



Girls' education and gender equality

EVIDENCE BRIEF

A mix of interventions to provide resources, change institutions or shift norms, works more effectively than trying to isolate a “silver bullet”.

About this Brief

This brief summarises evidence from *Interventions to enhance girls' education and gender equality: A rigorous review of literature*¹ by Unterhalter, E *et al* (2014).

Key findings

The evidence reviewed indicates the importance of a mix of combined interventions which work to change institutions. Evidence suggests the following interventions:

- **resource interventions** to support girls' education (eg. conditional cash transfers or in-kind support) depend on careful targeting of students most unlikely to attend school. Complementary in-kind health interventions can enhance enrolment and may result in learning gains for girls and boys.
- **infra-structural** interventions (eg. sanitation, school building) improve enrolment and potentially learning but more research is needed to show how.
- interventions for **institutional change** require well trained teachers, gender equitable schools and administrators.
- interventions to **shift gender norms** are under-researched. Girls' clubs, engaging faith communities, working with boys, and strategies to include marginalised women in decision-making appear promising.

The relationship between the expansion of girls' education, **social change and empowerment** is under-researched. A key finding concerns the importance of understanding contexts at local, national and global levels including the climate of support for girls' schooling, complementary legal, regulatory and security frameworks, state capacity to implement policy and engage in inclusive dialogue.

Methodology

Searches of databases, key journals, and correspondence with southern networks identified 1350 studies published since 1991. 177 were reviewed. Similar numbers of studies dealt with primary and secondary education.

- 74 studies dealt with resources and infrastructure interventions
- 94 studies dealt with changing institutions
- 57 studies dealt with changing norms

