

No Girl Left Behind: Advancing Adolescent Girls' Education in Ethiopia



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Executive Summary

Adolescent girls in Ethiopia face persistent barriers to education, including sociocultural norms, economic constraints, and political challenges, particularly in rural areas. While enrollment has improved, issues such as early marriage, gender-based violence, and weak policy enforcement continue to hinder progress. Urgent action is needed through gender-responsive policies, community engagement, and strengthened legal frameworks to ensure girls’ safety and retention in schools. Collaboration among government, civil society, and grassroots organizations is crucial for creating an inclusive education system that empowers girls and secures their right to learn. This brief highlights key challenges and recommendations to improve adolescent girls’ education in Ethiopia, drawing on evidence from the political economy analysis of the Inspiring Girls and Grassroots Networks for Inclusive and Transformative Education (IGNITE) consortium project.

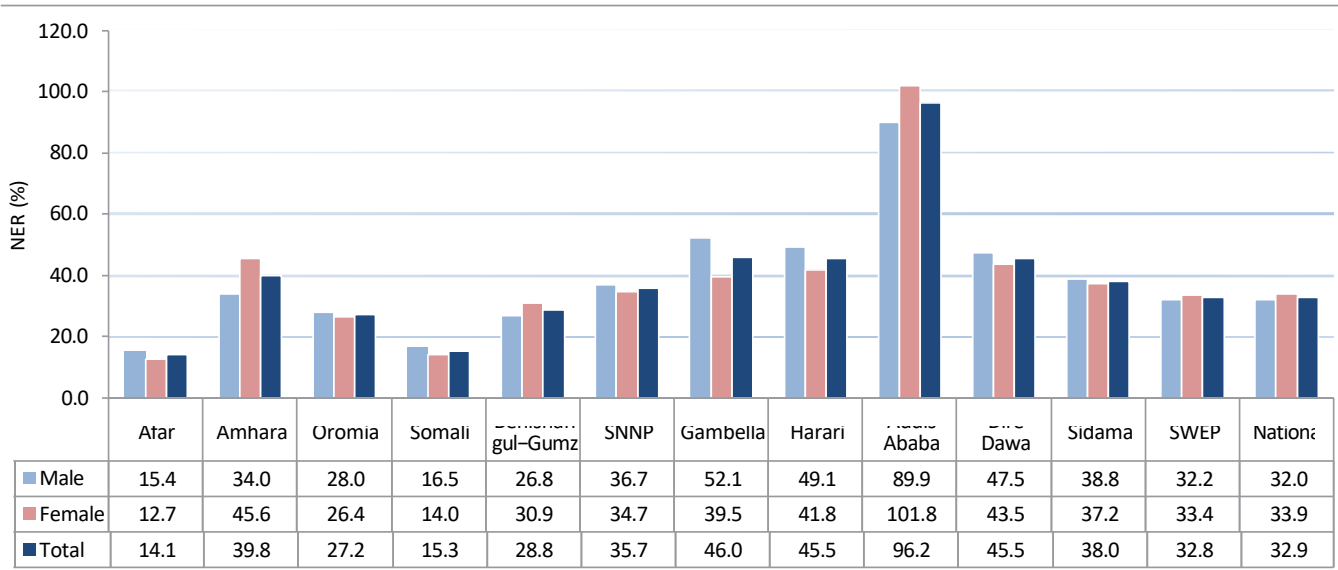
Background

Ethiopia has achieved near-gender parity in primary school enrollment (Gender Parity Index: 0.98) through government policies and international commitments. However, significant challenges persist for adolescent girls, particularly in secondary education transition rates (45% for girls vs. 53% for boys) and completion rates (3% in rural areas vs. 16% in urban areas). These disparities stem from multifaceted barriers including socioeconomic inequalities, cultural norms, and systemic challenges.

The policy brief draws on evidence from the IGNITE project’s Political Economy Analysis (PEA), which examines

The complex interplay of political, economic, social, and cultural factors affecting girls’ education. Focusing on marginalized and rural communities, the analysis highlights the critical role of grassroots initiatives, civil society organizations, and feminist groups in advancing girls’ educational aspirations. The PEA framework systematically assesses stakeholder roles (government agencies, NGOs, and development partners) to identify systemic barriers, policy gaps, and implementation challenges, while uncovering opportunities for improving educational outcomes for adolescent girls in Ethiopia. The findings, therefore, aim to guide targeted solutions to improve access, retention, and the quality of education for adolescent girls.

Factors Influencing Adolescent Girls’ Educationin Ethiopia



Source: NER by Region and Sex, Grades 9-12, 2022/23, MOE

Socio-Cultural Barriers

Deep-rooted gender norms in rural Ethiopia prioritize boys’ education, with 73% of girls dropping out due to household labor demands. These expectations reinforce

inequality by limiting girls’ school attendance and engagement.

