developing countries even though boys continue to enjoy an advantage in many such countries. As girls’ educational expectations rise at a faster pace than those of boysⁱⁱ, so does their academic performance as measured by persistence, repetition, academic achievement and transition into secondary education. Once they gain access to higher education, women exceed men in grades, evaluations and degree completions.ⁱⁱⁱ This growth should be seen as a positive development that reflects the changing values and attitudes related to the role and aspirations of women in society. Also relevant is the fact that stable social processes that make demands on men’s masculinity, such as serving as soldiers or demands for labour calling for physical strength for example construction or mining work, prevent men from participating in the tertiary education system, as they will have other alternatives.

ⁱ Takyi-Amoako, E. (2008). “Poverty reduction and gender parity in education. An alternative approach”. S. Fennell and M. Arnot (eds.), *Gender Education and Equality in a Global Context: Conceptual Frameworks and Policy Perspectives*. London: Routledge, pp. 196–210.

ⁱⁱ McDaniel, A. (2010). “Cross-national gender gaps in educational expectations: The influence of national-level gender ideology and educational systems”. *Comparative Education Review*. Vol. 54, No. 1, pp. 27–50.

ⁱⁱⁱ Buchmann, C., T. DiPrete and A. McDaniel (2008). “Gender inequalities in education”. *Annual Review of Sociology*. Vol. 34, pp. 319–337.

1. Female enrolment rising at greater rate than among males

Whereas enrolments have been rising since 1970 for both sexes, girls' enrolments have been increasing faster than those of boys at both the primary and secondary levels. This progress can be seen in the number of countries that have achieved gender parity at the two levels. Females have also made significant gains at the tertiary level, and these will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Map 2.1.1 shows the distribution of 184 countries showing whether they have achieved gender parity, defined as having a GPI between 0.97 and 1.03, at various levels of education. The largest proportion (36 percent) has done so only at the primary level, but more than two-thirds of countries (73 percent) have reached parity at either the primary or secondary levels or both. Particularly interesting are the 9 countries that have achieved parity in secondary schooling but have yet to do so at the previous level.

The patterns of success in reaching parity vary widely by region. As seen in Figure 2.1.1, Central and Eastern Europe is the top region in terms of achieving parity at both the primary and secondary level, with 18 of its 21 countries with data having done so. It is followed by two regions where a majority of countries have done so: Central Asia, and North America and Western Europe. With only one country in this category, South and West Asia ranks last in the number of countries reaching parity at both levels. Sub-Saharan Africa has the lowest proportion of such countries: two out of 35.

Map 2.1.1 Gender parity achieved in two-thirds of countries at primary and/or secondary levels

