MODULE 1:

GENDER NORMS AND ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Key messages

- Gender norms can have a direct effect on access to education, including norms that discourage adolescent mothers from returning to school.

- More commonly, multiple gender and wider social norms interact with each other, and with policy and contextual factors, to influence children's access to education.

- Removing gendered barriers to access often means increasing affordability, reducing logistical barriers, and enhancing school safety and quality. These factors set the context in which gender norms influence decisions about educational participation.

- Community mobilisation is a key strategy in contexts where gender norms form a direct barrier to schooling, and to overcome common misperceptions about issues such as the benefits of education or the curriculum. It can also help to resolve practical barriers such as safe access to school.

📖 About this module

This module explains how gender norms interact with other factors to influence children's access to education. It shows that although sometimes gender norms form a direct barrier, more often it is the interaction of gender norms, the education system, and the wider context that affect access. The module then discusses ways to reduce barriers that interact with gender norms to limit children's access to education.

> 'Gender remains a significant determinant of access to education and training among the most marginalized, especially for the poorest households, refugees and forcibly displaced persons.' (INEE, 2021: 13)

📖 Recent trends in gender disparities in access to education

Patterns of gender inequalities in educational enrolment and completion are both complex and varied, and a detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this guide. Instead, this section provides broad headlines to inform the discussion of norms-based barriers and facilitators. Box 1 summarises the headlines.

Box 1: Gender gaps in educational participation

Gender gaps have closed or reversed in many countries, especially at primary and lower secondary level. In many regions where girls' enrolment and completion rates formerly lagged behind those of boys, equal numbers of girls – or more girls than boys – are participating in formal education.

More boys than girls were out of school in 2023 (139 million vs 133 million) (UNESCO, 2025) and in many countries more boys than girls are at risk of repeating grades, not completing their education, and not achieving adequate learning (UNESCO, 2022).

However, trends and patterns are complex:

- In much of **sub-Saharan Africa and central and southern Asia, girls' enrolment rates lag behind those of boys** but the gap has been closing rapidly in central and southern Asia (UNESCO, 2025).

- **In contexts affected by crises, girls lag behind boys in access to primary education** but the gap has been closing and girls have overtaken boys in secondary completion rates. However, economically disadvantaged girls in crisis-affected regions lag far behind their male peers (INEE, 2021; INEE, 2022).

- **Participation and completion rates at lower secondary level are still low, particularly in low-income countries** where, for example, only 38% of girls completed lower secondary school in 2022 compared to 43% of boys (Bonfert and Wadhwa, 2024). This means millions of adolescents worldwide miss out on the potentially transformative effects of education.

Gender gaps are usually smaller than gaps between rich and poor children and between rural and urban areas (UNESCO, 2023; UNESCO, 2024).

Participation gaps between children with and without disabilities are much larger than between boys and girls with disabilities. Girls with disabilities are slightly less likely than their male peers to attend primary or lower secondary school but more likely to attend upper secondary school (UNICEF, 2021).

📖 How do gender norms affect access?

Gender norms that affect access to education are context-specific. They rarely, if ever, operate in isolation. As Figure 1 shows, gender norms interact with one another and with broader social norms. At the same time they interact with and are affected by factors related to the education system, the broader policy environment, and the overall social, economic, political and environment context.

