Developing National Agendas in Order to Achieve Gender Equality in Education (SDG 4)

Natasha Ridge (Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research[i])
Susan Kippels (Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research)
Alejandra Cardini (CIPPEC)
Joannes Paulus Yimbesalu (Women's Economic Imperative)

Submitted on March 15, 2019
Revised on March 31, 2019

Abstract

Approaches to addressing gender inequality in education are generally based on a one-size-fits-all model that has predominantly focused on girls' education. However, there are growing gender disparities in education impacting boys in regions, such as the Caribbean and Middle East. It is therefore necessary to take a more holistic look at gender and target those children who are most at risk of being unable to access "equitable quality education," (UN, 2018, p. 1). This brief calls for the establishment of baseline data and targeted interventions to benefit the most marginalized girls and boys in order to achieve gender equality in education.

"Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all"- Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UN, 2018, p. 1)

Challenge

Significant progress has been made in global education over the past two decades, in part due to the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 which provided a universal framework for tackling educational inequality (United Nations, 2015). Since 2000, key advances have been made towards achieving universal primary education and halving the number of out-of-school children (UNDP, 2018). However, there are still key areas in the education sector, in particular relating to gender, that require continued attention.

While the gender gap in primary and secondary education is closing at the global level, a wide gap remains in tertiary education where only 4% of countries have attained parity (Global Education Monitoring Report [GEM] Report Team, 2018b). The 2018 Gender Review written by the GEM Report Team found that "66% of countries have achieved gender parity in primary education, 45% in lower secondary [,] and 25% in upper secondary" (p. 11). These figures, however, mask gender differences occurring at the regional levels, in addition to not capturing patterns in gender inequality that exist within the most marginalized groups.

Gender parity statistics vary greatly throughout regions and countries. While sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia are still experiencing large inequalities in relation to girls' education, other regions such as North Africa, West Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, Europe, and North America are currently experiencing gender inequality in relation to boys (see Figure 1).[1]

Research disaggregating the distribution of gender parity statistics has also shown that the per capita income of a country is also a determining factor (GEM Report Team, 2018b). Among low-income countries that have not attained gender parity in education, gender disparity is at the expense of girls, while in upper middle- and high-income countries it is at the expense of boys (GEM

---

[1] For example, in sub-Saharan Africa between 2010-2015, 86 females completed lower secondary education for every 100 males while in Latin America and the Caribbean, 93 males completed the level for every 100 females (GEM Report Team, 2018b).

Report Team, 2018b; Psaki, McCarthy, & Mensch, 2017).[2]

Figure 1: Adjusted gender parity index for selected education indicators, selected regions, 2010-2016.
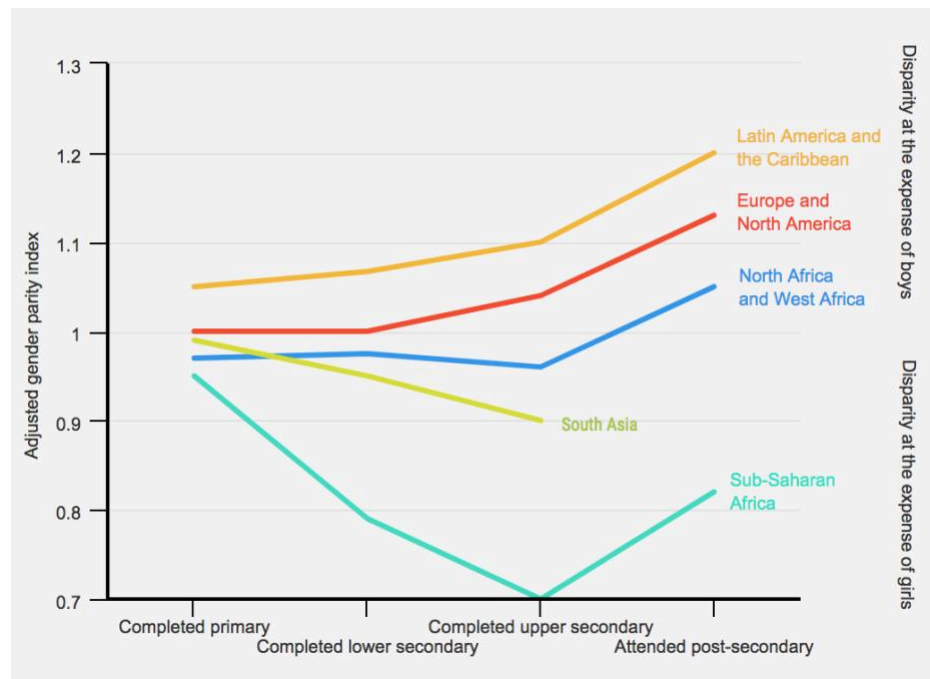
Source: GEM Report Team analysis based on household survey data, 2018a, p. 3.[3]