Harmful practices like FGM (affecting 65% of women 15-49) create additional obstacles, linking to early

marriage and school dropout. Beyond immediate health risks, FGM causes long-term educational and economic disadvantages through physical trauma and psychological impacts.

Gender-based violence further disrupts education, with 30% of girls experiencing physical or sexual violence in schools. Inadequate safety measures and reporting systems lead to increased absenteeism and dropouts, perpetuating gender inequality and denying girls’ rights to education.

These interconnected barriers, domestic burdens, harmful traditions and school violence create a cycle that limits girls’ educational attainment and future opportunities.

Economic Barriers

Despite free primary education, poverty creates significant obstacles for girls’ schooling. Hidden costs such as uniforms, supplies, and transportation consume up to 34% of the income of poor families, forcing 73% of girls to drop out due to financial hardship. These expenses often lead families to prioritize boys’ education, worsening the gender gap.

Early marriage compounds these challenges, with 41% of girls forced into marriage before the age of 18 years. Families frequently view marriage as an economic strategy, either through bride prices or reducing household costs. This practice typically ends girls’ education as they assume domestic roles, creating cycles of poverty and inequality across generations.

Pastoralist regions face particularly severe disparities, where they struggle with inadequate school infrastructure, untrained teachers, and rigid curricula that are unsuitable for mobile lifestyles. Combined with limited economic prospects, these factors result in alarmingly low enrollment, just 12–15% in the Afar and Somali regions versus the national 30% average for secondary education.

These interconnected financial pressures, from household costs to early marriage and regional underdevelopment, systematically disadvantaged girls’ education, perpetuating both gender and geographical inequalities in Ethiopia’s education system.

Political and Cultural Related Barriers

Ethiopia’s political instability has severely disrupted education, with conflict displacing 4.5 million people (half being women/girls) by mid-2024. Schools have been destroyed or converted to shelters, disproportionately affecting girls who face increased risks of early marriage and gender-based violence during displacement, often viewed by families as protective measures in crisis situations.



11.6 million
School-aged girls in Ethiopia (primary and secondary)*

40%
of girls are married as children**



10.9 million
girls are enrolled in over 39,000 primary and secondary schools*

1.6 million
Primary and secondary school aged girls are out of school*

47%
of girls who start Grade 1 do not make it to Grade 5*

75%
of secondary school age girls do not attend secondary school*



414,117
refugee school-aged children in Ethiopia (52% boys & 48% girls)***

Over 1 million
internally displaced school-aged children in Ethiopia (48% boys and 52% girls****)

Source: UNICEF Ethiopia Fact Sheet, Girls’ Education, 2018

While civil society organizations gained more operational freedom under the 2019 reforms, bureaucratic obstacles and funding limitations persisted, hampering their advocacy for girls' education and implementation of gender-focused programs.

Despite adopting international frameworks such as CEDAW and launching national initiatives (ESDP and GEQIP), implementation gaps undermine progress. Weak enforcement, cultural resistance, and inadequate inclusive education measures continue to hinder meaningful change, leaving policies promoting gender equality in education largely ineffective. These systemic failures in policy execution perpetuate barriers to girls' access to education and quality.

Infrastructure and Accessibility Challenges

Rural areas face severe shortages in secondary schools, forcing students to travel long distances - an impossible option for many girls who risk harassment, violence, and abduction during their commutes. Transportation costs create additional financial barriers. These challenges contribute to alarmingly low secondary enrollment in pastoralist regions (under 15%) versus the national average (30%), with conflict zones experiencing further disruptions from destroyed schools and displacement.

Most rural schools lack gender-sensitive infrastructure, particularly separate toilets and handwashing stations.

This deficiency creates menstrual hygiene management challenges, leading to increased absenteeism during periods, higher dropout rates and perpetuation of menstrual stigma.

The absence of proper sanitation facilities combined with limited access to menstrual products and cultural taboos creates a hostile learning environment that systematically disregards adolescent girls' education. These infrastructure gaps reinforce the gender disparities in educational access and completion.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Targeted Interventions: Feminist civil society organizations should develop targeted, gender-responsive policies to address the specific educational barriers faced by adolescent girls in Ethiopia's rural, pastoralist, and conflict-affected regions. These interventions must challenge deep-rooted gender norms through advocacy campaigns, while implementing practical solutions such as government-supported scholarships, cash transfers, and feeding programs to reduce economic barriers. Recognizing girls' education as both a fundamental right and development imperative, such efforts should combine policy reform with community engagement to

create sustainable pathways for girls' empowerment and equal educational opportunities. This approach requires addressing both systemic obstacles and immediate financial pressures that disproportionately force girls out of school.

