

Next Generation

Education and skills for women and girls

What we know brief

7 March 2024



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Executive summary

This briefing paper explores different factors that enable or hinder women and girls' access to education and skills in seven Next Generation countries. These are spread across South and East Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Europe, and include Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Viet Nam, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Poland.

The paper applies a socio-ecological lens to draw insights on enablers and barriers at various levels: individual, interpersonal, organisational, community, societal, and policy and legal. It also incorporates the principles of gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) to research design and delivery across the various country contexts. It reanalyses seven Next Generation datasets to the extent possible based on age (15–24 and 25–35), sex (women and men), and location (rural and urban). Insights are also drawn from qualitative interview data collected in 2023.

Overall, there is a greater volume of evidence on barriers than enablers, pointing to the urgent need for galvanising action on amplifying the enablers and mitigating the reported barriers.

Enablers of education and skills

Key enablers emerging from the evidence include:

- **Individual:** Young people, especially women and girls recognise education as key to self-empowerment and success over time.
- **Interpersonal:** Family support is critical to sustaining women and girls' engagement in education and skills in the long run.
- **Organisational:** International organisations and civil society actors address crucial gaps in knowledge and skills, including advocating for inclusive policy formulation that are often overlooked in educational settings. Young people value extra-curricular activities for their role in cultivating new skills for personal development and voice. Safe school and university campuses enable young people to remain motivated. Alternative forms of learning fill a critical gap for those who cannot access or drop out of formal education.
- **Policy and legal:** Education policies and laws play a critical role in strengthening education systems for young women and men.

Barriers to education and skills

Key barriers include:

- **Individual:** Insufficient household income is a key factor that contributes to young women and girls dropping out of school.
- **Interpersonal:** Despite personal aspirations of young women and girls to pursue education and acquire skills, prevailing mindsets of families that accord secondary status to them pose significant barriers.
- **Community:** Discrimination against young people based on gender, disability, and ethnicity creates barriers to education. This is magnified for women and girls.
- **Organisational:** Existing curriculum design and delivery does not match the priorities and preferences of young people. The lack of appropriate career counselling that prepares young people after graduation inhibits student growth.
- **Societal:** Existing stereotypes hinder women and girls from studying or pursuing a career in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).
- **Policy and legal:** Uneven distribution of infrastructure (e.g. schools, roads, energy, transport, and telecommunications including internet) amplifies challenges to learn in rural areas especially for women and girls who do not have access to gender-sensitive infrastructure.

Way forward

The findings of this paper reveal how different stakeholders can work to improve existing conditions for women and girls to pursue education and skills over time.

1. Family and community support is critical to sustaining long-term engagement of women and girls in education and skills. Specific efforts would include:
 - Increasing awareness of and engaging with families and communities to ensure that women and girls (including those with disabilities and from minority communities) are not undervalued but encouraged to pursue education and skills.

- Investing in multi-purpose community infrastructure to improve access to education and skills facilities.
 - Creating inclusive and safe spaces within communities for women and girls to interact and network without fear of discrimination.
 - Enabling educated women and girls to act as role models for family and community members.
2. Civil society organisations (CSOs) and public and private education and training service providers are key to ensuring women and girls have access to quality education and skills development over time. Key initiatives based on public-private partnerships as well as collaboration between CSOs and the private sector would include:
- Increasing advocacy on promoting gender equality in educational settings.
 - Leveraging existing expertise across CSOs and private actors (such as telecommunications and EdTech companies) through budgetary and technological support to pilot new initiatives as well as scale up best practices.
 - Improving learning and teaching quality through well-designed curricula and trained teachers who have knowledge of local contexts.
 - Providing progressive career guidance, mentoring, and breaking existing patterns of gender stereotypes so more women and girls pursue STEM education.
3. Policymakers' and legislators' work is essential to ensure women and girls have access to education and skills development. Areas to focus on would include:
- Formulating long-term policies on gender equality in education and skills that are effectively implemented to increase representation.
 - Developing policies to mainstream cross-sectoral collaboration and partnership with CSOs and the private sector to scale up best practices.
 - Updating national curricula to ensure that education and skills training is relevant.
 - Ensuring geographic disparities between rural and urban areas are reduced with long-term infrastructure planning and development with an emphasis on reducing the digital divide.
 - Upgrading existing educational facilities to ensure gender-sensitive infrastructure and to enable access for persons with disabilities.
 - Ensuring development expenditure on education and skills training is concomitant with needs on the ground with greater emphasis on hard-to-reach communities.



1 Introduction

Education and skills are fundamental to empowering women and girls. Yet, millions of them have had short learning journeys. Ensuring that all girls go to school, acquire skills and build confidence in safe learning environments, and reach higher levels of education would expand their choices, ambitions and potential for the future.

This briefing paper, a part of the British Council's thematic study, *Next Generation: What we know on women and girls*, delves into the enablers for and barriers to education and skills for women and girls in seven countries: Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Viet Nam, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Poland. The overarching research question is:

'What do we know about education and skills for women and girls?'

