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The right to education for every girl

by Eugenia Asigbee and John Chung Danboyi
Old Dominion University Model United Nations Society

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Introduction

Education is not merely a social good, it increasingly is understood as a fundamental human right and a catalyst for empowerment, equality, and sustainable development. Despite decades of global advocacy, millions of girls remain denied this basic right. How to alleviate this situation is one of the issues facing the General Assembly at ODUMUNC 49.

The right to education for every girl, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and further articulated through instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979), continues to face systemic challenges. Economic exclusion, entrenched gender norms, and conflict-related disruptions persist across regions, impeding global progress toward universal access and equality in education (UNESCO 2023; Ahsan 2022).

The global community has recognized that girls' education produces exponential benefits, reducing poverty, improving maternal health, increasing civic participation, and boosting national productivity. Yet, progress has not been linear. According to UNICEF, over 119 million girls are currently out of school worldwide, with the most severe deprivation at secondary and tertiary levels (UNICEF n.d.).

In fragile and conflict-affected settings, girls are more than twice as likely as boys to remain out of school (UNICEF ROSA 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing climate and political crises have further compounded these inequalities, pushing millions of girls out of classrooms and reversing decades of advancement (UN Women 2022; Plan International 2023).

International institutions, particularly the United Nations, have been central in defining the normative architecture of girls' right to education. From the adoption of CEDAW and CRC to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4 and SDG 5), the UN has created a robust framework for accountability. Human Rights Council resolutions, including A/HRC/RES/32/20 (2016) and A/HRC/RES/54/L.37/Rev.1 (2023), explicitly frame girls' education as a multiplier right essential for realizing all other rights (Right to Education 2016; United Nations Human Rights Council 2023).

Nonetheless, political divisions, cultural resistance, and weak enforcement mechanisms have hindered the translation of these commitments into tangible outcomes.

Girls are denied human rights in many countries. This girl in a Bangalore, India, slum may face not only economic hardship but discrimination and exploitation because of her sex.

State behavior remains a decisive factor in this struggle. Some states, like Canada, have championed feminist foreign policies and sustained multilateral investments in education (Global Partnership for Education 2021; Government of Canada 2023).

Others, such as the United States, oscillate between strong advocacy and political inconsistency, with current USAID program suspensions and congressional scrutiny undermining long-term goals (USAID Office of Inspector General 2024; Voice of America 2025).

Meanwhile, the Russian Federation remains a reluctant participant, and Afghanistan under Taliban rule represents the most egregious contemporary case of systemic denial (UNESCO 2025a, 2025b; Le Monde 2025).

To advance the right to education for every girl, the global community must reimagine cooperation, accountability, and inclusion, anchored not just in declarations but in enforceable commitments. This issue brief explores the structural barriers, UN normative evolution, and geopolitical dimensions shaping the right to education for every girl. It concludes with actionable policy proposals designed to enhance implementation, protect gains, and ensure that no girl, regardless of geography or circumstance, is left behind.

Background

Education is a universal human right, yet for millions of girls, this right remains aspirational rather than realized. International law enshrines girls' access to education as a binding obligation in four major agreements:

- *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDoHR, 1948)
- *The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (1966)
- *The Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989)
- *The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW, 1979).

Collectively, these treaties establish that girls are rights holders not beneficiaries of charity and that states are responsible for removing both legal and systemic barriers to their education (UNESCO 2020).

The United Nations has reinforced these norms through a series of resolutions and initiatives. The Human Rights Council Resolutions A/HRC/RES/32/20 (2016) and A/HRC/RES/35/22 (2017) call on states to eliminate discrimination in educational access, provide safe learning environments, and adopt gender-sensitive policies. Sustainable Development Goal 4 further commits to ensure inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all, with an explicit focus on eliminating gender disparities (UNICEF 2021).

Yet, legal commitments alone have not sufficed. Structural and institutional weaknesses, such as weak governance, inadequate funding, and insufficient monitoring, often leave girls' rights unprotected. In fragile or conflict-affected contexts, these systemic failures compound existing vulnerabilities. The consequences are long-term: the denial of education undermines social mobility, erodes human capital, and perpetuates cycles of poverty and inequality (Evans, Acosta, and Yuan 2024).

International organizations, including UNESCO, UNICEF, UN Women, and the OHCHR, play a central role in promoting norms, providing technical support, monitoring implementation, and advocating for enforcement. Programs such as the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) demonstrate how funding and targeted initiatives can support systemic reforms, from gender-responsive curricula to safe and inclusive school infrastructure.

These efforts also highlight the importance of multi-sectoral approaches: policy reforms, social protection, teacher training, and infrastructure improvements must work in concert to translate legal rights into practical access (Evans, Acosta, and Yuan 2024).

The persistent challenge is enforcement. Even where laws exist, violations, whether through discriminatory policies, resource allocation failures, or conflict-driven closures, often go unchecked. Extreme cases, such as Afghanistan under the Taliban, demonstrate how political will can entirely reverse progress. Conversely, countries making incremental gains show that legal and normative frameworks, combined with sustained investment and oversight, can create more resilient and equitable education systems (UNESCO 2019; UNESCO 2020).

Bogaletch Gebre speaks to villagers in a remote area of Ethiopia's southern Kembatta Tembaro zone to raise awareness about the danger of female genital mutilation.