Figure 1: Interactions between gender norms and other factors affecting access to education
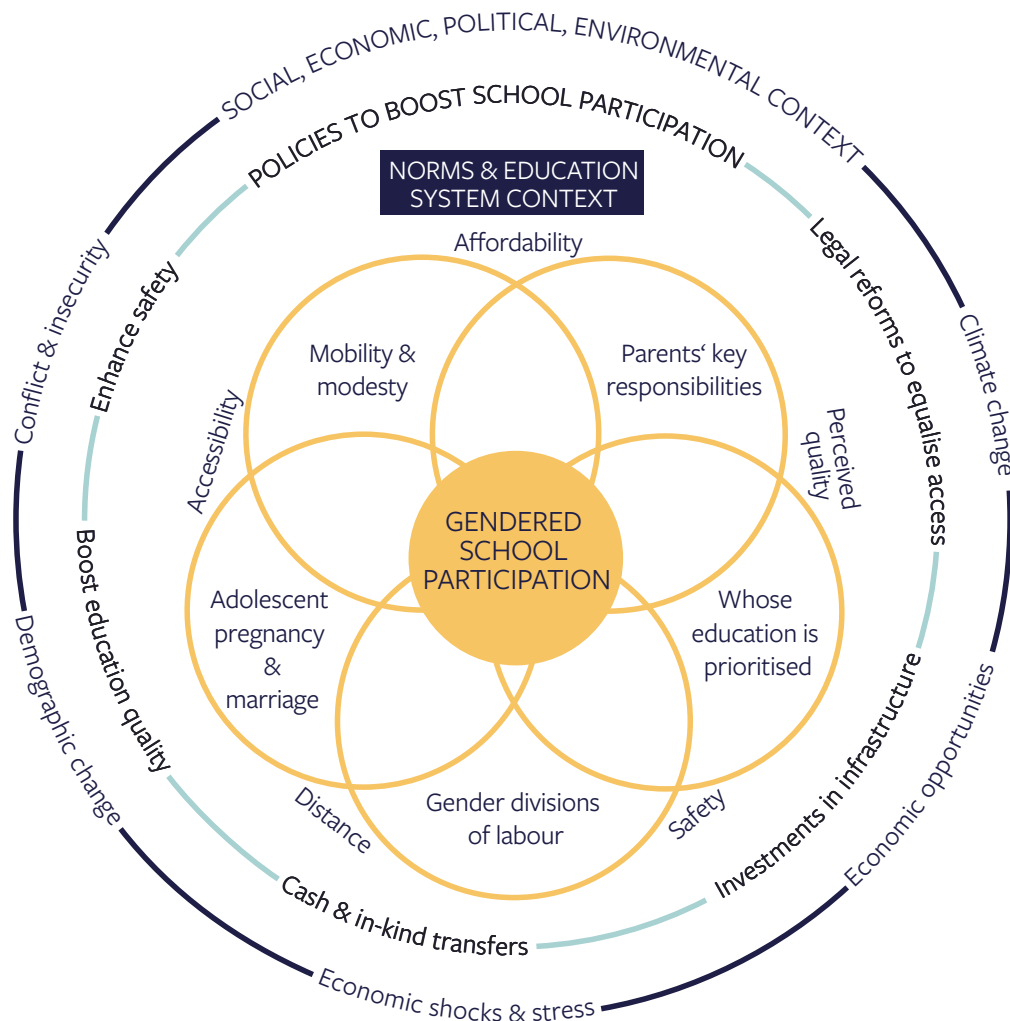
Source: Author

📖 Key norms that influence access to education in gendered ways

Discussion of social and gender norms is sometimes overgeneralised and decontextualised, as if they operate in isolation from other factors. However, the ways gendered norms affect education reflect how they interact with and are influenced by a changing economic, social, political and policy environment. This section outlines some key norms, discussing how they interact with broader influences within and beyond the education system to affect educational access. It focuses on how these norms interact with the accessibility and affordability of schools, and perceptions of school safety and quality.

| Gender norms | X | Education system challenges | X | Broader policy environment | = | ACCESS BARRIERS |

Parents' roles and responsibilities

Norms about parents' roles and responsibilities underpin many decisions about children's educational participation. While these norms vary cross-culturally and by children's age and gender, they tend to include providing for children's most basic needs (food, shelter, clothing, safety) and helping to secure their futures. Supporting children's access to education is often an important aspect of securing their futures, given its potential to open access to decent work. The expansion of education in the 1990s and 2000s in low- and lower-middle income contexts has helped to normalise educational participation for both boys and girls, at least up to mid-adolescence.

