

INSIGHTS IN BRIEF

# How can we enable foundational learning for the 122 million girls who are out of school?

Lessons from Accelerated Education Programmes  
for policy and programme leaders



## Summary

Despite significant efforts, the global out-of-school rate has dropped by just 1% in the past decade. 122 million girls are still out of school today. With population growth, the number of girls missing out on education will rise unless we take urgent action. The question is not just how to get millions of girls back in school but how to accelerate their learning. Accelerated Education Programmes (AEPs) offer a proven solution, regularly achieving stronger learning outcomes in less time and at lower cost than formal education, while reaching the most marginalised. AEPs also offer lessons applicable to both non-formal and formal education.

To enhance learning to girls who are out-of-school, policy leaders can:

1. Integrate AEPs into national education strategies, ensuring they are recognised as a vital part of the system, not a parallel intervention.
2. Invest in the structures that enable girls' learning, with a focus on ensuring safe, accessible learning environments tailored to their needs; engaging communities—parents, local leaders and educators—to encourage and reinforce learning; and increasing girls' – and women's – participation by responding to their educational needs, providing positive representation in the curriculum that challenge gender norms; and recruiting female teachers.
3. Scale up these policies and strategies, that tackle gender-specific barriers, engaging with other ministries to employ holistic solutions that address girls' unique needs.

# How can we ensure learning for out-of-school girls?

## Understanding the challenges and potential solutions

Globally, 250 million children are out of school, including 122 million girls.<sup>1</sup> While boys outnumber girls among the out-of-school population worldwide, the trend reverses in Africa, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where girls face greater barriers to education at every level.<sup>2</sup> These barriers—exacerbated by poverty and economic challenges—go beyond access, encompassing unsafe public spaces and routes to school, gender-based violence, limited awareness of the benefits of education, restrictive gender roles, heavy household responsibilities, early/forced marriage, and a lack of gender-sensitive teaching. And girls do not all experience the same challenges, with those affected by displacement, conflict, marginalisation, minority status, or disability often facing multiple, overlapping barriers.

Many efforts have focused on getting girls into school and preventing dropouts, but with millions already in school yet not learning, the challenge runs deeper. School shortages, inadequate infrastructure, resource constraints, and academic gaps make it difficult for girls—many of whom are overaged or unprepared—to re-enter formal education. **Instead of just asking how to get these 122 million girls into school, we need to ask a more pressing question: how do we ensure they receive foundational learning regardless of where they are?**

Accelerated Education Programmes (AEPs) offer a proven solution, often achieving stronger learning outcomes in less time and at lower cost while reaching the most marginalised. AEPs help girls develop foundational literacy and numeracy skills, enabling them to transition into further education or employment. Importantly, evidence shows that when girls thrive in education, boys do too—gender-responsive teaching and learning environments foster equality, strengthen economies, and create more stable, resilient societies where all learners can reach their full potential.<sup>3</sup>

Despite their potential, AEPs cannot succeed in isolation. Their impact depends on policy action, sustainable financing, and systemic reforms that remove barriers and create an enabling learning environment. This brief highlights how policymakers can integrate AEPs into national education systems, ensuring long-term funding, gender-responsive policies, and protections for girls and female teachers. Addressing the learning crisis for out-of-school girls requires both strong pedagogy and bold policy leadership to create an education system that delivers for all.

<sup>1</sup> Global Education Monitoring Report Team. (2023). *SDG 4 mid-term progress review: progress since 2015 has been far too slow*. UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000386852>

<sup>2</sup> UNESCO. (2024). *Progress on girls' access to education: What the new UNESCO data reveals*. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/progress-girls-access-education-what-new-unesco-data-reveals>

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF. (n.d.). *Girls' education*. <https://www.unicef.org/education/girls-education>

# Key policy priorities and recommendations

## 1. Creating safe, accessible learning environments

### Why it matters:

Girls face harassment, violence, and insecurity accessing education, with unsafe commutes keeping many from enrolling—especially in rural and remote areas or contexts affected by crisis. Even within schools, lack of gender-sensitive infrastructure (e.g. separate latrines, menstrual hygiene facilities) discourages participation. Almost one in three girls miss school during their period in certain parts of the world.<sup>4</sup>