Current Situation

Despite decades of global commitment, systemic barriers continue to deprive millions of girls of their educational rights, resulting in a fragile, uneven, and often reversing trajectory of progress (Ahsan, 2022). As of recent estimates, 119 million girls are out of school worldwide (UNICEF, n.d. [Girls' education]). This exclusion is starkest at higher levels of learning: approximately 58 million girls of upper-secondary school age are out of school (UNICEF, n.d. [Girls' education]). In low-income settings, fewer than two-thirds of girls complete primary school, and only about one in

three completes secondary education (World Bank, 2018).

The deprivation is driven by a constellation of intersecting vulnerabilities:

Economic and Financial Barriers: Financial hardship remains a pivotal factor determining access, as girls' school attendance is highly sensitive to household wealth (Evans, Acosta, & Yuan, 2024). While primary school may be nominally free in some countries, hidden costs such as uniforms, textbooks, supplies, transportation, and exam fees pose significant burdens on poor families. When resources are strained, cultural norms dictate that families prioritize boys' education, withdrawing girls to perform domestic labor, sibling care, or contribute to household income (Evans, Acosta, & Yuan, 2024).

Harmful Gender Norms and Practices: Gender inequality and deeply embedded social norms actively erode girls' educational attainment (UNICEF ROSA, 2024). Child, early, and forced marriage (CEFMU) is a major cause of dropout, often used by families as a coping mechanism during financial crises (Plan International, 2023; Girls Not Brides, 2024).

Globally, one in four girls marry before age 18, and South Asia alone accounts for nearly half of the world's 290 million child brides (International Day of the Girl Child, n.d.; UNICEF ROSA, 2024).

Furthermore, societal attitudes often devalue girls' academic pursuits, leading to gender bias embedded in curricula, textbooks, and teaching practices, which in turn derails girls' choices, particularly limiting their participation in fields like Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM). Women comprise only about 35 percent of students in STEM globally (UN Women, 2022).

Educate a Girl, Educate a Nation

Safety, Violence, and Health Concerns: Girls frequently face threats to their safety that disrupt their attendance and retention. These threats include gender-based violence, sexual violence in the school environment, and dangers encountered on the journey to and from school. Moreover, many schools lack appropriate gender-sensitive facilities, such as separate, adequate, and safe water and sanitation facilities, including those necessary for menstrual hygiene management, leading to absenteeism or dropout (Right to Education Initiative, n.d.).

International Day of the Girl Child: Let Us Renew Our Commitment to Investing in Girls' Rights – International Federation of Social Workers

Crises and Climate Change Impacts: Global *polycrises*, including conflict, economic instability, and environmental disasters, disproportionately harm girls' education (UNICEF ROSA, 2024; Plan International, 2023). Girls in conflict-affected countries are

more than twice as likely to be out of school (UNICEF, n.d. Girls' education). Climate shocks, such as floods and droughts, exacerbate family poverty, destroy school infrastructure, and force displacement or migration, further interrupting learning (Plan International, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a significant recent setback, deepening existing inequalities and leading to higher learning losses among marginalized girls, particularly those in rural areas (UN Women, 2022). The pandemic also contributed to increased adolescent pregnancies, forcing girls out of school (UN Women, 2022).

Institutionalized Exclusion: The most extreme example of educational deprivation is found in Afghanistan, where the Taliban, since 2021, has systematically banned female secondary and tertiary education. This systematic denial of rights based on sex has been described as institutionalized educational gender apartheid. UNICEF warned that if these bans persisted through 2023, over 4 million girls would be denied education beyond primary school

To enhance global resilience and address underlying inequality, international efforts continue to target these pervasive barriers through multi-sectoral strategies, focusing on increasing the value placed on girls' contributions and ensuring political commitments are translated into enforceable rights (Asigbee, n.d.; UNICEF ROSA, 2024). In South Asia, where the realization of gender equality is estimated to take 149 years at the current pace, focused programming on adolescent girls is viewed as crucial for achieving SDG 5 (UNICEF ROSA, 2024).

Case Studies

Afghanistan stands today as the most severe case of state-sponsored denial of girls' education worldwide. Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, a series of decrees has systematically banned girls from attending secondary school and barred women from universities, teaching roles, and most forms of public life (UNESCO 2025a). These prohibitions, justified by the Taliban under religious pretexts, have erased nearly two decades of progress built through international aid and domestic reform. As of 2025, 2.2 million Afghan girls remain out of school a number that represents roughly 80 percent of all school-age girls in the country (UNESCO 2025a, 4).

Before 2021, Afghanistan had seen notable gains: girls' enrollment in primary education had risen from less than 10 percent in 2001 to nearly 60 percent by 2018 (World Bank 2018). The collapse of these achievements following the Taliban takeover demonstrates how fragile progress can be when rights depend on international presence rather than institutionalized guarantees. The bans have not only deprived girls of education but also curtailed their future economic participation, creating a "lost generation" with intergenerational social and developmental costs (UN Women 2024).

International condemnation has been near-universal. The UN Human Rights Council and UN Security Council have issued multiple statements condemning the Taliban's actions as "gender persecution," while organizations such as UNESCO and UNICEF have maintained alternative education programs through informal networks and digital learning initiatives (UNESCO 2025b). Yet the Taliban government has largely ignored global pressure, framing external criticism as "interference in domestic cultural values." In practical terms, girls'

education has been driven underground, operating through secret schools, remote tutoring, and community initiatives led by Afghan women risking imprisonment or worse (Amnesty International 2024).

