

Building Feminist Futures Requires Ongoing Commitments to Girls' Education

Written by Adrienne Tiessen, McGill University

Investments in girls' education have immense impacts on the rights and opportunities for the girls who are educated and for feminist futures comprised of an equal and inclusive world that advances collective well-being. However, cuts to foreign aid programs that support girls' education have significant impacts on the future well-being for all.

Examples of cuts to official development assistance (ODA) for education include a reduction of \$3.2 billion (USD) or an overall 24% drop in funding since 2023. These cuts are the tip of the iceberg, reflecting the actions of a small number of countries that account for more than 80% of the education aid cuts, including the United States, Germany, France and the United Kingdom. The impacts of these cuts are particularly harmful to girls: 6 million of whom are at risk of being out of school by the end of 2026. The dismantling of USAID in 2025 and the termination of global education funding totalling more than \$1 billion USD will have long-term consequences for progress in global education. Canada's ODA is also in free fall with cuts to international assistance impacting global development portfolios, including education and bilateral training programs.

Short-sighted Rationales for Aid Cuts with Long-term Implications

Rationales for foreign aid cuts are linked to economic slowdown in donor countries, rising national debt, and new economic security initiatives linked to increased defence spending. However, these economic security measures are short-sighted and undermine long-term stability that results from global investments in education.

Reduction in foreign aid spending on girls' education programming contributes to higher rates of child marriage, setbacks to women's economic empowerment, and increased community instability. Girls who are pushed out of school due to educational program also face increased rates of gender-based violence and other human rights violations directed at women such as child labour; and is linked to higher adolescent fertility rates for younger women; and poorer nutrition outcomes.

Why Education Programs for Girls Make a Difference

When girls are educated they gain a sense of independence and are able to choose what they want to do in life. They aren't restricted to a designated role, but instead they are able to have dreams and desires to work hard. Education enables girls to strive for their dreams and to overcome societal barriers and gender discrimination. Education provides women and girls autonomy from the men in their communities and the ability to make their own forms of income without the need to rely on others.

Educating women and girls also improves society in general. Equality of opportunity within education allows for the country's development, including enhanced productivity and economic growth.

Furthermore, if girls are in school they are more likely able to avoid early marriages. By staying out of early marriages, young girls are less vulnerable to mortality risks during pregnancy and are more likely to have increased general maternal health later in life. The younger the mother is, the more likely she is to have a stillborn or a baby that dies within a week. When a woman or girl is educated she is more likely to make better health choices, whether that be for herself or for her children. Educated women have healthier children because they are more likely able to plan their births, be more careful during pregnancies, and provide better care for their children. When girls stay in school, it delays life altering events (like pregnancy) until they are older and can make better decisions for themselves. Education enhances a woman's ability to protect herself from exploitation and abuse, because they are able to identify and reject violence. Broader societal impacts of improved educational investments include evidence of enhanced health outcomes including improved nutrition.

Even before the recent cuts to foreign aid and global education funding, girls faced myriad challenges of accessing education. Girls are less likely than boys to receive educational opportunities resulting in women comprising "nearly two-thirds of the 765 million adults without basic literacy skills."

Tackling Systemic Barriers and Societal Norms

Several factors explain the low educational outcomes for girls, including societal norms that promote opportunities for boys as perceived family investments in the future. For example, families faced with limited household resources to invest in education may prioritize boys' education first in many communities around the world. Related to these financial challenges is the practice of child marriages whereby parents may let their daughters enter child marriages as a strategy to offset economic burdens in the home.

Legal and legislative reforms play an important role in ending child marriage and encouraging girls' education. In countries that have laws that prevent child marriage, girls face increased opportunities to stay in school. Similarly, one of the most effective strategies for preventing child marriage is to keep girls in school. Free and compulsory education for all children is linked to reduced rates of child marriages. Globally, laws are changing to support improved educational retention of girls who become pregnant or marry young. However, several countries continue to restrict the right to education of pregnant, parenting, or married young girls. Sixteen percent of countries still do not guarantee the right to education in their constitutions or laws.

Advancing knowledge on societal barriers to girls' education also requires understanding the stigma associated with broader reproductive health realities, including menstruation. Without proper menstrual pads, hygiene facilities at schools, and in societies where menstruating women are not allowed to leave the home, girls may miss a significant amount of school days.

Investing in girls' education also requires programming and strategies to end gender-based violence within schools and more broadly in society. Surviving physical or sexual and other types of abuse affects a girl's enrollment in school and their participation, causing increased dropout rates.

Girls have reported safety concerns arising from gender-based violence as they travel to school including harassment and physical assaults facing girls on their way to school. Dangerous commutes and, at times, long travel distances to school particularly in rural or isolated areas, make the commute to schools a significant hazard for girls. In total, 18% of countries do not provide protection against gender-based violence and corporal punishment with education establishments. Threats of violence or harassment prevent girls from fully participating in school and in political life. Evolving forms of violence, particularly online harassment and violence in digital spaces pose new risks for girls that must also be addressed. Many girls and women cannot exercise their right to education due to discriminatory practices, such as: poverty, early marriage, and gender-based violence.

Evidence of Progress in Girls Education and the Need for Scaling Up Rather than Funding Cuts

The persistent challenges facing girls in educational attainment reflect the ongoing work needed. However, the data we have about these challenges is evidence of growing understanding of barriers, increased knowledge and data on girls' education, and important foundational work needed to build stronger programs and initiatives.

Nevertheless, much progress in girls' education is notable over the past few decades, progress that we cannot afford to lose and gains we need to scale up through increased educational investments. For example, in many regions, "adolescent girls now match or outperform boys in reading and basic proficiency assessments in secondary school" and educational programs geared to girls are resulting in declining rates of -child marriage.

Empowerment through girls' educational programs are also linked to evidence of agency since educated girls "consistently challenge the gender norms imposed on them." Ending these important investments in girls' education will have ripple effects across societies, and foreign aid cuts to girls' education will most certainly leave deep scars.

Investing in feminist futures - a world where equality of opportunity prevails - requires scaling up educational programs that support gender equality and girls' opportunities to live as free and equal rights-bearing members of society.