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New UN atlas shows access to secondary education still a challenge for girls



The UNESCO World Atlas of Gender Equality in Education enables readers to visualize the educational pathways of girls and boys. Photo: UNESCO

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Access to secondary education is still a challenge for girls, especially in parts of Africa and Asia, according to a United Nations atlas published today that highlights the differences in education between girls and boys in terms of access, participation and progression.

The atlas, which was produced by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)), includes more than 120 maps, charts and tables illustrating the extent to which

gender disparities in education have changed since 1970 and how they are shaped by factors such as national wealth, geographic location, investment in education and fields of study.

It shows that girls in all parts of the world have benefitted from efforts to achieve universal primary education, especially since 1990, with two-thirds of countries having achieved gender parity at the primary level. However, access to secondary education remains a challenge for girls in many regions, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia.

“This atlas is a call for action,” [said](#) UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova. “The growth in girls’ enrolment in primary education is a clear demonstration of strong political will to achieve the education for all goals. But there are still great strides to be made in order to reach the large numbers of vulnerable girls and women who continue to be denied their right to education,” she said.

“We must address the root causes of this discrimination and target our action towards those most in need,” she added.

The atlas reflects patterns in education by visualizing a series of data, including the school-life expectancy (SLE), which is the average number of years of education that a boy or a girl entering the system can expect to receive. In the Arab States for example, girls are likely to spend 10 years in schools while boys still have an advantage with having at least one extra year for instruction.

“These data reflect the commitment of governments and the international community to close the gender gap in education, but there is a tremendous difference between gender parity and gender equality,” said Hendrik van der Pol, Director of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

The atlas also shows how access to education may not always translate into better opportunities for women in terms of employment and income.

“There may be equal numbers of boys and girls in the classroom but to what extent are both groups encouraged – or discouraged – to pursue their education and potential?” Mr. van der Pol said. “To better understand what girls and boys are learning in the classrooms, UNESCO is developing new ways to measure the quality of education and the learning outcomes of all students, with a specific focus on gender.”

The print edition of the atlas, available in English, French and Spanish, will be accompanied by an online data mapping tool that will enable users to track trends over time, adapt the maps and export the data.

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