Despite significant differences in patterns of gender equality, global agendas often overlook local, regional, and national realities. As such, countries need to develop context-based approaches to achieving gender parity and formulate educational priorities that address specific national (or even sub-national) contexts. These need to not only focus on disadvantaged women and girls, but also on disadvantaged men and boys where needed (see Ridge, 2012). A more nuanced approach to understanding gender disparities with respect to education would benefit the entire sector, as a one-size-fits-all approach risks leaving certain populations neglected and in decline.

Governments should seek first to understand and map education patterns in

---

[2] In low-income countries, from 2010-2015, 66 females completed upper secondary education for every 100 males, in contrast to upper middle- and high-income countries where 91 males completed this level for every 100 females (GEM Report, 2018a).

[3] The Report states that values for North Africa and West Asia refer only to low- and middle-income countries in the region and that the analysis is based on household survey data.

gender inequality, then look at underlying structural factors, such as poverty, race, cultural norms, and geography. Following this, they can develop bespoke education initiatives for specific populations, in specific places, to achieve gender equality in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4).

Proposal

Ensuring gender equality around the world remains crucial, and there is an opportunity for G20 member states to take action to address this in the education sector. With modest but strategic investment, the G20 member states can support the development and implementation of the first holistic gender policy frameworks to support more equitable education systems. While there is no exact formula for how to ensure gender equality in education, the hope is that G20 member states consider addressing gender disparities in education by working upwards from the local to the national to the global level.

National-level Recommendations

G20 member states can begin by understanding the specific issues related to gender and education in their own countries. Similar to recommendations at the global level, all countries need to have access to research to better understand their own educational contexts. Only once areas of need are identified and understood can targeted interventions be implemented. As gender equality issues are not confined only to education, there is also a need for multi-sectoral collaboration in terms of research and policy implementation. Governments, education institutions, businesses, philanthropic actors, think tanks, civil society organizations, youth, and others need to work together if gender equality is to be achieved in and through education. Our recommendations are outlined in more detail below.

Recommendation 1.1: Establish a national research fund to examine issues related to gender in education

Governments have a responsibility to understand the various education landscapes in their own countries, and in order to do so, funds should be allocated to non-partisan research. At the country level, research should focus on mapping and understanding gender disparities, examining barriers, and

identifying promising solutions to eliminate gender disparities in education.

Research first needs to map educational issues related to gender in order to better understand what and where the most pressing issues are and determine if these issues are linked to associated underlying structural factors, such as poverty, race, and/or geography. Next, research needs to identify what barriers to success in education exist for marginalized girls or boys. Finally, national-level research should also identify existing promising programs and policies in the local context as well as examine other countries that have been successful in reducing the gender gap in education.

Recommendation 1.2: Formulate and implement targeted policies to address particular gender issues

Using the research, appropriate gender policies should then be designed and formulated to fit country-specific needs. These policies may include addressing issues related to a range of areas, including infrastructure, teacher training and recruitment, curriculum design and development, or parental involvement (see Table 1). For example, policies linked to infrastructure may include developing water and sanitation systems in schools, as girls have been found be absent from school due to inadequate access to toilets (Birdthistle, Dickson, Freeman, & Javidi, 2011). Similarly, schools can be spaces where boys are exposed to and unprotected from violence (Barker et al., 2012), and as such teachers could be trained on how to identify, respond to, and prevent such issues (Antonowicz, 2010). Child labor also represents a barrier to education for poor girls and boys, and governments could design policies to increase school enrollment and attendance, potentially through initiatives around educating parents on the benefits of education and by introducing legal frameworks to prevent child labor (Sakamoto, 2006: UNICEF, 2006)

Table 1: Areas of educational policy that may reduce the gender gap.