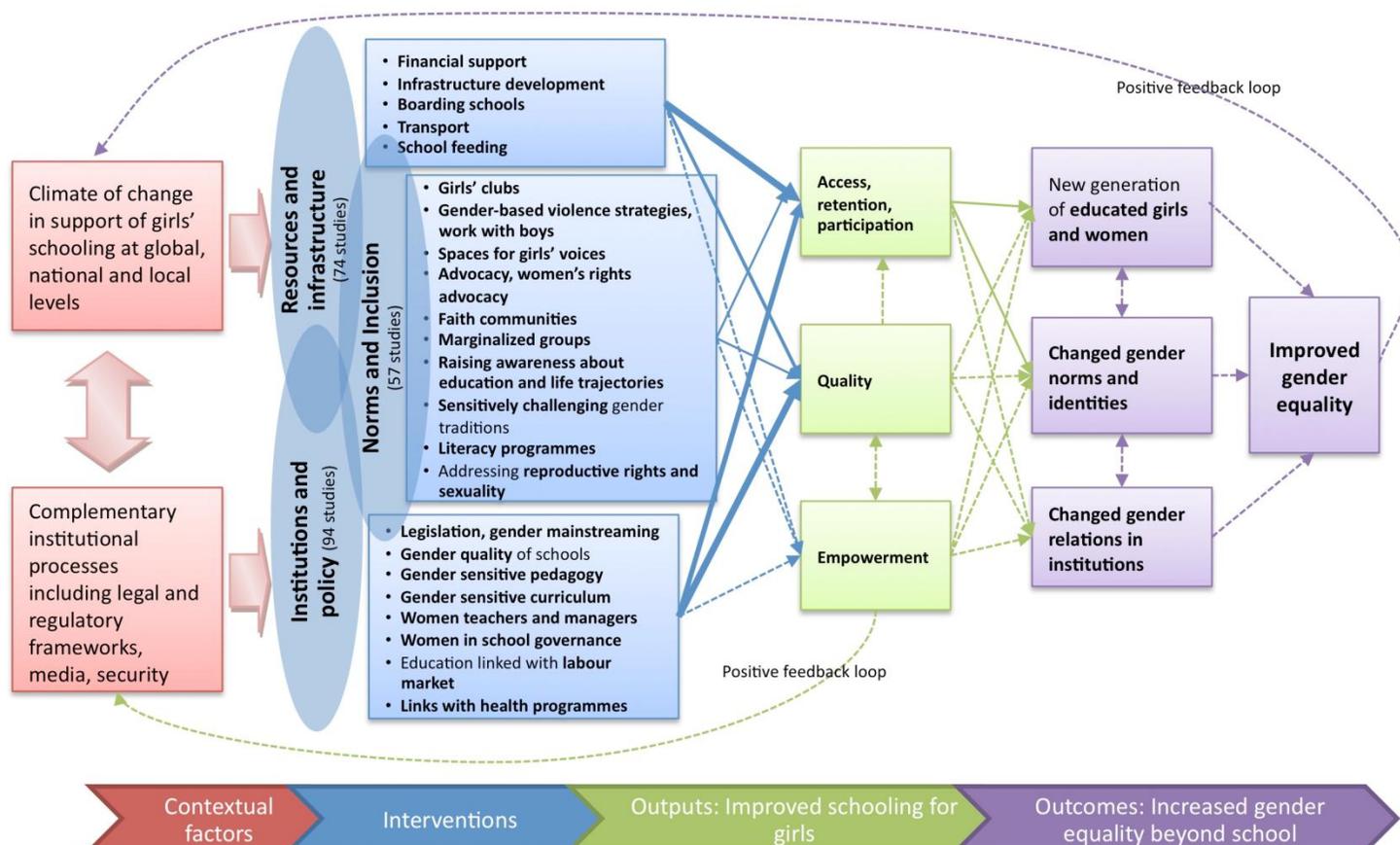
Research gaps

- More research studies focus on interventions linked to resources, infrastructure and changing institutions. Engagement with gender norms and strategies for inclusion of the marginalized are under-researched.

- More studies were concerned with the expansion of girls' education, than with aspects of empowerment and the links between girls' schooling at primary and secondary levels and gender equality more broadly.
- There is a good body of quantitative literature on different kinds of interventions, but fewer in-depth qualitative research and longitudinal studies that develop causal explanations or assess the sustainability of interventions over time.
- More quantitative research reviewed was ranked as high quality than qualitative and mixed methods, despite the importance of qualitative research in explaining processes of change.
- Reviewed studies covered a range of geographical regions, with the largest number relating to Africa, then Asia. There is less research on urban contexts than rural, and only a small proportion of the studies deal explicitly with marginalized communities or contexts of conflict.
- There is not enough research that looks at girls' education and gender equality through integrated approaches combining quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods studies.
- There is a need for more operational research to support scaling up and improved decision-making.

Theory of Change

A Theory of Change (ToC) was developed for the review. The diagram below sets out the understanding that girls' education and gender equality are affected by processes within and beyond schools. The development and implementation of interventions to improve girls' schooling and enhance gender equality are affected by aspects of context at local, national and global levels. These include the level or extent of a climate of support for girls' schooling, the existence of complementary legal, regulatory and security frameworks, state capacity to implement policy and engage in inclusive dialogue. The ToC was developed as a multi-level model to enable an examination of the relationships between context, different forms of interventions, outputs relating to girls' education, and broader gender equality outcomes.



Notes:

- **Context is an overarching condition:** the connections shown here need to be read in relation to historical and contemporary conditions in different contexts. They can guide evaluative discussions but are not intended to map firm causal links without due account of context.
- **Line arrows linking interventions to outputs and outcomes:** Depict the volume and assessments of rigour of the published works reviewed for the study. Thicker arrows indicate stronger research evidence for a connection; thinner or dotted arrows indicate that fewer published studies were located, included in the review, or met criteria for rigour. However, the connection indicated by thinner or dotted lines is nonetheless important and indicates where more research is needed.
- **An assumption of the ToC is that the relationship between outputs and outcomes depicted in the diagram is dependent on a number of key actions including:** Involving women, men, and groups such as families, or other networks in reflecting on gender issues; involving policy makers, educational and religious leaders in these processes; ensuring schools and other educational programmes develop participatory gender equality pedagogies.

Evidence map

This Table maps the evidence linked with the three different kinds of interventions and their impact on participation, learning and empowerment. For each type of intervention, intense blocks of colour indicate strong evidence of impact collated from a significant number of studies of high and medium quality or a smaller number of rigorous high quality studies. Lighter blocks indicate where reviewed research shows promising approaches, where reviewed research indicates limited evidence or where evidence is unclear and more research is needed.