Gender parity index for primary and secondary education

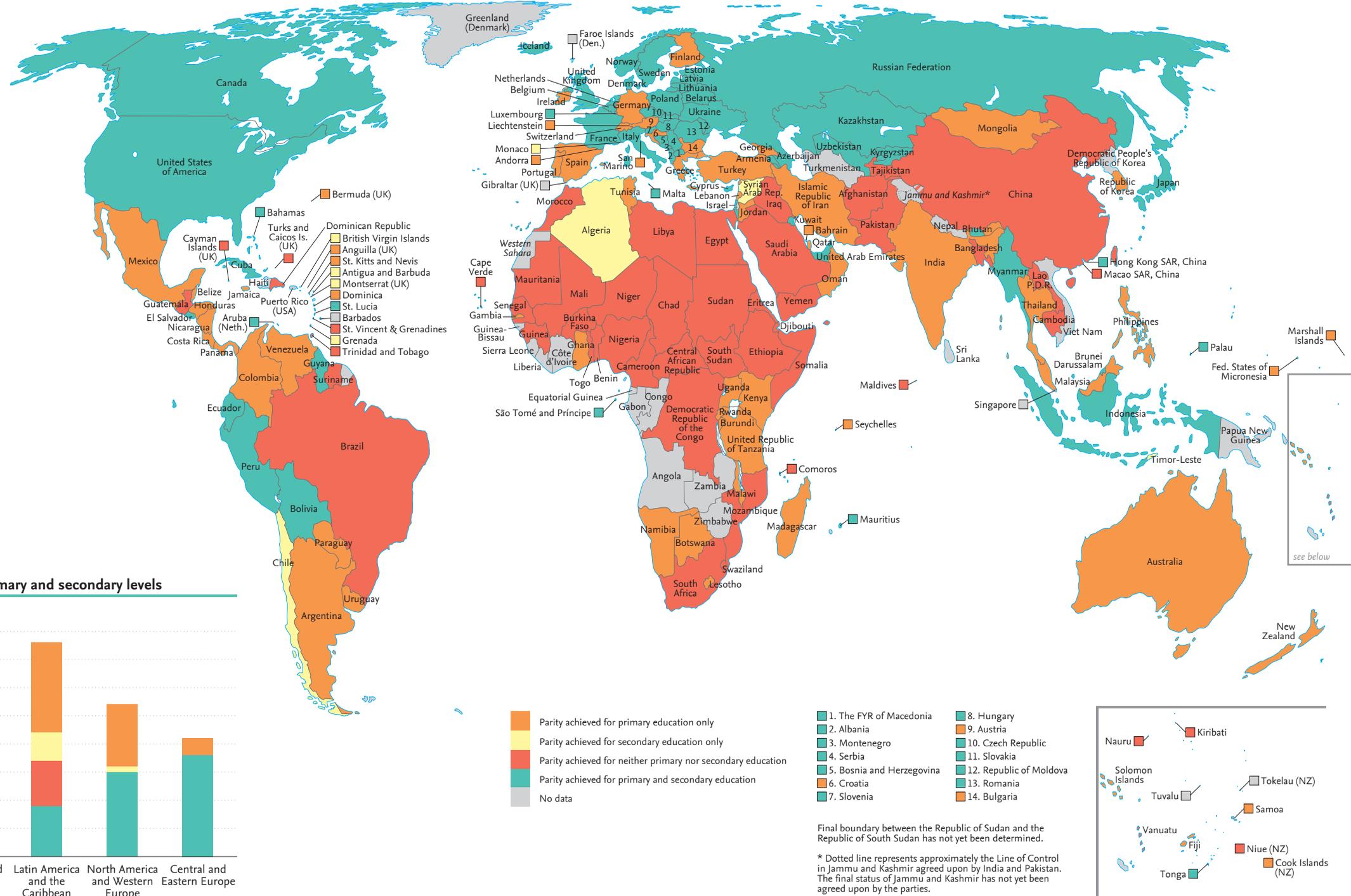
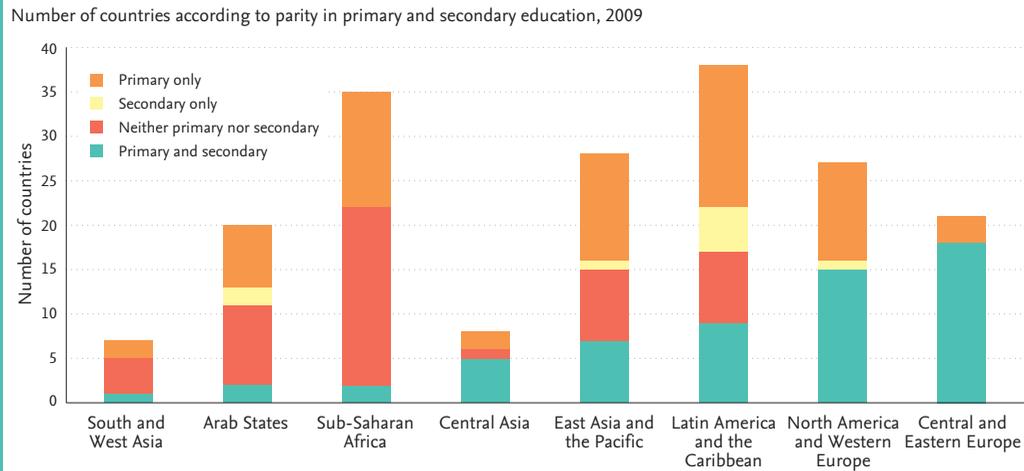


Figure 2.1.1 Central and Eastern Europe the top region for parity at both primary and secondary levels