Focus Area	Example
Infrastructure	- Provide schools with access to safe drinking water and gender-specific sanitary facilities (e.g., toilets) that offer privacy for students - Found to decrease school absenteeism, especially for girls in developing countries (Birdthistle et al., 2011; Jasper, Le, & Bartram, 2012) - Ensure that schools in the hardest-to-reach communities are easily accessible - Particularly important for girls as they are more vulnerable to physical and sexual violence while making long commutes to school (UNICEF, 2004)
Teacher training	- Provide targeted teacher training to eliminate gender bias (GEM Report Team, 2018b; Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency [SIDA], 2017) - Train teachers on how to identify, respond to, and prevent issues afflicting (or affecting) specific genders - In schools, boys are most exposed to school based violence (Barker et al., 2012)
Educator recruitment	- Ensure gender equity in the teaching profession - E.g., attract more males to be primary teachers (McGrath & Sinclair, 2013) - E.g., recruit more female instructors to teach in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects, where appropriate (Bettinger &

	Long, 2005)
Curriculum design and development	▪ Ensure that curricula are gender-equitable o Both girls and boys should be presented positively within curricula to prevent and combat gender stereotypes (Global Partnership for Education, 2016; SIDA, 2017). o Curricula should encourage both boys and girls to pursue STEM subjects ▪ Provide all children with the same national curriculum regardless of gender o Found to prevent children of one gender from being channeled into "lower status" subjects and reduce pre-existing teacher prejudices (Akpakwu & Bua, 2014)
Parental involvement	▪ Enact policies designed to encourage quality parental involvement of both fathers and mothers (Guo et al., 2018; NASUWT, 2014; Sosu & Ellis, 2014) o Father involvement reinforces the importance of education and subsequently children's engagement in education, particularly for boys (Kadar-Satat, Szaboki, & Byerly, 2017) o Parents' level of education and their concern for their children's well-being are associated with child labor rates (Sakamoto, 2006)

Extracurricular activities and awareness campaigns	▪ Provide activities outside of school, targeted at reducing gender gaps
	
	    ○ E.g., mentorship programs
	
	▪ Implement awareness initiatives tailored to gender issues
	
	    ○ E.g., launch campaigns to promote the value of education in areas with high dropout rates for girls or boys (UNICEF, 2005)

Cultural values and societal norms	▪ Develop policies to address cultural norms and harmful practices that keep boys or girls out of school ○ E.g., address issues such as early marriage, teenage pregnancy, female genital mutilation and breast ironing that negatively impact girls education (Banda & Agyapong, 2016)

Gender-specific programs may also be implemented to support the girls or boys most in need. For example, several Balkan countries introduced the Young Men Initiative (YMI) which targets vocational secondary schools and disengaged boys within them in an effort to redefine manhood and promote healthier masculinities (Namy et al., 2015). Through using educational workshops, residential retreats, and a social marketing campaign, YMI has provided additional support for boys in education outside of the traditional school environment. Research on YMI suggests that boys who participated in the Initiative showed increased gender-equitable attitudes, exhibited reduced levels of violence, and a strengthened sense of civic engagement (Namy et al., 2015). Policymakers should share such success stories, in addition to lessons learned.

Recommendation 1.3: Encourage multi-sectoral collaboration

Gender inequality will not be eliminated without broad support from both within and outside of the education sector. Thus, there should be concerted effort to collaborate across government entities, as well as with education institutions, think tanks, businesses, philanthropic organizations, social welfare organizations, civil society, and other relevant bodies when appropriate. For example, as education has a direct link to the labor market, it makes sense to partner with entities such as ministries of labor to explore the linkages (or lack thereof) between education and the labor market as they relate to challenges for women and men.

