Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and Education

Child marriage, adolescent pregnancy, HIV and GBV all undermine girls' access to education.

When girls are healthy and their rights are fulfilled, they can go to school, learn and gain the skills and resources they need to be healthy, productive and empowered adults. In the last two decades, we have seen enormous advances in girls’ educational attainment at the primary level. However, girls in most regions, particularly the poorest and most marginalized, continue to fall behind at the secondary level.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights issues, especially gender-based violence and adolescent girls’ vulnerability to child, early and forced marriage, unintended pregnancy, and HIV and other sexually transmitted infections impede girls’ educational aspirations.

The post-2015 development agenda must address sexual and reproductive health and rights issues to meet educational and development goals.

Facts at a Glance

Early pregnancies and child marriage contribute to school dropout.

- A significant proportion of girls become pregnant during the time that they should be in school: About 19% of girls in the developing world become pregnant before age 18, and about 3% become pregnant before age 15.¹
- About one-third of girls in the developing world are married. In South Asia, nearly 50% of girls are married before age 18, and in Sub-Saharan Africa, nearly 40% are.² Not coincidentally, these are also regions where the gender gap is greatest between boys and girls at the secondary level.
- Girls with no education are three times more likely to marry before age 18 than those with secondary or higher education.³
- Girls with only primary education are twice as likely to marry as those with secondary or higher education.⁴

Delaying marriage can enhance schooling.

- A study in Bangladesh found that for each additional year of delay in marriage, a girl will gain an average of 0.22 additional years of schooling, and the probability she is literate will rise by 5.6%.⁵
- A study in India found that a conditional cash transfer program focused on delaying age of marriage also increased the likelihood that girls would stay in school.⁶

Girls and boys often lack access to information and services that would improve their sexual and reproductive health and educational status.

- In Sub-Saharan Africa and South Central and Southeast Asia, more than 60% of adolescents who wish to avoid pregnancy do not have access to modern contraception.⁷
- Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) around the world reduces risky behaviors. About 62 percent of programs had a positive effect on at least one behavioral or biological outcome, such as increased condom use or reduced unplanned pregnancies.⁸ However, in many countries, such programs are unavailable.

Gender-based violence is a major deterrent to education.

- Violence undermines access to school as well as learning.⁹
- A recent nationwide study in Tanzania reported that three of every 10 Tanzanian females age 12 to 24 had been victims of sexual violence. Of these, almost 25% reported an incident while traveling to or from school, and 15% reported an incident at school or on school grounds.¹⁰
- A similar study in Kenya found that females and males age 18-24 who had experienced unwanted sexual touching most often reported that the incident occurred in school.¹¹


3 UNFPA, 2012.

4 UNFPA, 2012.


7 UNFPA, 2013.