> ⓘ **Where the quality of education is poor, education may appear less of a pathway to a secure future than marriage or paid work.**

At times, however, the potential of education to open opportunities may conflict with more pressing immediate needs. In contexts of extreme poverty, for example, and/or following disasters, providing for children's basic needs may mean deprioritising education. Where the risk of physical or sexual violence in or on the way to school is high, and children must travel long distances or board away from home, parents may prioritise children's safety over education, particularly for girls (INEE, 2021). And where the quality of education is poor, it may appear less of a pathway to a secure future than marriage or paid work. Trade-offs between education, the costs of marriage payments (dowry or bride price), and perceptions of the relationship between education and securing a good marriage can all influence parents' decisions about girls' school participation (Ashraf et al., 2018; Malhotra and Elnakib, 2021). In these contexts, the norm that drives parents to secure their children's futures may lead them to deprioritise schooling. It is important to stress, however, that such decisions are complex and marriage payments are only one of many factors (Khan, 2021).

In many cultures obedience to parents/elders is an expected norm, even where this conflicts with a child's own desires about their education. Such expectations are sometimes subtly or explicitly gendered, with implicit or explicit pressures on girls to defer to the wishes of their parents' or caregivers'. While boys and young men often face similar expectations, norms of masculinity often allow them more space to assert their wishes than norms of femininity do for young women and girls (Espinosa Revelo and Oganda Portelo, 2019; Yount et al., 2022). Studies of the effects of gender norms on educational participation often pay little attention to the agency of children – and particularly adolescents – in educational decisions, whether this is to continue in education, drop-out or return to education or training. This risks missing an important element when developing effective strategies to boost educational access and retention.

Whose education is a priority, especially in contexts of scarcity?

Where families cannot afford to educate all their children, decisions about which children should attend school often reflect gendered expectations. These play out in different ways in different contexts and include expectations about which children are more likely to need their education in the future, who is best placed to obtain a good job with or without education, and who is most likely to support their parents in later life. Historically in many contexts, girls' education has been seen as a lower priority than that of boys, in part because of assumptions that girls will get married and become home-makers and, therefore, need less education than boys.

Even where norms have shifted to value the education of boys and girls more equally, latent and more unequal norms can re-surface when times are hard. And in some contexts, norms that give boys priority over girls have never gone away. They can be seen in the lower enrolment rates for girls from low-income households in primary and lower secondary education in low-income contexts as outlined in Box 1. Another manifestation of such norms is documented most commonly in South Asia, where some parents pay for boys to attend private schools that are presumed to offer better equality education while sending girls to government schools (e.g. Hultgren et al., 2024; Taneja and Taneja, 2022).

> ! Even where norms have shifted to value the education of boys and girls more equally, latent and more unequal norms can re-surface when times are hard.

However, norms about who can make the best use of education are not static. Changing norms about the value of education for different children explain, in part, why gender gaps in school enrolment and completion have closed or reversed over the past two decades. Where gender gaps have shifted to the disadvantage of boys, in some cases, this may reflect changes in perceptions of who needs education. In some contexts, boys are perceived (accurately or not) as having greater access than girls to reasonably paid jobs without the need for school completion credentials (Welmond and Gregory, 2021). Similarly, where opportunities for young women with secondary or post-secondary education have grown, norms can shift rapidly in favour of girls completing schooling (Jensen, 2012; Heath and Mobarak, 2015).