Resources and Infrastructure	
Impact on Participation:	
Strong	Targeting cash interventions at populations most in need and at grade levels where drop-out is most likely have an impact on girls' participation particularly if these are seen to be objective and fair ^{2,3,4,5} . Conditional cash transfers are more effective in improving girls' enrolment than unconditional transfers, however unconditional transfers can have a positive impact on reducing teen pregnancy and early marriage ^{4,5} .
	The provision of information about employment returns to schooling has a positive effect on participation ^{6,7}
	Provision of additional schools in underserved areas has an impact on girls' enrolment, particularly where safety concerns associated with distance to school are significant. ^{8,9,10}
Promising	Promising evidence of the benefits of the following in-kind resource interventions on girls' enrolments: i) provision of iodine supplements to pregnant women where iodine deficiency disorders are prevalent ¹¹ ; ii) deworming ¹² . iii) school feeding programmes (but there may be some negative effects on learning in crowded classrooms) ^{13,14,15}
	Integrated water, sanitation and hygiene interventions have a positive impact on absenteeism for girls ¹⁶
Limited	There is limited evidence that provision of menstrual supplies impacts <i>directly</i> on girls' attendance, ¹⁷ likewise limited evidence on the provision of separate toilets ¹⁸ , but they have effects on quality of life and dignity ¹⁹
More needed	More research is needed to assess impact of infrastructural interventions and classroom enhancements <i>in combination with</i> changing policy and institutional cultures in the direction of girls' and women's rights and gender equality.
Impact on Learning:	
Strong	Resource interventions provided in cash for families or children impact on success in the grades achieved. ²⁰
Promising	The provision of additional schools in underserved areas impacts on girls' learning outcomes, ²¹

More needed	Research into the impact of resources and infrastructure tends to focus on attendance at school. More evidence is needed to investigate the impact of these interventions on learning.
Impact on Empowerment:	
More needed	Research into the impact of resources and infrastructure tends to focus on participation in schools. More evidence is needed to investigate the impact of these interventions on empowerment.

Institutions and Policy	
Impact on Participation:	
Strong	Training teachers formally (through initial teacher training and INSET) in subject content, pedagogy, management and with regard to gender equality and gender-sensitive pedagogy, and informally to develop attitudes of inclusion and tolerance, plays a significant role in reducing girls' drop-out ^{22,23}
	Girl-friendly schools and ' quality mix ', or combined school-level reforms impact on girls' participation ²⁴
	At classroom level, group learning supports girls' participation and learning outcomes ^{25,26,27}
	Learning outside the classroom through formal and informal extracurricular activities (eg. Tutoring, after-school clubs) has a positive effect on girls' learning outcomes ^{28,29}
Promising	The involvement of women in school governance and community mobilization and in community leadership has an effect on girls' participation in schooling. ^{30,31}
	Gender mainstreaming as an approach to changing institutional cultures may have a positive impact however adequate resourcing (money, time, skill, support and critical reflection) must be allocated to support implementation. ^{32,33,34,35}
Limited	School choice and the availability of private schools appears to heighten gender inequalities as parents choose what they consider the better option for sons, leaving daughters in under resourced public schools ³⁶
More needed	School histories and contexts appear to be a key factor regarding whether single-sex versus co-educational schools ³⁷ and faith-based ³⁸ schools do or do not have positive effects on girl's education and learning.
	Promising evidence that the employment of women teachers has a positive impact on girls' education and learning ³⁹ but a wider range of contexts need investigation.

Impact on Learning:	
Strong	Group learning ^{26,27,28} is associated with improved learning outcomes.
	Learning outside the classroom through formal and informal extracurricular activities (eg. tutoring, after-school clubs) has a positive effect on girls' learning outcomes ^{29,30} .
Promising	Formal and informal teacher training in gender equality and pedagogy improves girls' learning outcomes (cross reference ^{23,24}).
	The involvement of women in school governance and community mobilisation and in community leadership may have a positive impact on girls' learning outcomes ^{31,32} .
	Girl-friendly schools and ' quality mix ', of combined school-level reforms may have a positive impact on girls' learning ²⁵ .
More needed	More research is needed to reinforce existing promising evidence that the employment of women teachers may have a positive impact on girls' learning ⁴⁰ .
	More research is needed into the impact of school choice ^{37,38,39} and inclusive strategies on girls' learning ²³ .
Impact on Empowerment:	
Strong	Group learning is associated with empowerment ^{26,27,28} .
	Learning outside the classroom through formal and informal extracurricular activities (e.g. after-school clubs, girls' clubs) has a positive effect on empowerment ⁴⁰ .
Promising	There is promising evidence to show that informal teacher training to develop attitudes of inclusion and tolerance has a positive impact ^{23,41} .
	The involvement of women in school governance and community mobilisation and in community leadership may have a positive impact on girls' confidence ^{31,32} .
	Evidence is promising regarding the impact of positive school culture and gender equality stance on girls' attainment ^{41 42} Girl-friendly schools , and ' quality mix ', or combined school-level reforms ⁴³ .
More needed	A number of studies show that networks of women's rights activists have contributed to policy development for gender equality in schooling at global, national and local levels, ^{43 44 45} . More research is needed to investigate whether these initiatives are sustained.
	More research is needed into the impact of school choice and inclusive strategies on girls' learning.