Recommendation 1.4: Implement targeted polices to close gender gaps in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields and in reading

G20 countries must pay close attention to STEM education and reading outcomes in their countries as there are often marked gender disparities related to participation and achievement in these subjects. At a global level, girls are less likely to study STEM subjects or subsequently enroll or take up career paths in related fields (Chavatzia, 2017; UNESCO, 2018). However, in the case of reading, boys consistently underperform in comparison to girls. In the 2015 Programme for International Student Assessment, in every country, boys scored less than girls on average in reading (OECD, 2016). Domestic narratives and policies around girls pursing STEM and boys' achievement in reading need to better communicate the importance of the ability to be able to, create, think, use and develop innovative solutions to address local and global challenges. At a global level, G20 countries can also commit to supporting international agendas like the Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2016) and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (United Nations, 2015), both of which call for equality and increased investments in STEM education in order to ensure those entering the workforce are equipped with the skillsets required for jobs of the future

Global-level Recommendations

Globally, education policies need to be designed to better support gender equality in education. While there has been a shift in the global agenda for

gender education equality with advent of the SDGs—namely in moving away from a narrower focus on girls' education to a broader appreciation for gender equality more holistically—there is still more to be done to ensure that all girls and boys receive the support they need. Although there should be a sustained effort to target the systematic marginalization of women and girls, there must also be an appreciation of the issues facing men and boys. The two recommendations outlined below focus on ensuring equitable approaches to education; firstly, through forming a global coalition to understand and actively implement relevant policies targeting gender disparities in education and secondly, through mobilizing and pooling resources for the most vulnerable.

Recommendation 2.1: Establish a Global Coalition for Gender Equality in Education

The G20 is in a unique position to establish a Global Coalition for Gender Equality in Education. Three key aims of this body would be to: i) support research on gender disparities in education, ii) hold governments accountable for gender equality in education, and iii) convene key actors to share the latest findings in research and practice.

i)   To start, the Coalition would commission research related to developing gender and education indicators, mapping the gender landscape, tracking progress made toward achieving SDG 4 as it relates to gender, and identifying future research and policy areas. Although there is enough data available to report on gender issues in education, the ability to track gender equality is limited. Researchers have found that for many of the global indicators, additional methodological work is needed, and the SDG 4 monitoring framework should be broader (see GEM Report Team, 2018b). Thus, research into existing and new indicators could strengthen the monitoring framework. Expanded areas of focus could include values and attitudes, teaching and learning practices, and laws and policies (GEM Report Team, 2018b; Unterhalter, Exzegwu, Heslop, Shercliff, & North, 2015).

Research commissioned by the Coalition should also examine existing and emerging issues in gender in education as they relate to SDG 4. This should explore cross-cutting issues related to barriers in education for girls and boys, identifying overlapping issues and those that are gender- specific. The Coalition

would be responsible for making findings widely available to inform policymakers, academics, and other stakeholders.

ii)   Secondly, the Global Coalition for Gender Equality in Education would assist governments with upholding their obligations to the Education 2030 Framework for Action, the international community's roadmap towards achieving SDG 4 (GEM Report Team, 2018b). In addition, the Coalition would encourage G20 member states to initiate new international treaties on gender in education and create associated formal mechanisms to hold governments accountable. It would also encourage G20 member states to support their counterparts struggling to enact and enforce relevant policies, which may include countries affected by conflicts or natural disasters.

iii)   Finally, a third core mandate of the Coalition would be to facilitate the convening of policymakers, academics, practitioners, and other stakeholders in order to exchange information through targeted events and platforms. Some possible avenues to facilitate such exchanges could include symposia, meetings adjacent to pre-existing events, and/or an online sharing portal. Such facilitation would support a sharing of best practices and the adoption of strategic gender education policies at the state, regional, and global levels.

Recommendation 2.2: Increase funding for initiatives in education to address gender needs within vulnerable populations, including refugees

G20 member states can collectively increase support for the most vulnerable populations in education, as these groups are not only in the greatest need but gender issues in education can also be particularly pronounced for them. If policymakers are to advance SDG 4's aim of leaving no one behind, then they should invest more heavily in quality education for those who are most vulnerable, including and especially in countries with refugee populations. For example, in 2011 in Pakistan, the national primary net enrollment rate was 71%; however, for Afghan refugees it was less than half at 29% (GEM Report Team, 2018c). Within that subgroup, 39% of Afghan refugee boys were enrolled in comparison to only 18% of Afghan refugee girls (GEM Report Team, 2018c). While in 2017, USD 450 million was given in global humanitarian funding to education, this amount was only 2.1% of total humanitarian aid and fell short of the 4% target (GEM Report Team, 2018c). G20 member states can

make a united effort to improve provisions and increase funding[4], as many refugee host countries cannot provide the necessary educational provision alone.