> **Box 2: Impact of climate change on gender norms affecting children's access to education**
>
> Climate-related shocks and stresses tend to amplify existing inequalities and affect children's access to education in gendered ways. These reflect geographical and cultural differences in the nature and significance of gender norms in specific environmental and economic contexts. A forthcoming ODI Global systematic review of the impact of climate change on education finds that girls' access to education is more commonly disrupted than that of boys as a result of extreme weather events, such as floods, droughts and cyclones.
>
> For example, after floods in Pakistan in 2010 and 2022, in a country where the education of poor and rural girls already lagged behind that of boys - girls were often out of school for longer, as parents felt it was unsafe for them to walk the greater distances to temporary schools (Ahmed et al., 2022). However, boys also dropped out of school to contribute to their households' incomes.
>
> Indeed where norms of masculinity emphasise boys' breadwinning responsibilities, boys are more likely to drop out to earn income as a result of drought or unpredictable rainfall, as illustrated in Colombia (Carillo, 2020).
>
> Qualitative studies from Zambia and Zimbabwe highlight girls dropping out of school following climate-related shocks and stresses (Mazingi and Muyumbwa, 2021; Chigwanda et al., 2023). These studies highlight the impact of pre-existing gender norms that viewed girls' education as a lower priority than that of boys, or of girls getting married as a way to reduce economic pressures on households studies.

Gendered economic roles, paid and unpaid

Gendered economic norms influence children's participation in education both directly and in interaction with other norms. For example, norms of masculinity that emphasise the role of men as breadwinners, combined with the availability of labouring opportunities can contribute to adolescent boys dropping out of school (Welmond and Gregory, 2021).

Gendered norms that frame certain forms of unpaid work as masculine and feminine also affect girls' and boys' enrolment, attendance at school and learning activities, such as doing homework. Studies from diverse contexts show that girls tend to spend more time on unpaid care and domestic work than boys. Examples include studies in: Mexico and Colombia (Amarante et al., 2024), India (UNICEF, 2024), and Ethiopia, India, Peru and Viet Nam (Keane et al., 2022). Whether, and how far, this has a negative impact on educational outcomes is likely to depend on the intensity and timing of such work. Evidence on the impact of care and domestic work responsibilities on educational outcomes are summarised in a systematic review by Psaki et al. (2022).

Data on the gendered impact of unpaid livelihood activities, such as agricultural work is more mixed, as children's time use in poor rural communities depends on specific local norms about gender divisions of labour. As outlined by UNESCO (2022) for example, in herding communities older boys are more likely to need to miss school to care for animals, contributing to lower enrolment and completion rates.

Norms around adolescent marriage and pregnancy

A World Bank report using data from six low- and middle-income countries in the early 2010s estimated that early marriage or pregnancy could account for around 10-30% of school drop-out among girls (Wodon et al., 2017). Multiple norms shape how adolescent marriage or pregnancy affect access to education. These include the significance of marriage and childbearing as part of transitions to adult life, the desirable age or timing of marriage and childbirth, the extent to which adolescents' agency and preference influence future trajectories, the acceptability (or not) of childbearing outside marriage, and of returning to school after giving birth.

These norms vary hugely between contexts and are strongly affected by the policy context: both formal laws and informal decision-making at local level, and by the presence or absence of catch-up education options and formal or informal childcare support. Table 1 outlines different scenarios related to norms about marriage and childbearing and education.

Table 1: Norms related to child marriage, pregnancy and education

Situation	Norms involved	Other contextual factors	Examples/references
Girls pulled out of school to get married (occurs but less common)	Obedience to elders; parental responsibility to secure girls' future; deprioritisation of girls' education; norms related to marriage payments	Economic stress, insecurity; limited alternatives	Malhotra and Elnakib, (2021); Opok (2024)
Girls who are already out of school or disengaged from school and get married or become pregnant (more common)	Marriage/motherhood as a marker of adult life; adult life incompatible with education; care responsibilities of wives/mothers	Limited education, training or work opportunities	Malhotra and Elnakib, (2021); Murphy-Graham et al. (2020); Presler-Marshall et al. (2023)
Girls drop out of school after marriage or pregnancy	Care responsibilities of wives/mothers; stigma of non-marital pregnancy; deprioritisation of adolescent mothers' education	Presence/absence of policies allowing return; family support	Machoka et al. (2024); Opok (2024); Presler-Marshall et al. (2023)
Girls return to school after marriage or pregnancy	Familial, community and school norms supportive of return to education	Policies and practices allowing return; childcare support (familial/institutional)	Jochim et al., (2023); Nafungo (2022); Presler-Marshall et al. (2023)
Boys drop out of education after marriage or fatherhood	Male breadwinner responsibilities incompatible with education	Presence/absence of social protection and childcare support	Rialet et al. (2022)