Afghanistan therefore embodies the clearest case of institutionalized exclusion from education in the modern world a textbook example of how gender apartheid operates through the denial of learning. The international community faces an ongoing challenge: maintaining educational engagement without legitimizing a regime that criminalizes girls for seeking knowledge.

After the American-led invasion overthrew the Taliban government in 2001-02, international support, domestic reforms, and reconstruction efforts created opportunities for school reopening, teaching training, infrastructure building, and education reform. Kabul University, among other higher education institutions, saw steady growth in female enrollment across social sciences, humanities, and life sciences.

A recent study (2016-2019) at Kabul University documented that female participation increased throughout those years, though with persistent, disparities in STEM and technical disciplines. Prior to 2021, girls had access up through secondary and tertiary levels in many provinces, literacy initiatives and gender sensitive programs expanded. In many urban and relatively stable areas, communities embraced girls schooling as a developmental imperative. These gains, however uneven, formed a fragile baseline, vulnerable to political reversal, conflict, or ideological shifts.

After the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, their actions in the education sphere quickly shifted from tentative control to aggressive exclusion. In March 2022, the Taliban restricted girls' schooling beyond grade six. This effectively cut off access to all middle, secondary, and higher secondary schooling for millions. As of 2025, more than 2.2 million girls remain from secondary school, according to UNESCO estimates. In late 2022, the Taliban extended their ban, closing university access for women and girls entirely.

Afghanistan: The only country that bans girls' education - Geneva Solutions

The state's higher education regulatory apparatus enforced this ban, denying women enrollment or participation. Since 2021, the Taliban regime has issued more than 70 decrees (or directives) that violate women's rights, many targeting educational exclusion, public life, mobility ban, dress codes, and public employment.

These decrees often cloak exclusionary policies in religious or cultural language, presenting them as necessary for "moral order" or security, making legal pushback difficult. One of the more pernicious moves has been targeting digital infrastructure. In September 2025, the Taliban imposed a nationwide two-day international blackout, cutting off one of the few remaining lifelines for girls remote learning.

The blackout is widely seen as a warning and signal of further information control, particularly against girls who attempted to use online courses to bypass bans. Even private or non-government educational initiatives are under surveillance or restricted. The Taliban have sought to control or shut down informal, non-state schooling options, making alternatives precarious.

Taken together, these moves transformed what might initially have been pitched as temporary or conditional restrictions into a robust system of gendered exclusion in education. With more than 2.2 million secondary level girls barred, Afghanistan stands alone in the world in maintaining an official ban on female secondary and higher education.

UNICEF warns that if these bans persist until 2023, over 4 million girls will be denied education beyond primary school, the “lost generation”. Human Rights Watch estimates the ban has already deprived at least 1.4 million girls of their education, inflicting psychological, opportunity, and developmental harms.

The exclusion leads to a shrinking female workforce, especially in critical sectors like health care, teaching, public service. Without new pipelines of women professionals, service delivery (especially for women) will worsen. Fewer female health care workers contribute to worse maternal and child health outcomes. Bans on female education jeopardize continuity in essential sectors. Investment in girls’ education yields high returns, shutting that down is a regression in national capacity. For many girls, educational identity is central.

Denial of schooling communications exclusion, inferiority, and extensive aspirations. The nas legitimize the notion that women should remain in private/domestic spheres, reinforcing patriarch control and eroding progress made in social norms. Families and communities that lose educated women see fewer role models, lower female literacy, and reduced social mobility over decades.

One concrete example is Fatima Amiri, an Afghan student injured in the 2022 Kabul school bonding. She scored among the top on the national entrance exam, despite her injury, but was barred from entering university due to the prohibition. She has since relocated to Spain, navigating national and bureaucratic obstacles in her quest to continue education.

Even under heavy repression, Afghans and external actors have attempted creative and courageous forms or resistance *Dars,* is an educational TV program launched in April 2023, targeting learning aged 11-16 including locked out of secondary school. Produced outside Afghanistan (in London) by BBC Dari/Pashto teams, it adapts curricula to local context and broadcasts via TV and online platforms. The UN has called it “a learning lifeline” for children barred from school.

In a 2025 door to door survey of over 2,000 Afghans, 92 percent said girls schooling is “important” including rural men and women. In rural areas, 87 percent of men and 95 percent of women expressed support. More broadly, over 90 percent of Afghan adults continue to support girls' educational rights, despite the bans. Some students attempt to stitch together online courses, hybrid modules, or localized mobile learning platforms. Researchers are exploring mobile learning as a flexible bridge across conflict zones, especially where school buildings are inaccessible.

UNICEF and UNESCO regularly call on the Taliban to lift the bans, warning of long-term harm. In March 2025, UNICEF flagged that about 400,000 additional girls are newly deprived as each school year begins. Some diplomatic leaks suggest internal dissent within the Taliban, the deputy foreign minister publicly urged reopening girls' high schools, referencing Islamic tradition. However, such statements have faced backlash, and the right regime has moved to suppress critics.

Even outside the most extreme cases, a constellation of entrenched barriers prevents girls from fully exercising their right to education. While many primary schools are nominally free, hidden costs, uniforms, textbooks, stationary, exam fees, and school meals remain significant burdens. In some contexts, families must purchase water, extra tutoring, travel, or technology.

