

ALiGN

Advancing
Learning and
Innovation on
Gender Norms



ODI Global

ALIGN Guide

Gender norms and education

Rachel Marcus, Evie Browne
and Ján Michalko

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ODI Global, 4 Millbank, London SW1P 3JA, United Kingdom

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Acronyms

AI	artificial intelligence
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CSE	comprehensive sexuality education
ECE	early childhood education
FRA	European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights
GBV	gender-based violence
GRP	gender-responsive pedagogy
GRP4ECE	Gender-Responsive Pedagogy for Early Childhood Education
GSA	Gender sexuality alliance
ICRW	International Center for Research on Women
ICT	information and communication technology
ILO	International Labour Organization
LGBTQI+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex plus
NGO	non-governmental organisation
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
SOGIESC	sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics
STEM	science, technology, engineering and maths
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
TVET	technical and vocational education and training

Introduction

Module overview

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Introduction

Educating children and young people in the era of the polycrisis – a set of interconnected risks across multiple systems and regions – presents major challenges. Economic inequality, climate breakdown, rising authoritarianism and underregulated digital technology are all fuelling social polarisation ([World Inequality Report, 2026](#); Jimenez Thomas and Browne, forthcoming). Working hand-in-hand with other anti-rights movements, an increasingly organised and assertive global political movement opposed, to varying degrees, to gender equality is contributing to this polarisation ([Brechenmacher, 2025](#)). This context affects every aspect of education, from who can access education and for how long, to what students can learn and their school experiences.

At the same time, education systems are well placed to help counter the effects and drivers of the polycrisis, and to contribute to building more inclusive, less polarised societies where human rights are a bedrock of policy, with resulting gains for societal well-being. More specifically, education has unique potential to help transform gender norms – the informal social rules of accepted and expected behaviour for people of different genders. It is the single area of public policy with the greatest potential to reach young people at scale ([Marcus, 2026](#)). Education is also, at its core, about developing new skills and values as well as acquiring new knowledge; attitudes and values learnt in childhood and youth often last for life. As such, it can catalyse a generational shift towards more gender-equitable values ([Marcus et al., 2024](#)).

But this process is not automatic. First, children must be able to access school – 273 million children and adolescents worldwide are still missing out ([UNESCO, 2026](#)). Second, once they are in the classroom, prevailing gender norms and gender discriminatory practices in their school and in wider society must be addressed to prevent them undermining education’s potential to drive change.



Education systems are well placed to help counter the effects and drivers of the polycrisis, and to contribute to building more inclusive, less polarised societies.

About this guide

This guide – which updates and extends the 2019 version – summarises available evidence while highlighting key debates and areas where evidence is limited. It integrates case studies of promising practices, and outlines useful resources and further reading. It points readers to reviews and other syntheses of evidence, with some examples from specific countries, regions or projects.

This guide draws on studies and examples that span low-, middle- and high-income country contexts. Where most available research comes from high-income countries, the guide indicates this bias. The focus is largely on formal primary and secondary education, drawing on experiences in non-formal education where relevant, while gender norms in early childhood education are discussed in [Module 7](#).

Reflecting the available evidence, most modules largely discuss gender norms in a binary manner. However, not all learners identify as male or female, and this updated guide now features a dedicated module on LGBTQI+ students ([Module 8](#)). In addition, this guide includes a module on boys and masculinities ([Module 6](#)).