Source: Author

Modesty and mobility

Gender norms that limit women's mobility and access to public space can translate into restrictions on girls' access to education, particularly in adolescence. These norms are often closely tied to norms of modest behaviour, and in particular, not being seen in the company of unrelated boys or men in public (Ali et al., 2025; Arif et al., 2025). Such norms often intertwine with parental duties to safeguard their daughters' futures by avoiding activities that could compromise their reputation or that of their family. They also reflect perceptions of how women and girls should demonstrate religious piety. A perception that girls' education undermines these norms underpins restrictions on girls' education, most notably the complete exclusion of girls from education beyond the primary level by the Taliban in Afghanistan, and attacks on schoolgirls by other armed actors elsewhere (GCPEA, 2019; D'Angelo et al., 2024).

Box 3: How intersecting norms affect access to education

Gender is only one aspect of children's identity; it intersects with other factors such as class, religion and ethnicity, among many others, to influence both access to education and children's experiences of education.

For example, xenophobic or racist discrimination against refugees and other migrants may affect boys and girls differently, with girls more at risk of sexual vioelence (World Bank, 2020; UNICEF, 2021). Inadequate school water and sanitation – widely noted as a barrier that affects adolescent girls – can be particularly challenging for some girls with disabilities (Mactaggart, 2021).

This Guide's Module on LGBTQI+ students (forthcoming), explains how violence and discrimination against LGBTQI+ students – which, in part reflects their non-compliance with mainstream gender norms – is a major access barrier.

📖 What helps shift gender norms that limit access to education?

A combination of social, economic and demographic change interacting with increased availability of education have contributed to increased school enrolment and reductions in the gender gap in recent decades. Policies that aim to universalise primary and lower secondary education have played a particularly important role, but few studies discuss their effects on gender norms. This section brings together available evidence and outlines how some common approaches to reduce access barriers can shape gender norms. Many effective initiatives involve multiple components, sometimes making it difficult to discuss their effects in isolation.

Reducing economic barriers. Reducing economic constraints can lessen parents' need to prioritise the education of certain children, thereby limiting the impact of norms and stereotypes that restrict enrolment or lead to drop-out on the basis of gender. A large body of literature has examined the impacts of financial measures in boosting school enrolment

and retention, summarised in reviews such as Sampa et al. (2021), Bergstrom and Özler (2023) and Evans et al. (2021).

A review of large-scale initiatives found that eliminating fees and providing scholarships, stipends, cash transfers and school meals are effective ways to boost school attendance and completion for both girls and boys (Evans et al., 2021). Programmes that boost parents' economic opportunities can play an important role (GEC, 2024), but evaluated evidence of their impact on their children's school participation and retention is scarce. In under-served rural communities, initiatives that lessen the demands of unpaid care and domestic work can also help to reduce an access barrier that often particularly affects girls (Plan International, 2024).

Reducing barriers related to distance and infrastructure by building or extending schools to fill gaps in provision or subsidising transport also boost enrolment and retention (Evans et al., 2021; Bergstrom and Özler, 2023). The impacts are often particularly positive for girls, whose movements are more likely to be restricted by gender norms. Enhancing water and sanitation infrastructure (e.g. increasing provision and providing gender-segregated school toilets with an adequate water supply) can make a difference where non-existent or poor infrastructure is a significant barrier (Evans et al., 2021; Psaki et al., 2022).