Girls often contribute domestic labor, sibling care, or agricultural work. In households under stress, the economic logic of retaining girls at home is powerful. UNICEF, in partnership with ODI and FCDO, maps how social protection (cash transfers, vouchers, school feeding, transport subsidies) can mitigate these costs across the stages of girls' education. Their analysis shows how interventions can be targeted for secondary aged girls to reduce dropouts.

International Day of the Girl Child – Humanium

Canada established itself as a leading global advocate for girls' education, combining principled commitment with strategic investment. Its approach is grounded in a feminist foreign policy, which explicitly prioritizes gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls as central pillars of international development and diplomacy. This policy framework has translated into concrete financial and programmatic commitments that seek to dismantle both structural and socio-cultural barriers preventing girls from accessing education.

A key demonstration of Canada's engagement is its CAD 300 million pledge for the 2021–2025 replenishment of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). This contribution was not merely a financial gesture but strategically framed to support system-wide improvements in education infrastructure, teacher training, and gender-responsive policies.

By tying its funding to measurable outcomes for girls' schooling, Canada reinforced the principle that investments in female education yield broader social and economic benefits, including enhanced literacy, improved health outcomes, and expanded economic participation for women (Global Partnership for Education 2021).

Beyond multilateral mechanisms, Canada has also prioritized targeted, context-specific interventions. In 2023, the Canadian government allocated CAD 6 million to the Commonwealth of Learning, a program specifically designed to reach women and girls in marginalized communities across Bangladesh, Malawi, Mozambique, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

This initiative leverages open, distance, and technology-enabled learning, recognizing the importance of innovative solutions in overcoming geographic, financial, and cultural barriers to education. By focusing on digital platforms and distance learning, Canada addresses critical challenges such as rural access, safety concerns, and interruptions caused by crises, including pandemics or conflict (Government of Canada 2023).

Canada's dual strategy supporting both large-scale multilateral mechanisms and localized, innovative programs demonstrate a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding girls' education. It recognizes that while systemic, country-wide reforms are essential, sustainable progress also requires adaptive approaches tailored to the specific vulnerabilities faced by girls in diverse socio-political contexts.

Furthermore, Canada's initiatives are often coupled with advocacy and normative influence in international fora, including the United Nations and G7, where it consistently champions commitments to gender equality in education, calling on other states to align their funding and policy priorities with these standards.

Through these coordinated efforts, Canada not only contributes resources but also helps shape the global narrative on girls' education,

emphasizing accountability, inclusivity, and innovation. Its actions exemplify the type of comprehensive approach necessary to achieve meaningful, sustained educational access for girls worldwide, positioning Canada as a consistent and influential champion of girls' educational rights.

Russian Federation occupies a complex and often contradictory position regarding global efforts to advance girls' education. While Russia recognizes education as a human right under its national constitution and maintains near-universal literacy domestically, its engagement in multilateral advocacy for girls' education remains limited and politically cautious (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2023).

In principle, Moscow supports educational access for all, and it has made investments in digital learning, science, and technical education that benefit both sexes. Yet, in international diplomacy, Russia's posture often reflects broader geopolitical interests and belief in national self-assertion, rather than normative commitment to gender equality.

At the UN, Russia has repeatedly adopted positions that weaken or obstruct consensus on gender-related resolutions. For instance, during Human Rights Council debates on women's rights in Afghanistan and Iran, the Russian delegation abstained or opposed texts emphasizing gender equality and education, arguing that such issues fall within "national sovereignty" (Le Monde 2025). Similarly, in 2024, Russia declined to support a UN Security Council statement condemning the Taliban's systematic exclusion of women and girls from education, calling it a "politicization of human rights discourse".

Russia's development assistance strategy also diverges from Western models that prioritize gender parity in education. While it funds education projects through UNESCO and bilateral technical aid, these initiatives rarely target girls explicitly (UNESCO 2024). Instead, they emphasize vocational and scientific training framed as gender-neutral, consistent with the Kremlin's broader stance against what it calls "Western gender ideology."

Consequently, Russia can be described as a moderate spoiler: it does not directly undermine education programs, but it consistently resists integrating gender equality language or commitments into global policy frameworks. Its influence thus lies not in overt obstruction but in diluting the normative consensus that connects education with women's rights.

South Sudan is the world's youngest and one of its most fragile nations. Education girls stands at the intersection of conflict, poverty, and gender inequality. In the new nation, independent only since 2011, nearly three out of four girls never complete primary school, and fewer than one in ten advances to secondary education. This crisis is not the result of a single factor, but of a convergence of chronic instability, displacement, and deeply entrenched social norms that devalue girls' education.

Decades of civil conflict have decimated the country's infrastructure and governance capacity. Schools are often destroyed, occupied by armed groups, or repurposed as shelters for displaced families. Teachers, especially women, are scarce; salaries go unpaid for months, and many qualified educators have fled across borders. The Ministry of General Education and Instruction faces persistent budget shortfalls, with less than 10 percent of national spending allocated to education far below the recommended international benchmark. This underfunding perpetuates dependence on international aid and leaves the system vulnerable to political turbulence.