### Policy actions:

- Expand safe learning spaces and community-based education models to reduce travel risks and increase accessibility, particularly in fragile contexts (as seen in Afghanistan's national education strategic plan, which emphasises Community-Based Education as a strategy to reduce the girls' travel distance to school).<sup>5</sup>
- Institutionalise school safety policies, including zero-tolerance for gender-based violence (GBV), child safeguarding protocols, and training for educators on gender-responsive school management.
- Ensure gender-sensitive facilities by mandating separate latrines, menstrual hygiene resources, and childcare spaces in AEP centres, such as in Uganda, where AEP centres are designed for young mothers, featuring breastfeeding corners, shelters, tents, and child-friendly spaces, enabling them to care for their children while learning.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Strengthening community engagement to support girls' education

### Why it matters:

Family and community attitudes shape girls' education. Social norms favouring boys, restricting girls' mobility, or undervaluing their futures can hinder AEPs, which are most effective when co-designed, implemented, and managed with local communities for lasting impact.

### Policy actions:

- Foster local leadership in AEP implementation by working with parents, religious leaders, and community organisations to advocate for girls' learning and increase their involvement in girls' education (e.g. Pakistan's Accelerated Learning Programme perceptions on girls' schooling).<sup>7</sup>
- Integrate strategies into national education policies to shift social norms around gender, reinforcing equity messaging in AEPs and broader education systems. In Sierra Leone, for example, national guidelines for AEP implementation emphasise communication and sensitisation strategies to foster community support and understanding of the value and scope of AEPs.<sup>8</sup>
- Actively involve girls—and boys—in governance structures and extracurricular activities, including with the wider community, to develop their leadership skills.

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF. (2024). *Period Poverty: Impact of Taboos and Barriers on Information and Resources for Menstrual Health and Hygiene*. <https://www.unicef.org/mena/reports/period-poverty>

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Education. (2016). *National Education Strategic Plan (2017 – 2021)*. <https://www.globalpartnership.org/sites/default/files/education-sector-plan-afghanistan-2017-2021.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> UNICEF. (2024). *Period Poverty: Impact of Taboos and Barriers on Information and Resources for Menstrual Health and Hygiene*. <https://www.unicef.org/mena/reports/period-poverty>

<sup>7</sup> Norwegian Refugee Council. (2015). *A meta-evaluation of the Norwegian Refugee Council's Accelerated Education Responses*. <https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/evaluations/meta-evaluation-of-nrcs-accelerated-education-programme.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education. (2024). *National guidelines on accelerated education for out-of-school children and youth*. <https://mbsse.gov.sl/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/National-Guidelines-on-Accelerated-Education-for-Out-Of-School-Children-and-Youth-June-2024.pdf>

### 3. Investing in gender-responsive curricula and teachers

#### Why it matters:

Female teachers mentor and inspire girls, yet traditional teaching often reinforces gender stereotypes. Specialised training on gender-responsive curricula, pedagogy, and safeguarding policies is essential to support girls, particularly those facing displacement, trauma, or early marriage.

#### Policy actions:

- Prioritise the recruitment of female teachers, particularly in rural and crisis-affected areas, through financial incentives and career pathways (as seen in Balochistan's Education Sector Plan).
- Ensure teacher training includes gender-transformative approaches, such as social-emotional learning, life skills, trauma-informed teaching, sexual and reproductive health, and gender-sensitive classroom management.
- Revise curriculum materials to promote gender equity, ensuring that girls see positive female role models in leadership, STEM, and non-traditional careers. This should include images and voices of girls and women in all their diversity, including girls with disabilities or from local ethnic or religious minority groups.<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion:

#### Strengthening the foundations for girls' learning:

Strong pedagogy and curriculum remain at the heart of effective AEPs, but they cannot succeed in isolation. As experience with AEPs has grown, it is clear that learning happens within an ecosystem, and girls can only thrive when safety, infrastructure, community support, and gender-responsive teaching align to create a truly enabling environment.

By expanding the focus beyond pedagogy, we can create holistic, sustainable solutions that give millions of out-of-school girls the foundational learning they need to build brighter futures.



<sup>9</sup> Secondary Education Department, Government of Pakistan. (n.d.). *Balochistan Education Sector Plan 2020–2025*. <http://emis.gob.pk/Uploads/BESP2020–25.pdf>

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