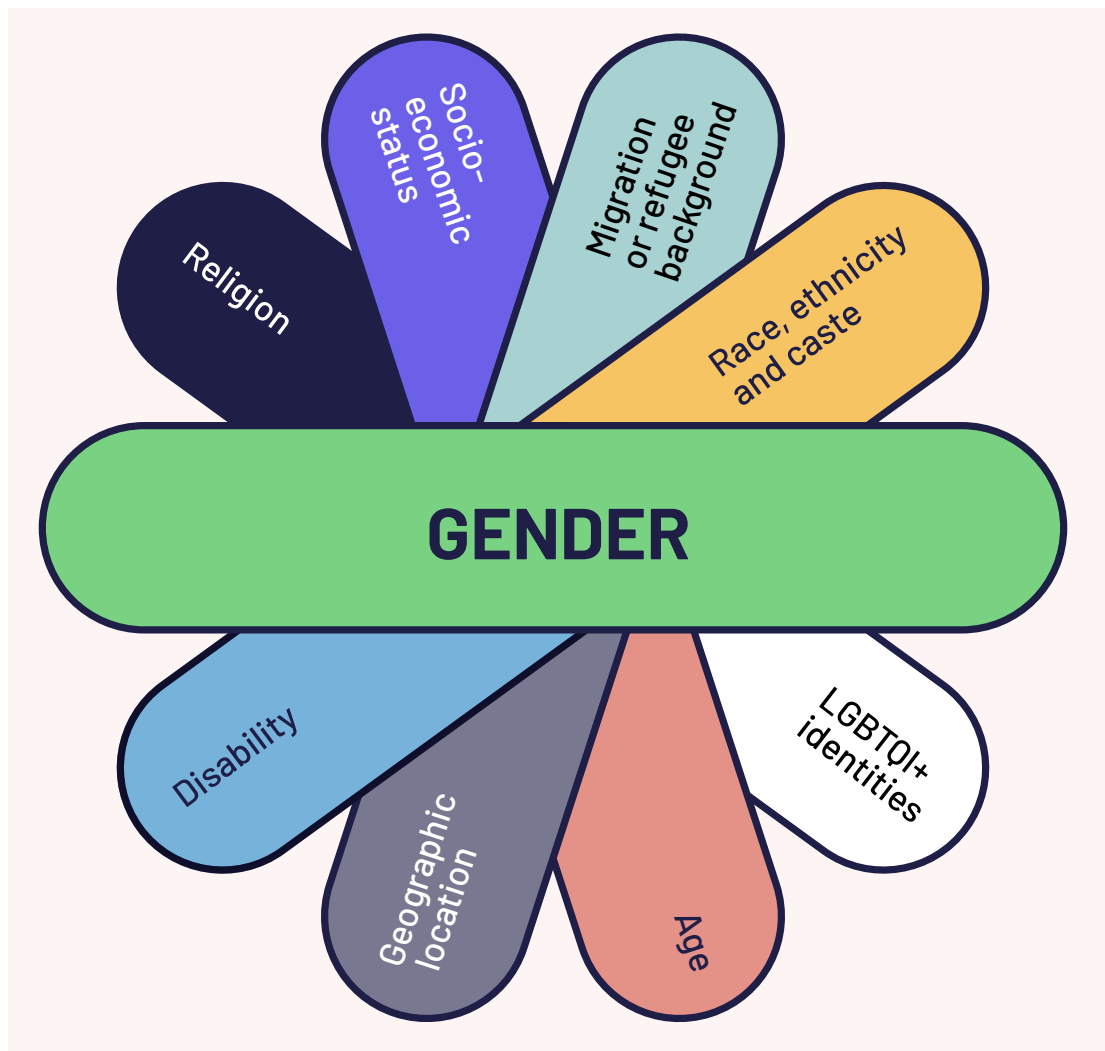


Gender norms vary by geographical and cultural context, as well as by socioeconomic class, religious community and ethnic group, among other differences.

Where possible, this guide points to the different ways in which contextual factors and economic, geographical and identity-based inequalities and systems of power intersect with gender norms to affect children's educational opportunities, experiences and outcomes. Gender norms vary by geographical and cultural context, as well as by socioeconomic class, religious community and ethnic group, among other differences (see Figure I.1). Multiple and intersecting aspects of identity and context affect both the expectations of students' families and communities, and also how teachers view and treat their students. A short guide cannot do justice to these many and diverse interactions and power dynamics, which are best understood through locally grounded studies.

The strength of political movements and power-holders opposing the promotion of gender equality through education has increased rapidly since the previous version of this guide. Their tactics often weaponise gender equality as a 'wedge issue' as part of a broader political project, sometimes misrepresenting what promoting gender equality through education actually means ([D'Angelo et al., 2024](#)). The rapid rise of 'anti-gender' politics in varied ways in different contexts undermines efforts to enable all children to access education, and limits the potential of education to contribute to more equal and inclusive societies. At its worst, anti-gender politics foments violence against students or teachers who challenge prevailing norms. This trend – discussed in [Module 2](#) – makes it vital to understand the ways that gender norms affect education, and the responses that can help to safeguard the rights, well-being and opportunities of all students and staff.

Figure I.1: Intersecting aspects of identity that affect education outcomes



Source: Adapted from [Global Partnership for Education \(2023: 14\)](#).

This guide aims to help readers diagnose the mechanisms by which gender norms interact with other forces to affect education, identify leverage points, assess risks and support locally grounded action. Specifically, it explains how:

- gender norms can affect children's access to education and ways to mitigate norm-based barriers ([Module 1](#))
- discriminatory gender norms are often reinforced through schools ([Module 2](#))
- gender norms can affect children's learning outcomes ([Module 3](#))
- education can lead to change in gender norms ([Module 4](#))
- education systems, schools and teachers can maximise the potential of education to transform gender norms ([Module 5](#))
- particular norms of masculinity affect boys' education ([Module 6](#))
- gender norms affect early childhood education ([Module 7](#))
- gender norms affect LGBTQI+ students ([Module 8](#)).