Despite these constraints, there have been glimmers of progress. The Global Partnership

for Education (GPE), UNICEF, and Save the Children have supported innovative community-based schooling programs that bring learning closer to displaced populations. Conditional cash transfers to families, supported by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), have demonstrated measurable increases in girls' attendance. Mobile "school-in-a-box" kits have been deployed in camps for internally displaced persons, offering flexible learning environments. However, the reach of these programs is limited; they often serve as humanitarian stopgaps rather than sustainable systemic reforms.

The implications are far-reaching. A generation of uneducated girls translates into diminished participation of women in governance, weakened health outcomes, and slower national recovery. The World Bank estimates that South Sudan loses over $700 million annually in potential GDP due to gender gaps in education and labor force participation. Conversely, every additional year of schooling for girls could reduce child marriage rates by up to 7% and infant mortality by 5–10%.

The lesson from South Sudan is stark: education cannot thrive without peace, and peace cannot endure without education. External funding can build classrooms, but only political stability and community commitment can sustain them. For South Sudan to break the cycle of exclusion, its leadership with strong backing from the UN and regional bodies like the African Union must prioritize girls' education as a cornerstone of reconstruction, not an afterthought.

United States. For decades global educational reform was part of the work of the US Agency for International Development, USAID. Through programs that fund scholarships, support online and distance learning, and set gender-sensitive education policies in more than 50 countries, it made meaningful inroads (USAID 2025). In specialized settings, such as sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, USAID has helped create safe schools, train female teachers, and revert harmful social norms around girls' schooling (USAID 2025, 2–3).

But in 2025, USAID was eliminated. Under reforms championed by Elon Musk, the purpose-created Department of Government Efficiency, and supported by President Trump, USAID was closed in July 2025. More than 80 percent of USAID programs were cancelled. Surviving programs were placed under the authority of the US State Department or the White House. All gender-related programs were eliminated. The U.S. government is no longer supports the gender-equality goal of the Sustainable Development Goals. Further, it has rejected the SDGs altogether (Baker Institute 2025).

With the collapse of government funding, uncertain programming, and the loss of institutional support, girls' educational access in fragile or crisis-affected states is increasingly at risk. As one report put it, the collapse of aid support in Afghanistan amounts to "a loss for secret schools, female journalists, and girls in the shadows" (WGLT 2025). The implication is clear: in contexts where girls' education is already precarious, the retreat of USAID services can reverse gains quickly.

Women and the Cold War - The Remedial Herstory Project

Role of the United Nations

The UN system stands as the central body defining and defending the right to education for girls, lending global legal and moral legitimacy to the cause. Its immense influence is channeled through a strong normative architecture and widespread operational efforts, yet its ultimate effectiveness remains constrained by limitations in enforcement and state sovereignty. The UN's engagement on girls' education thus operates through a dual approach: setting standards on paper and mobilizing practical resources on the ground.

Defining the Normative Framework

The foundational role of the UN lies in establishing education as a binding obligation under international law. This is embodied in core treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), both of which mandate equal access to quality education without discrimination based on sex. The GA and the Human Rights Council continuously reinforce this framework through key policy commitments and resolutions:

Global Policy Mandate: The GA adopted the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 in the 2030 Agenda, committing the world to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all, specifically targeting the elimination of gender disparities.

Targeted Resolutions: The HRC has adopted resolutions, such as A/HRC/RES/32/20 (2016) and A/HRC/RES/35/22 (2017), that explicitly focus on realizing the equal enjoyment of the right to education by every girl. These resolutions urge states to remove legal, cultural, economic, and safety obstacles, including ensuring safe, non-violent learning environments.

Evolving Context: Normative architecture is adaptive; recent resolutions, like A/HRC/54/L.37/Rev.1 (2023), reflect the growing complexity of barriers by focusing on girls' exclusion during climate-related disasters, digital divides, and the need for resilient education systems.

Awareness and Advocacy: The UN created the International Day of the Girl Child (first observed in 2012) to raise global awareness regarding challenges such as lack of education and forced child marriage. The Secretary-General is also tasked with producing reports documenting progress and challenges related to resolutions, such as those concerning Child, Early, and Forced Marriage (CEFM).

In Phnom Penh, Cambodia, students at Techo Hun Sen Chraing Chamres Primary School in their classroom.

Operational Implementation

The UN's agencies translate these high-level norms into action through technical assistance, coordination, and on-the-ground programming:

UNICEF and Programmatic Action: Guided by its mandate to protect every child from discrimination and uphold their right to be educated, UNICEF implements wide-ranging initiatives, particularly targeting adolescent girls.

Its plans, such as the Adolescent Girls Program Strategy, 2022–2025, emphasize gender-transformative, multi-sectoral support focusing on learning, protection, and skills development.

Specific Interventions: UNICEF supports programs like Skills4Girls to equip girls with digital skills and expertise in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). It also scales up crucial interventions like Alternative Learning Pathways in contexts where formal education is inaccessible, such as in Afghanistan and Nepal.

Economic Barriers: Recognizing that hidden costs often force girls out of school, UNICEF supports financial solutions, including implementing conditional cash transfers, scholarships, and school feeding programs, often leveraging government social protection mechanisms like the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP) in Pakistan.

Specialized Expertise and Financing: UNESCO provides essential technical assistance for education system diagnostics and is responsible for setting and tracking global education data. UN Women ensures gender integration within national education systems. These agencies often collaborate with key financing bodies like the World Bank (WB) and the Global Partnership for Education (GPE).