Those from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds constitute another vulnerable group, and the intersection of poverty and gender deserves greater attention from policymakers. Gendered labor expectations can pull low SES boys out of school and push them into unskilled labor jobs where secondary school completion is not a requirement, and differences have also been found in terms of academic achievement levels of girls and boys when they come from the poorest segments of the population (David, Albert, & Vizmanos, 2018; GEM Report, 2018b; Ridge, Kippels, & Chung, 2017). Governments can prioritize financing education for such populations. If there is a heightened global effort to invest in the education of vulnerable populations, this would boost development and economic growth at national and international levels (GEM Report Team, 2018c).

Conclusion

Significant advances have been made in education over the past two decades as near universal primary education has been achieved and education is now accessible to many sections of society that were previously excluded, including girls. Moving forward, policymakers must recognize and understand existing gender issues in education in their specific contexts and correspondingly implement evidence-based policies to establish more equitable, quality education systems. Only after this will they develop societies where everyone can be an active and productive citizen.

---

[4] Two avenues for supporting populations in need include the International Finance Facility for Education (IFFEd) and Education Cannot Wait (ECW).

References

- Akpakwu, O. C., & Bua, F. T. (2014). Gender equality in schools: Implications for the curriculum, teaching and classroom interaction. *Journal of Education and Practic*e, *5*(32), 7-12.

- Antonowicz, L. (2010). Addressing violence in schools: Selected initiatives from West and Central Africa. Save the Children/ActionAid/PLAN/UNICEF. Retrieved from http://www.unicef.org/wcaro/VAC_Report_english.pdf

- Barker, G., Verma, R., Crownover, J., Segundo, M., Fonseca, V., Contreras, J. M., … & Pawlak, P. (2012). Boys and education in the Global South. *Boyhood Studies, 6*(2), 137-150.

- Banda, J., & Agyapong, P. (2016). An agenda for harmful cultural practices and girls' empowerment. *Retrieved from* https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/agenda-harmful-cultural-practices-and-girls-empowerment.pdf

- Bettinger, E. P., & Long, B. T. (2005). Do faculty serve as role models? The impact of instructor gender on female students. *American Economic Review*, *95*(2), 152-157.

- Birdthistle, I., Dickson, K., Freeman, M., & Javidi, L. (2011). *What impact does the provision of separate toilets for girls at schools have on their primary and secondary school enrolment, attendance and completion? A systematic review of the evidence*. London, UK: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.

- Chavatzia, T. (2017). Cracking the code: Girls' and women's education in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). France. Retrieved from https://euagenda.eu/upload/publications/untitled-137226-ea.pdf

- David, C. C., Albert, J. R. G., Vizmanos, J. F. V. (2018). *Boys are still left behind in basic education*. Quezon City, Philippines: Philippine Institute for Development Studies. Retrieved from https://pidswebs.pids.gov.ph/CDN/PUBLICATIONS/pidspn1820.pdf

- Global Education Monitoring Report Team. (2018a). *Achieving gender equality in education: don't forget the boys* (Policy Paper 35). Paris, France: UNESCO. Retrieved from https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000262714

- Global Education Monitoring Report Team. (2018b). *Gender review. Meeting our commitments to gender equality in education*. Paris, France: UNESCO. Retrieved from http://www.ungei.org/resources/files/GEM_Report_Gender_Review_2018.pdf

- Global Education Monitoring Report Team. (2018c). *Global education monitoring report 2019: Migration, displacement and education: Building bridges, not walls*. Paris, France: UNESCO. Retrieved from https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265996

- Global Partnership for Education. (2016). *Gender equality policy and strategy 2016-2020*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from http://www.globalpartnership.org/sites/default/files/2016-06-gpe-gender-equality-policy-strategy.pdf

- Guo, X., Lv, B., Zhou, H., Liu, C., Liu, J., Jiang, K., & Luo, L. (2018). Gender differences in how family income and parental education relate to reading achievement in China: The mediating role of parental expectation and parental involvement. *Frontiers in Psychology, 9*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00783

- Jasper, C., Le, T., & Bartram, J. (2012). Water and sanitation in schools: a systematic review of the health and educational outcomes. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 9*(8), 2772-2787. https://doi.org/10.3390%2Fijerph9082772

- Kadar-Satat, G., Szaboki, R., & Byerly, A. (2017). *Father involvement in primary schools: A pilot study in East Lothian*. Edinburgh, Scotland: Fathers Network Scotland. Retrieved from https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/fathersnetwork/pages/4041/attachments/original/1505927385/170920_ELFFSP_FINAL_report.pdf?1505927385

- McGrath, K., & Sinclair, M. (2013). More male primary-school teachers? Social benefits for boys and girls. *Gender and Education, 25*(5), 531-547.