Norms and Inclusion

Impact on Participation:

Promising	Teaching about personal, social and health issues linked with sex education both at school and in complementary programmes may have a positive impact on participation ^{46,47,48}
	Women's literacy programmes can be a key area for transforming gender norms and identities, particularly when they offer women and girls the chance to develop gender awareness, as well as literacy knowledge and skills ⁴⁹ .
	Interventions that seek to enhance the capacity of poor or marginalized women and girls to participate in discussing school practices and reflecting on their experiences are not well documented, but the few studies there are indicate the potential for work in this area ^{50,51,58} .
	There is promising evidence to show that supporting young women to proceed to higher levels of education has a positive impact on participation ⁵² .
More needed	More research is needed to provide evidence of the impact on participation of tackling gender-based violence in schools, work with boys on gender equality, engaging with faith communities, and developing combined programmes involving community work.

Impact on Learning:

Promising	There is promising evidence that complementary learning spaces to school (eg. NGO programmes, girls' clubs) are effective in giving opportunities to discuss gender equality ⁴⁸ .
	Teaching about personal, social and health issues linked with sex education both at school and in complementary programmes is effective in providing knowledge ⁴⁹ .
	Women's literacy programmes , particularly when they offer women and girls the chance to develop literacy knowledge, skills and spaces for reflective discussion ^{53,54} .
More needed	More research needed into religion , education and shifting gender norms note the importance of key individuals, the significance of supportive networks within faith communities, and the potential for religious institutions to be sites for critical reflection on gender norms.
	Also more needed on the effect of tackling gender-based violence in schools, working with boys on gender equality, work to include marginalised girls, developing combined programmes linking work in schools on gender equality to community work.

Impact on Empowerment:

Strong	Using complementary learning spaces to school (eg. NGO programmes, girls' clubs) are effective in giving opportunities to discuss gender equality, develop confidence to strategise for the future and reduce risk-taking behaviour ^{41,48,54} .
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Promising	Teaching about personal, social and health issues linked with sex education both at school and in complementary programmes is effective building confidence ⁴⁷ .
	Women's literacy programmes , particularly when they offer women and girls the chance to develop gender awareness.
	Interventions that seek to enhance the capacity of poor or marginalized women and girls to participate in discussing school practices and reflecting on their experiences are not well documented but the few studies there are indicate the potential for work in this area.
More needed	More research needed into religion , education and shifting gender norms note the importance of key individuals, the significance of supportive networks within faith communities, and the potential for religious institutions to be sites for critical reflection on gender norms.
	More evidence needed on whether work with boys has potential to build support for gender equality or understand aspects of their sexual identity.
	Also more needed on tackling gender-based violence in schools, developing community linking programmes.
	A number of studies show that networks of women's rights activists have contributed to policy development for gender equality in schooling at global, national and local levels, More research is needed to investigate whether these initiatives are sustained.

Links between the expansion of girls' education, gender equality and social change

The Theory of Change suggests dynamic links between three areas of intervention:

- expanding and improving girls' schooling and education
- processes of social change associated with building an **enabling environment**
- **and changes in institutional processes.**

These are all considered to support developing gender equalities and empowerment.

The literature reviewed indicates opportunities for **women and women's rights groups in policy making**, combined with **legal reforms** that remove obstacles to women's advancement (eg age of marriage or legal rights to property) formally, are key to supporting improvements in girls' education^{55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60}. The **capacity of the state** to implement policy and translate agreed commitments into viable programmes is essential for the success of attempts to enhance education for girls and promote equality⁶¹.

Strategies to improve female education do not necessarily reduce barriers in **access to the labour market**, but are a key contributor to women gaining this access^{62, 63}. Expanded education opportunities for girls and women are beginning to challenge some aspects of unequal gendered power. However schooling can be necessary, but not sufficient for **empowerment** which entails engagement with changing multiple social relations, including education in many guises⁶⁴.

This material has been funded by the Department for International Development. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department for International Development.

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