The World Bank has committed over USD 3.2 billion since 2016 to education projects specifically benefiting adolescent girls, while GPE created a $250 million thematic fund dedicated to gender equality programming in regions where girls' education lags.

Girls' Education: 5 Shocking Facts Everyone Should Know

Enforcement Limitations

Despite establishing an indispensable normative system, the UN faces significant challenges in accountability and enforcement, which limits its ability to fully protect girls' educational rights.

Lack of Direct Coercion: The UN system relies heavily on voluntary reporting and diplomatic pressure; its effectiveness is compromised when states choose to treat its frameworks as "aspirations" rather than legally enforceable "duties". Its moral condemnation frequently lacks the political leverage needed to compel compliance.

Exclusionary Cases: The systematic bans on secondary and tertiary education for girls in Afghanistan imposed by the Taliban serve as a stark example where the UN's authority is flouted. Despite issuing strong condemnations and warnings of long-term harm, the UN's lack of direct policing power means it cannot demolish these political barriers.

Security Council Silence: While the UN's actions are robust in advocacy and programming, the sources do not detail the Security Council taking direct binding action specifically to enforce education rights in fragile or conflict settings, illustrating the difficulty in escalating educational rights to the level of "hard" security issues. The broader challenge remains integrating educational rights into peacebuilding, sanctions, and aid conditionality frameworks to enhance leverage. Russia's veto makes it unlikely the Security Council will act on this issue.

Resistance to Rights Language: Even in resolution drafting, the UN faces intense diplomatic opposition to retaining strong rights-based language, particularly related to sensitive issues like sexual and reproductive health and rights and comprehensive sexuality education.

Although commitments are generally retained, this persistent opposition necessitates constant defensive action by rights advocates.

The UN has masterfully constructed the global framework for girls' education, establishing not only the right but also a robust menu of proven, scalable solutions such as financial support (cash transfers, fee elimination) and infrastructural safety (gender-specific WASH facilities). However, the global struggle now pivots on whether UN Member States and the UN system itself can find the political will and mechanisms necessary to transition from powerful advocacy to decisive, rights-enforcing accountability.

Landmark UN resolutions

The UN has established a robust normative architecture to secure the right to education for every girl, defining state obligations and guiding global action on the elimination of educational inequities (Right to Education Initiative 2018). These international frameworks articulate not only the fundamental entitlement to education but also delineate the political, economic, and social barriers that states must remove to ensure effective access for girls.

Central to this architecture are core human rights treaties. *The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979)*, particularly through Article 10 and subsequent General Recommendations, explicitly mandates that states take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women and girls in education (Right to Education Initiative 2018, 566). This includes ensuring equal opportunities for access to studies, curricula, and scholarships, as well as actively working to eliminate stereotypical gender concepts embedded in textbooks and teaching practices (Right to Education Initiative 2018, 7–9).

Similarly, the *Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989)* affirms every child's right to education without discrimination based on sex, with Article 28 requiring states to make primary education compulsory and free while promoting the accessibility of secondary education, often through financial assistance mechanisms (Right to Education Initiative 2018, 26–27, 566).

Further reinforcing these commitments, *the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs, 2015),* adopted by the UN General Assembly through the 2030 Agenda, set the political goal of achieving gender equality, with SDG 4 specifically targeting equitable, quality education for all and emphasizing the elimination of gender disparities across all levels (Ahsan 2022; United Nations 2015, 270, 569).

The UN Human Rights Council has supplemented these legal instruments through resolutions focusing on the practical barriers that impede girls' education and on mechanisms to hold states accountable. The seminal resolution *A/HRC/RES/32/20 (2016),* titled Realizing the Equal Enjoyment of the Right to Education by Every Girl, marked the first explicit HRC statement on this issue (Right to Education Initiative 2016, 590, 598).

This resolution called upon states to remove all obstacles to education, including discriminatory laws and harmful practices such as child marriage and early pregnancy, and emphasized the need for separate, adequate, and safe water and sanitation facilities in every primary and secondary school (Right to Education Initiative 2016, 261–262, 587, 595).

Importantly, it recognized education as a "multiplier right," which enables girls to claim and exercise other human rights and requested the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to report on obstacles to girls' education and make recommendations for

eliminating gender disparities by 2030 (Right to Education Initiative 2016, 260, 267–268, 569).

Crossing the threshold - Reflections on girls' education ten years into International Day of the Girl Child - The Education and Development Forum

The draft resolution was co-sponsored by multiple Member States, including Australia, Germany, Pakistan, the United States, and the United Kingdom, reflecting broad international commitment (Right to Education Initiative 2016, 252–253).

Building upon this foundation, *A/HRC/RES/35/22* (2017) reaffirmed state responsibilities and highlighted the importance of eliminating gender stereotypes within education systems while ensuring smooth transitions from primary to secondary schooling (Right to Education Initiative 2017, 596, 598). The evolution of the UN's approach is further reflected in *A/HRC/54/L.37/Rev.1 (2023),* which addresses intersecting vulnerabilities such as exclusion during climate-related disasters, digital exclusion, and the need for resilient education systems during emergencies (United Nations Human Rights Council 2023, 591, 596, 599).

The General Assembly has reinforced these efforts by targeting key drivers of educational dropout, particularly child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM). The UNGA adopted its first substantive resolution on CEFM in 2014, recognizing the urgent need to eliminate the practice, and subsequent resolutions have strengthened the normative framework by outlining drivers of child marriage and recommending concrete actions, including education-focused and gender-transformative strategies (Girls Not Brides 2024, 558, 560).

