

School completion at primary and secondary levels of education



Key points

- Gender disparities in school completion rates show different patterns, depending on the level of education and income group.
- Among low-income countries, disparities in school completion, to the disadvantage of girls, are more common at higher levels of education; the converse is true among upper-income, middle-income and high-income countries.
- In upper-income, middle-income and high-income countries, boys are more likely than girls to drop out of school at the upper secondary levels of education as a result of a variety of factors, including poverty, which compels some to choose employment over continued education.
- Among poorer countries, particularly those in sub-Saharan Africa, lower levels of school completion among girls than boys tend to be more common among children from poor households than those from wealthier households, particularly at higher levels of education.

Background

The school completion rate indicates how many persons in a given age group have completed primary, lower secondary or upper secondary education. It indicates how many children and adolescents enter school on time and progress through the education system without excessive delays.

A completion rate at or near 100% indicates that all or most children and adolescents have completed a level of education by the time they are 3–5 years older than the official age of entry into the last grade of that level of education.

A low completion rate indicates low or delayed entry into a given level of education, high drop-out, high repetition, late completion or a combination of those elements.

Difficulty in timely progression through primary and secondary grades occurs for a variety of reasons, mostly related to the educational system and social and economic factors. Gender also plays a significant role in school progression and completion in most countries.

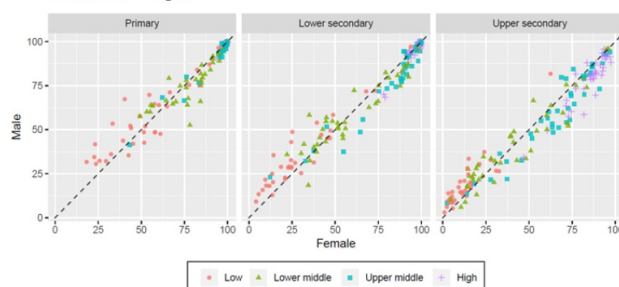
Gender disparities differ across income groups and levels of education

Gender differences in completion rates show different patterns, depending on the level of education and country income group (see figure 1).

Among low-income countries (and to a lesser extent lower-income and middle-income countries), the school completion rate for boys is generally higher than for girls at higher levels of education. This is indicated by the proportion of countries above the parity line, together with the vertical distance between the observation and the parity line.

The converse is true among upper-income, middle-income and high-income countries: male and female completion rates are very similar at the primary level, but diverge increasingly, to the disadvantage of boys, at secondary levels of education. In upper-income, middle-income and high-income countries, boys are more likely than girls to drop out of school at the upper secondary levels of education due to a variety of factors, including poverty, which compels some to choose employment over continuing their education.

Figure I: Completion rates by sex, level of education and country income group: 2018 (or latest year available) (Percentage)



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics database (<http://uis.unesco.org/>) (accessed February 2020).

Note: Observations below the parity line show disparity in performance to the disadvantage of boys, and observations above the parity line show disparity in performance to the disadvantage of girls. Each country is categorized according to the following broad income groups: low, lower-middle, upper-middle and high.

Gender disparities tend to be greater among poor households than among rich households

Poverty interacts with gender in determining school completion rates. In most countries, disparities between girls and boys from poor households tend to be greater than those from wealthier households, particularly at higher levels of education.

The interaction between poverty and gender can work for or against girls, depending on the circumstances in a given country. As highlighted in the 2019 report of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on gender equality, among poorer countries, particularly those in sub-Saharan Africa, gender disparities in school performance to the disadvantage of girls tend to be of greater magnitude among girls from poor households than among those from wealthy ones.¹

This is due, in part, to strong social expectations that girls from poor households will marry early. For example, among poor households in Nigeria, on average, only 80 girls complete primary education for every 100 boys, and only 20 girls for every 100 boys at the upper secondary level, whereas there is gender parity among boys and girls from wealthy households.

Among relatively richer countries, gender disparities in performance tend to be to the disadvantage of boys, and, to a greater extent, boys from poor households, possibly because of the greater pressures on poor male students to enter the labour market.² In Thailand (an upper-middle income country), for example, roughly 140 girls for every 100 boys from poor households complete upper secondary education, while there is gender parity among the rich.

Sustained efforts are needed to improve girls' and boys' education

Despite substantial progress in improving school completion rates, more needs to be done to ensure universal primary and secondary education. Sustained efforts are needed to improve educational outcomes for both girls and boys. As stressed by UNESCO in its reports on education for all, policies and programmes need to aim at changing social attitudes, making schools more accessible, monitoring trends in child labour and providing financial support for poor adolescents and youth to continue their education. Social protection programmes, such as cash transfers, family or child allowances, could be considered to reduce direct and opportunity costs for vulnerable children and keep them from having to leave school to work.

Sources

- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, (UNESCO), Gender Report: Building bridges for gender equality, Global Education Monitoring Report, Paris, 2019

- Bruns, B., Evans, D. and Luque, J., Achieving World-Class Education in Brazil: The Next Agenda, World Bank, Washington, D.C., 2012
- Evans, D., Kremer, M. and Ngatia, M., "The Impact of Distributing School Uniforms on Children's Education in Kenya", World Bank eLibrary, Washington, D.C., 2009

About the data

Definitions

- **School completion rate:** Percentage of a cohort of children or young people aged 3–5 years above the intended age for the last grade of each level of education who have completed that grade.³ The intended age for the last grade of each level of education is the age at which pupils would enter the grade if they had started school at the official primary entrance age, had studied full-time and had progressed without repeating or skipping a grade. For example, if the official age of entry into primary education is 6 years, and if primary education has 6 grades, the intended age for the last grade of primary education is 11 years old: in this case, 14–16 years ($11 + 3 = 14$ and $11 + 5 = 16$) would be the reference age group for the calculation of the primary completion rate.

Coverage

Girls and boys aged 3–5 years above the intended age for the last grade of: (a) primary; (b) lower secondary; and (c) upper secondary school.

Availability

Data are available for: 86 countries at the primary education level; 117 countries at the lower secondary level; and 120 countries at the upper secondary education level (latest available for the period 2013–2018).

Footnotes

1. UNESCO, Gender Report: Building bridges for gender equality, Global Education Monitoring Report, Paris, 2019.
2. Ibid.
3. Definition and data from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Glossary . (accessed February 2020)