- Namy, S., Heilman, B., Stich, S., Crownover, J., Leka, B., & Edmeades, J. (2015). Changing what it means to 'become a man': Participants' reflections on a school-based programme to redefine masculinity in the Balkans. *Culture, Health & Sexuality, 17*(sup2), 206-222. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2015.1070434

- NASUWT. (2014). Education and gender equality: Learning lessons, moving forward. Document of conference held in London on Monday 17 November. Retrieved from https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/asset/38860E51-FC2F-448E-9E4F8DF5D7D4EB01/

- Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD]. (2016). PISA 2015 Results (Volume 1): Excellence and Equity in Education. PISA. Paris: OECD Publishing.

- Psaki, S. R., McCarthy, K. J., & Mensch, B. S. (2017). Measuring gender equality in education: lessons from trends in 43 countries. *Population and Development Review, 44*(1), 117-142. https://doi.org/10.1111/padr.12121

- Ridge, N. (2012). In the shadow of global discourses: Gender, education and modernity in the Arabian Peninsula. In G. Steiner-Khamsi & F. Waldow, (Eds.), *World yearbook of education 2012: Policy borrowing and lending in education* (pp. 311-328). New York, NY: Routledge.

- Ridge, N., Kippels, S., & Chung, J. B. (2017). *The challenges and implications of a global decline in the educational attainment and retention of boys*. Doha, Qatar: World Innovation Summit for Education. Retrieved from https://www.wise-qatar.org/sites/default/files/rr.2.2017_qasimi.pdf

- Sakamoto, S. (2006). Parental attitudes toward children and child labor: Evidence from rural India. Hitotsubashi University Repository. Retrieved from http://hermes-ir.lib.hit-u.ac.jp/rs/bitstream/10086/13699/1/D05-136.pdf

- Sosu, E., & Ellis, S. (2014). *Closing the attainment gap in Scottish education*. York, UK: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Retrieved from https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/education-attainment-scotland-full.pdf

- Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency. (2017). *Gender equality in the education sector – Focusing on issues of quality of education and completion*. Stockholm, Sweden: Author. Retrieved from https://www.sida.se/contentassets/8603ffb013ff4fb7a662c3f4f5d0cc5b/tool_gender_equality_education_sector_june-2017_c1.pdf

- UNICEF. (2004). *Strategies for girls' education*. New York, NY: Author. Retrieved from https://www.unicef.org/sowc06/pdfs/sge_English_Version_B.pdf
- UNICEF. (2005). Barriers to girls' education, strategy and interventions. New York, NY: Author. Retrieved from https://www.unicef.org/teachers/girls_ed/BarrierstoGE.pdf
- UNICEF. (2006). The State of the Worlds' Children 2007: Women and Children. New York, NY.
- United Nations. (2015). The Millennium Development Goals report 2015. Retrieved from www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20rev%20(July%201).pdf
- United Nations. (2018). Sustainable Development Goal 4. Retrieved from https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg4
- United Nations Development Programme. (2018). Goal 4: Quality education. Retrieved from http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals/goal-4-quality-education.html
- Unterhalter, E., Exzegwu, C., Heslop, P., Shercliff, E., & North, A. (2015). *Training teachers and gender equality in Nigeria: Reflections on measurement and policy*. London, UK: British Council. Retrieved from https://www.britishcouncil.org.ng/sites/default/files/training_teachers_and_gender_equality_in_nigeria.pdf
- UNESCO. (2016). Incheon Declaration and framework for action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4. Paris, France.
- UNESCO. (2018). Telling saga: Improving measurement and policies for gender equality in science, technology and innovation: Working Paper 5.
- United Nations. (2015). Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development. New York, New York.