

There are nearly 130 million girls today who aren't in school. While there has been some progress toward gender equity in primary education, massive gaps still exist around adolescent girls receiving a secondary education. According to UNICEF, 42% of countries globally have achieved gender parity in lower secondary education (7th–9th grades), and only 24% in upper secondary education (10th–12th grades).¹ While there are many social and economic challenges contributing to these disparities, issues related to girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights are inextricably linked to their educational attainment.

Recognizing the barriers to girls' education

The Keeping Girls in School Act identifies 15 barriers to adolescent girls' education, several of which are tied to girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights and their bodily autonomy, including child marriage, early pregnancy and motherhood, female genital mutilation, gender-based violence, HIV infection and a lack of appropriate sanitary facilities and menstrual hygiene products.

Every year, approximately 12 million girls are married before their 18th birthdays.² For these girls, continuing a formal education is nearly impossible, as their responsibilities shift to household duties and the pressure increases to quickly become pregnant and raise children of their own. In some places, a pregnancy outside of marriage can make it not only logistically difficult for girls to complete school, but potentially even be grounds for expulsion. Stigma around menstruation, a lack of adequate sanitary facilities available in schools and the high cost of menstrual hygiene products can force many girls into "period poverty" and mean missing several days of school each month or lead to dropping out entirely.³

Addressing the unique needs of adolescent girls

In early 2016, the first-ever U.S. Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls was launched under the Obama administration.⁴ This strategy, which remains in place, brings together several U.S. agencies, such as the State Department (including the Office of the Global AIDS Coordinator), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and Peace Corps in an effort to respond to challenges that adolescent girls face around the world.

This strategy emphasizes the rights girls have to a quality education and aims to prevent child, early and forced marriage; meet the needs of young brides; and end gender-based violence, including female genital mutilation. It also critically recognizes the role girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights plays in their empowerment and seeks to address the challenges they experience in accessing sexual and reproductive health care and information.

Long-term benefits

There are many benefits to achieving universal secondary education that extend far beyond the obvious and important outcome of more educated women and girls.

Education has the effect of delaying marriage and early pregnancy for girls. Research has shown that every additional year of secondary education reduces the likelihood of girls to marry and give birth before the age of 18 by more than five percentage points and that universal secondary education could help to entirely eliminate child marriage.⁵ Furthermore, educating girls has been shown to not only have benefits to their health — for example, by improving knowledge around HIV and increasing contraceptive use — but also lead to better health outcomes for children they may choose to have in the future.⁶

COSPONSOR THE KEEPING GIRLS IN SCHOOL ACT

We encourage you to stand up for the rights of girls and young women to receive an education by passing the Keeping Girls in School Act.

This legislation:

1. Outlines barriers that girls face in their pursuit of secondary education, including early pregnancy and child marriage;
2. Requires the development of a U.S. Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls to be reviewed and updated every five years; and
3. Authorizes USAID to support innovative, results-based and traditional grant programs designed to reduce the barriers that adolescent girls face to receiving an education.

To be added as a cosponsor of the Keeping Girls in School Act, please reach out to staff in the offices of Representative Lois Frankel and Senator Jeanne Shaheen.

Sources

¹ Rueckert, P. (2018, May 30). Period Poverty, Stigma Are Keeping Girls Out of School. *Global Citizen*. <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/menstrual-hygiene-day-education>

² Girls Not Brides. (n.d.). About child marriage. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/about-child-marriage>

³ Rueckert, P. (2018, May 30). Period Poverty, Stigma Are Keeping Girls Out of School. *Global Citizen*. <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/menstrual-hygiene-day-education>

⁴ U.S. Department of State, U.S. Agency for International Development, Peace Corps, and Millennium Challenge Corporation. (2016, March). *United States Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls*. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/254904.pdf>

⁵ Wodon, Q. (2017, June 29). Child Marriage and Education: Impacts, Costs, and Benefits. *Global Partnership for Education*. <https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/child-marriage-and-education-impacts-costs-and-benefits>

⁶ Wodon, Q., Montenegro, C., Nguyen, H., & Onagoruwa, A. (2018, July). *Missed Opportunities: The High Cost of Not Educating Girls*. <https://www.globalpartnership.org/sites/default/files/2018-07-gpe-high-cost-of-not-educating-girls.pdf>