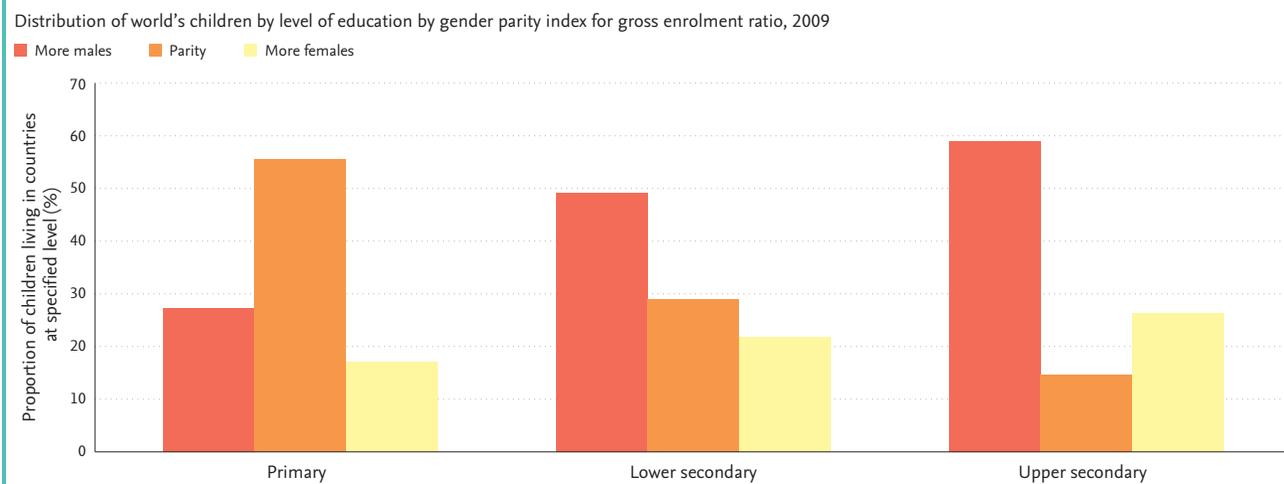


Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

Final boundary between the Republic of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan has not yet been determined. * Dotted line represents approximately the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir agreed upon by India and Pakistan. The final status of Jammu and Kashmir has not yet been agreed upon by the parties.

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

Figure 2.1.2 Majority of world's children living in countries with gender parity at primary level



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

Another way to look at the issue is to calculate the proportion of children who live in countries that have achieved gender parity. Figure 2.1.2 shows that a slight majority (56 percent) of the world's children who are at primary age live in countries that have achieved gender parity at the primary level. However, the proportion of such children drops significantly to 29 percent at the lower secondary level and to 15 percent at the upper secondary level.

At all three levels there are some countries in which males are favoured and others in which females have the advantage. At the primary level, for example, 27 percent of children live in countries with more males in school and only 17 percent in countries with more females. The same pattern is found at the lower secondary (49 versus 22 percent) and upper secondary (59 versus 26 percent) levels.

2. Gender parity an issue in all countries

Almost all countries face gender disparities of some kind, though the challenges vary widely among countries and even at the different levels within countries. Although many countries have achieved gender parity in terms of access and enrolment at the primary level, most face continuing challenges related to issues such as late entry into school, repetition and dropping out. At diverse stages of development, virtually all countries must address gender disparities that shape the way boys and girls progress through education.

In some situations the challenge becomes one of how to increase educational outputs for boys rather than girls. Most developed countries have reached parity at the primary level, but disparities in favour of girls sometimes develop at the higher levels. In developing countries, boys frequently have an advantage over girls with regard to access to education; but once they make it into schooling, girls often outperform boys both in terms of educational progression and academic performance. Female advantage in terms of educational attainment can also be found in situations where boys continue to maintain an enrolment advantage.

Despite the continued existence of what is sometimes called the "boy problem" in some countries, the rights of girls to education continues to be inhibited in many developing countries in important respects.

1. *Constraints with families.* In many countries girls take on domestic responsibilities, including the care of younger siblings, and, depending on the country and the culture, boys often receive preferences when choices have to be made regarding education. For example, in

most African countries, such as Kenya, girls may experience domestic work overload, which reduces their interest in pursuing education. Since it is commonly expected that girls should be married off at an early age, parents consider educating their daughters a waste of time and money. The girls are aware of their parents' perceptions regarding their education. They do not find it necessary to work hard because they assume that they will probably drop out of school early.

2. *Constraints within society.* These include pressure for early marriage, sexual harassment and violence in and out of educational settings, religious constraints and vulnerability to HIV and AIDS.

3. *Policies of school system and educational practices.* School systems in countries of all kinds are not always empowering for girls, nor are they sensitive to their needs through curricula, guidance and counseling services, teaching methods and the presence of appropriate female role models.

4. *Benefits of education.* Even when girls achieve parity in access to education or academic performance, this parity does not always lead to equal benefits of education, especially in the job market of developed countries. We will discuss this point in Chapter 5.

In short, gender disparities and inequalities are prevalent within the schooling process in both rich and poor countries. Virtually all countries must address the gender disparities and inequalities that shape the ways in which boys and girls progress through the education system.