These resolutions are generally adopted by consensus, and global support has increased over time, growing from 116 co-sponsors for the first resolution to 125 co-sponsors in 2022 (Girls Not Brides 2024, 561). However, key challenges remain, including resistance to explicit references to sexual and reproductive health and rights, and the notable absence of co-sponsorship by several countries with the highest prevalence of CEFM, such as China, India, Indonesia, Iran, and Pakistan, revealing critical gaps in commitment where intervention is most needed (Girls Not Brides 2024, 562–563).

Through this combination of core treaties, HRC resolutions, SDGs, and General Assembly actions, the UN has established a comprehensive framework to advance girls' right to education, explicitly linking legal obligations with practical measures to eliminate discrimination, harmful practices, and systemic barriers, while promoting accountability and state responsibility.

After surviving a murder attempt by the Pakistani Taliban, Malala Yousafzai became a highly visible advocate for effort to promote education for girls everywhere.

Major Country and Bloc Positions

African Union (AU): The African Union (AU) promotes sovereign equality among its 55 Member States. The AU takes very general positions on major international issues like governance, peacebuilding and development. AU resolutions tend to stress general principles, relevant to all of its Member States. It occasionally gets involved in regional conflicts, but not consistently. Like the Arab League, the African Union leaves actual policy-making up to each of its Member States. On most issues, each state's parallel membership in the Non-Aligned Movement (below) can be a more reliable guide to their positions.

Many African Member States are strong advocates of global efforts to enhance girls' education, Southern and West Africa especially. Many Eastern and North African states also are highly supportive. But for many of these countries, sovereign national control remains vital.

Arab League: Because of sharp differences among its 22 Member States, the Arab League tends to act cautiously, and typically permits its Members to pursue their own distinctive polices. On divisive and controversial issues gender issues the Arab League is especially likely to leave policy-making up to each of its Member States. The biggest exception is any issue relevant to Palestine, on which it is more unified. As a result, Arab League states are likely to see any debate on almost any issue in terms of aspects relevant to their support for Palestine. On most other issues, each state's parallel membership in the Non-Aligned Movement (below) can be a more reliable guide to their positions.

Within their own territory, Arab countries can be more subtle, supporting the goals of equal educational opportunities for girls, but not always in support of specific measures. They tend to regard domestic social policy as. Sovereign responsibility. The UN can establish very general global goals, but not steer their actual policy.

China: While some countries are reducing their reliance on the UN, China is increasing its investment in the organization, making it the center of much of its foreign policy. For China, the great appeal is the UN Charter's emphasis on national sovereign equality, which China sees as supporting its authority at home, and facilitating working with other countries as legal equals.[1] China consistency supports goals established by the UN, and supports international institutions.[2] China also stresses the UN as a tool for increasing its influence over global values, a key element in its campaign to make the world more like China itself.

China's UN policy is not without concerns. It fears the UN will be used to create precedents for international action in the domestic affairs of Member States, precedents that could be used

[1] 'Xi says China always a trustworthy partner of UN', *Xinhua*, 1 September 2025, http://en.cppcc.gov.cn/2025-09/01/c_1120831.htm

[2] Wen Sheng, 'China leads global efforts to realize UN sustainable development goals for 2030', *Global Times*, 27 June 2023, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202306/1293251.shtml

against China. As Chinese UN diplomats at the UN said in another context, 'China's continuing and vehement insistence on respect for other nations' sovereignty is not only a cornerstone of its foreign policy but a foundational ethos for the government of a nation that has traditionally struggled to maintain control at its edges - from Xinjiang and Tibet in the far west to Hong Kong and Taiwan off its east coast.'[3]

European Union: for the 27 Member States of the EU, multilateral politics always is primarily about universal values, ideas that apply to all states equally. EU Member States can be expected to stress an approach that serves the entire international community, not the interests of any particular state, with all countries working toward agreed goals and standards. It often is the most visionary of actors within the UN system. The European Union also is the most generous funder of global development projects, offering grants or subsidized, low-interest loans for major initiatives.

But even the European Union is not as generous as it used to be. Aid money is going down, as it switches funding to national security. And European aid is highly conditional, with careful oversight to ensure it is spent as planned, efficiently, without fraud. Many EU donor states also make their aid conditional on basic national goals, including strengthening democratic government, rule of law, respect for minorities and equal rights for women.

Non-Aligned Movement: The 120 Member States of the NAM, the UN's dominant voting bloc and primarily interested in approaches to any issue that serve their needs as developing economies, burdened with significant poverty and demands for faster economic development. The NAM generally support universal values, such as EU efforts to create global standards on this, like most other issues.

Where the NAM departs from the EU and other advocates of multilateral action, is on funding. Although many of its members are not poor—its membership includes many wealthy oil exporters—the NAM routinely demands that any proposal for action come with generous funding, increases in foreign aid from wealthier Western countries.

While the NAM, as post-colonial states, welcome foreign funding, they resist the oversight and control that normally comes with it. Donor countries may offer assistance, but will make it conditional. Such oversight—whether intended to ensure progress toward program goals, to prevent fraud, or the direct investment back to the countries volunteering the money—is seen by NAM members as a threat to their national sovereignty. They welcome the money, in other words, but not the oversight. This sets up a confrontation, a diplomatic challenge, as sides struggle to advance their rival goals.