Fostering Collaboration and Policy Integration: To effectively advance girls' education, feminist CSOs must foster multisectoral collaboration by uniting policymakers, educators, and community leaders to challenge entrenched norms. Strategies should include awareness campaigns, family incentives, and evidence-based advocacy, to promote equitable access to education. A coordinated approach involving government, civil society, grassroots groups, and the private sector is essential for addressing systemic barriers. Policies must integrate education, gender equality, child protection, and economic empowerment to create holistic support systems. CSOs should serve as bridges between communities and decision makers, ensuring that local perspectives inform national policies and programs.

Empower Local Networks: To strengthen girls' education, grassroots organizations and CSOs need enhanced capacity through training, sustainable funding, and technical support. Many lack the resources and expertise to effectively advocate for policy changes or address barriers, such as early marriage and GBV. Key interventions include capacity-building in policy engagement and gender-responsive strategies, mentorship programs, and direct multi-year funding from donors to ensure a long-term impact. Collaboration among governments, NGOs, and local organizations is essential for sustaining community-driven solutions.

Promote Accountability: To ensure the effective implementation of gender-responsive education policies, robust accountability mechanisms must be established. CSOs should monitor and report girls' enrollment, retention, and completion rates, particularly in marginalized communities. This requires collaboration among governments, CSOs, international partners, and oversight bodies. The Ministry of Education working with local CSOs should lead to the development of transparent and community-responsive systems. International donors can support data infrastructure, while independent watchdogs can verify the accuracy and assess the policy impact.

Expanding Safe and Gender-Responsive Learning Environments: To reduce dropout rates and ensure girls' education, schools must provide safe, gender-sensitive environments with proper sanitation, menstrual hygiene support, and protection against GBV. While governments bear primary responsibility for infrastructure improvements, CSOs play a vital supporting

role by advocating for policy changes, mobilizing resources from donors and the private sector, conducting facility assessments, and implementing hygiene and child protection programs. A collaborative approach between education authorities and civil society is essential for developing comprehensive solutions that address both physical infrastructure and safety needs.

Building Girl-Led Initiatives: Educational programs must actively involve adolescent girls in designing, implementing, and evaluating initiatives that affect them. Governments and CSOs should establish platforms for girls to form peer networks, lead advocacy efforts, and address critical issues, such as GBV, menstrual stigma, and inadequate facilities. These girl-led initiatives should combine leadership training, mentorship, and life skill development to build confidence and resilience. CSOs play a key supporting role by providing resources, amplifying girls' voices, and ensuring accountability in education systems. This approach transforms girls from passive beneficiaries to empowered leaders during their educational journeys.

Enhancing Community-Led Social Norm Change: CSOs should leverage grassroots networks to challenge harmful traditional practices through sustained community dialogue, media campaigns, and engagement. This responsibility lies with various stakeholders including governments, community leaders, religious institutions, and the media. These groups can work together through sustained efforts to reshape societal attitudes and norms. Additionally, CSOs can encourage the involvement of educated young women as role models and mentors, empowering them to advocate for girls' education and serve as examples of success and resilience.



Conclusion

Addressing the barriers to adolescent girls’ education in Ethiopia requires urgent, targeted interventions that go beyond policy formulation to effective implementation and enforcement. Political instability, weak accountability mechanisms, and limited civil society engagement continue to hinder progress, while economic hardships and entrenched socio-cultural norms disproportionately affect girls in rural and marginalized communities. Without immediate action, the persistence of financial barriers, early marriage, and gender-based violence will further entrench disparities, limiting girls' access to quality education and their long-term socioeconomic prospects.

To create a truly inclusive education system, Ethiopia must strengthen its legal and policy frameworks, enhance financial support mechanisms for disadvantaged families, and expand gender-responsive school infrastructure. Increased collaboration between government agencies, civil society organizations, and local communities is essential to addressing deeply rooted cultural resistance and ensuring the safety and retention of girls in schools. By prioritizing these measures, Ethiopia can break the cycle of gender-based educational exclusion and empower adolescent girls.

Further Reading

1. Totoba, B. A., & György, M. (2024). The Role of Modern Education in Historical Move Towards Gender Equality Issue in Ethiopia. Sexuality and Gender Studies Journal, 2(2): 32-51. <https://doi.org/10.33422/sgsj.v2i2.843>

2. Tafere, Yisak and Agazi Tiumelissan .(2020). "Slow Progression: Educational Trajectories of Young Men and Women in Ethiopia". In: Young Lives Working Paper 192. 3 UNICEF Ethiopia. (2024). Against all odds, adolescent girls find hope in learning. <https://www.unicef.org/ethiopia/stories/against-all-odds-adolescent-girls-find-hope-learning>



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