Increasing students' safety can help enhance enrolment and reduce drop-out. This involves a combination of legal reforms and implementation (Smarelli et al., 2024) including:

- implementing a whole school approach that engages staff, students and community members to eliminate violence within and while travelling to schools (Mills and Tao, 2022)
- sensitising students and staff to what constitutes gender-based violence and shifting norms to reduce its acceptance (UNGEI and SVRI, 2024)
- developing survivor-centred systems for reporting and action (Mills and Tao, 2022)
- training teachers in positive discipline methods to reduce corporal punishment (Smarelli et al., 2024)
- increasing the number of female teachers, particularly in contexts where the teaching profession is male-dominated. This can help boost girls' attendance by providing role models and also by reducing perceived risks to girls from male teachers (Khan et al., 2016; INEE,2023).

Enhancing the quality of teaching can help to boost students' achievements and their interest in education, as well as perceptions of the value of education, and thereby reduce drop-out (Agarwal, 2025; Kaffenberger et al., 2023). By doing so it can reduce the salience of norms that deprioritise education, particularly for older adolescents, and push girls towards early marriage. Programmes to strengthen pedagogy and boost learning outcomes, and initiatives that integrate life skills, entrepreneurship and other curriculum elements can enhance learning and increase school completion and progression to higher education (Kaffenberger et al., 2025; Chioda and Gertler, 2020).

Supportive school environments. Strengthening gender equality within schools and thereby enhancing students' experiences can also help to boost retention. For example, a study in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam found that teachers' use of

gender-inclusive practices contributed to increased student attendance and class participation (IDRC, 2024). Similarly, a study of gender-responsive education in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali and Senegal found that over 80% of students felt it had helped them stay in school (IDRC, 2024). Other initiatives that have helped to sustain the engagement and retention of girls and young women include mentorship programmes (Rose et al., 2025), and school-based girls' clubs (Bergstrom and Özler, 2023).

Community mobilisation. Engaging families, including men and boys (INEE, 2025), civic associations (e.g. women's organisations), religious leaders, etc., can also help shift gender norms to sustain support for girls' education (Rose et al., 2025; Plan International et al., 2025). Providing students and parents with accurate and up-to-date information on the returns to education in person or via videos and apps can help shift norms based on misperceptions (Alzate and Neilsson, 2019; Bergstrom and Özler, 2023).

Case study: addressing multiple barriers to shift norms about girls' school participation

Since 1995 the Citizens Foundation in Pakistan has provided low-cost, high-quality education to children living in poverty. A study found that a combination of safe environments, low fees, well-trained female teachers, and community outreach involving direct engagement with families effectively remove barriers to girls' attending school. This experience shows how interactions between norm-based and other barriers can be addressed through holistic actions. The study concluded:

'Supply side factors play a stronger role in girls' enrolment than demand side factors. Therefore, given good quality, cultural sensitivity, and affordability, Pakistani parents will enrol girls.'

Khan et al. (2020: 2)

📖 Useful resources

These resources synthesise insights from multiple countries. They discuss how gender norms affect school participation, and policy and practice responses.

Gender at the Centre Initiative (2022) – *Social norms and girls' education: A study of eight sub-Saharan African countries,* explains norm-based barriers to education and policy and programme responses in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. Also available in French and Portuguese.

The Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) (2025) – This *Learning brief compendium* provides links to and key insights from GEC projects. They outline norm-based and other constraints and insights on effective approaches to strengthening marginalised girls' access to education and learning. Several briefs have a specific focus on intersections between gender and disability.

Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) (2023) – The *Mind the Gap* series of reports and briefs explain how gender norms intersect with various contextual and education system factors in conflict-and crisis-affected settings and outline evidence-based solutions. Mind the Gap 3 has a section on addressing issues facing girls with disabilities.

Welmond and Gregory (2022) – *Educational underachievement among boys and men* and World Bank and UNESCO's (2022) – *Leave no child behind: global report on boys' disengagement from education,* discuss how gender norms affect boys' educational participation and possible responses.

Data resource on access to education:

- Bonfert and Wadhwa – Tracing Global Trends in Education: A Tale of Old and New Gender Gaps, World Bank Gender Data Portal
- UNESCO – Scoping Progress in Education
- UNESCO - World Inequality Database on Education
- UNESCO GEM Report - VIEW – Visualizing Indicators of Education for the World