Russian Federation: Outside the Security Council, Russia can be an unpredictable actor in UN bodies. It's primary goal in all UN fora is insulating Russian freedom of action in Ukraine, to ensure other issues cannot become a wedge allowing discussion of the war or its effects. In the UN, Russia pioneered opposition to what it calls 'Gender Ideology', measures that specifically support any gender-based group. This policy has few other supporters, but Russia's aggressive position can have an effect.

Russia usually can rely on support from socialist countries like Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela and sometimes Vietnam. South Africa and African countries depend on Russin military help also

[3] Ted Anthony, 'China, at UN, warns against 'expansion of the battlefield' in the Ukraine war', *Associated Press*, 28 September 2024, https://apnews.com/article/china-united-nations-general-assembly-51ea58a6cd821656382f06ad0b3b93bc

can be very sympathetic. On particular issues the Russian Federation can work with China, Iran and North Korea.[4] Under the leadership of President Trump, the United States cooperates with Russia, albeit unpredictably, and probably not on this issue, unless a promising deal can be reached.[5]

United States: In general, the United States wants to minimize the role of UN agencies in all international issues. Cutting UN budgets is a prominent American goal that will be applied to this issue. Expect American diplomats to work to reduce the cost and effect of any UN initiative. The ideal UN initiative, from their perspective, allows each Member States to do as it pleases. Yet President Trump routinely makes an exception for the education of girl, which he strongly supports.

The American approach is not without international support. Far-right governments in countries like Argentina, El Salvador, Hungary, Israel and sometimes the Russian Federation may be tempted to support the United States on specific issues.

The United States also has had new success working with authoritarian leaders in non-aligned countries, typically by making issues part of a larger deal, trade-off to other goals American leaders are more concerned with. A large real estate deal, for example, involving territory in a host country, might be facilitated by other commercial deals. In this case, deals with tobacco or medical companies might be used to win development of tourist centers or city re-development plans.

Some Possible Proposals for Action

As sovereign countries, the Member States of the UN are free to develop the proposals they believe best serve their individual priorities as well as the needs of women and girls globally. Ideological differences also will be important, with governments sometimes favoring radically different approaches toward the practices of countries they oppose or support. But they may agree on support for global initiatives under the right conditions.

Global sanctions against governments banning girls' education: Creating a UN-backed sanctions framework targeting regimes that systematically restrict girls' education, would send a strong deterrent message.

Afghanistan is the obvious target, but so could be other countries that reject global norms on this topic. Israel also could be targeted by Member States of the Arab League and the Non-Aligned Movement, due to the war In Gaza, which ended much formal education, and because of its religious minorities (its large Haredi population especially) which oppose equal education for girls.

This proposal will be strongly opposed by Member States who fear the precedent of sanctions for a social policy, which could be used against them someday, maybe even on other social policies issues.

Establish a Permanent UN Special Tribunal on Gender Apartheid: A specialized body recognizing denial of education to women and girls as a form of "gender apartheid" could hold states and officials accountable under

[4] 'General Assembly Debates Russian Federation's Security Council Veto of European Amendments Seeking 'Just' Peace in Ukraine', *United Nations*, 6 March 2025, https://press.un.org/en/2025/ga12677.doc.htm

[5] James Landale and Patrick Jackson, 'US sides with Russia in UN resolutions on Ukraine', *BBC News*, 25 February 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c7435pnle0go

international law. The Tribunal could have investigative powers and an investigative agency. But this would require agreement on funding, staffing and the nature of the powers.

For example, where would the money come from? Would staff be independent or send by governments? And could the tribune investigate only when invited by a Member States, or would it be able to review cases even when opposed by a Member State?

And what would be the effect of its decisions? Would they be recommendations, under international law? Or would they be enforceable, under the domestic law of the effected country? Much would have to be decided.

Global Education Emergency Fund for Conflict and Fragile States: Possibly to be coordinated by UN agencies like UNESCO or UNICEF, and the Global Partnership for Education, fund would pool resources from donor states like Canada, the European Union and the United States to rapidly restore access to education in crisis zones.

This proposal will be especially appealing in situations where girls' education is not contested, where its normally is available, but interrupted by emergency circumstances.

Funding will be required, probably from donor countries. And control over the content and extent of its services to be provided are serious issues to be resolved.

Digital education corridors for girls in restricted environments: Using satellite internet and remote-learning platforms to reach girls in countries where schools are closed or restricted (such as Afghanistan or Sudan). Canada, the EU, and private tech partners could lead this initiative.

The possibilities of remote education may offer a partial solution to repression that prevents or complicates girls' education. Ensuring its availability may require creating an international mechanism—possibly a new agency—to make remote education available. Funding will be required, probably from donor countries. And control over the content and extent of its services will be a serious issue to be resolved.

Annual UN Global Accountability Report on Girls' Education: A transparent, data-driven progress report, tracking countries' compliance with *Sustainable Development Goal 4* (SDG 4, Quality Education) and *SDG 5* (Gender Equality) would spotlight both leaders and laggards. Supported by UNESCO and endorsed by the General Assembly.

An *Annual UN Global Accountability Report* will be strongly favored by Member States supportive of global progress. It will be opposed by Member States that want national control over the issue. If they cannot stop it, they may demand changes that ensure they keep national control over data collection and authorship of report sections on their countries.

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