The paper is organised as follows: Chapter 2 presents the research methodology; Chapter 3 introduces country contexts; Chapters 4 and 5 delve into the key enablers and barriers; and Chapter 6 concludes with recommendations.

What is the Next Generation programme?

The Next Generation is a global research programme that explores the needs, potential, and aspirations of young people across the world. The research seeks to analyse the conditions that support young people and allow them to reach their potential as fulfilled, productive and active citizens. It includes those from underprivileged or geographically isolated backgrounds, as well as those from more established communities and represents the aspirations of young women and girls, as well as young men and boys.

Research is initiated in countries that are experiencing a period of notable change, with the purpose of ensuring that young people's voices are heard, no matter their background or gender, and their interests properly represented in decisions that will have lasting implications for their lives. The research is always completed with a series of recommendations to support policy change.

The overall aim of Next Generation is defined through three strands:

- **Research:** Understanding youth attitudes and aspirations, including those from underprivileged backgrounds and difference by gender.

- **Youth voice and capacity building:** Amplifying youth voice from young people from a range of backgrounds, including supporting their active participation, inclusion within the research process and opportunities for skills development.
- **Policy impact:** Supporting better youth policymaking, including perspectives of underprivileged youth and support that increases the inclusion of women and girls.

Next Generation has been conducted in the following regions and countries – Asia: Indonesia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Viet Nam; Middle East and North Africa: Lebanon and Turkey; Sub-Saharan Africa: Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, South Africa, Sudan, and Zimbabwe; Europe and the UK: Albania, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Poland, and the UK; and Latin America and the Caribbean: Colombia.

Follow-up reports have been developed for Myanmar and Lebanon, and an overview report has been conducted on Next Generation countries in Africa. Work is currently underway in Iraq and Bangladesh, and new research will shortly be launched in Brazil and Kazakhstan.

2 Research methodology

The paper uses a mixed-methods approach. It combines insights from the seven Next Generation country-level reports and datasets from 2018 to 2023 and new qualitative interview data from 2023.¹ Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model from the 1970s, which posits that people exist and interact within a complex ecological system of interrelated levels, provides a compelling framework to analyse the data. The five levels include:

1. **Individual:** The physical and cognitive characteristics of youth, such as age, education, income, experience, interests, attitudes, and beliefs.
2. **Interpersonal:** The immediate social circle of youth, such as peers, partners, family, teachers, and community leaders, who influence young people's perceptions and behaviours.
3. **Organisational/community:** The structured communities and settings in which social relationships occur, including schools, workplaces, training academies, and neighbourhoods. The characteristics and interactions in each space can either facilitate or hinder young people's access to education, political, social and economic empowerment. Furthermore, they play a crucial role in fostering or addressing violence against women and girls.
4. **Societal:** The broad societal factors that shape youth participation in education, political, social, and economic change processes, including social and cultural norms that help to maintain or rebalance inequalities and violence between groups in society.
5. **Policy and legal:** Public policies, laws and regulations at various levels – including local and national policy frameworks – and programme interventions around education, skills, violence against women and girls, and broader policies on empowerment.

Since the Next Generation reports were published at various points in time over the five-year period, the team reviewed policy and grey literature published between 2018 and 2023. This helped to better understand the contexts of each country. The research team also clustered key findings from the seven reports into themes, enablers, and barriers using the different socio-ecological levels. Fifty-eight semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted across the seven countries in native languages and English. Stakeholders for the KIIs included government officials, bilateral and multilateral development agencies, implementing partner agencies, and civil society (academics, thought leaders, activists, influencers, and rights-based organisations). Data from the interviews was anonymised and coded in a qualitative analysis grid using the socio-ecological levels. Enablers and barriers common to at least two or more countries are presented in the paper.

Cross-country insights derived from global datasets have focused on questions that allowed comparisons across at least four of the seven countries. These are related to the proportion of young people out of school at upper secondary level and secondary school completion rates disaggregated by sex, as well as the educational attainment sub-index scores and country rankings from the World Economic Forum's 2023 Global Gender Gap Index.

¹ Reports (most recent first): Pakistan (June 2023), Indonesia (October 2022), Poland (May 2021), Nigeria (November 2020), Viet Nam (August 2020), Ethiopia (October 2019), and Sri Lanka (March 2019).

3 Country contexts

The seven countries in this paper have diverse political, social, and economic conditions. Three of them (Indonesia, Pakistan, and Nigeria) are the world's fourth, fifth, and sixth most populated countries with sizeable youth demographics. Youth aged 15–35 constitute a significant share in

each country (25 per cent in Poland and between 30 per cent and 38 per cent in the other six countries). Women and girls make up equal shares of the population.

Table 1. Key data on each country

Key indicators	Pakistan	Sri Lanka	Indonesia	Viet Nam	Nigeria	Ethiopia	Poland
Income classification*	LMIC	LMIC	UMIC	LMIC	LMIC	LIC	HIC
Total population (in millions)	234	22	277.5	99	219	123	38.4
Share of girls and women in total population	50%	52%	50%	51%	49%	50%	52%
Share of youth aged 15–35 in total population	37%	30%	33%	32%	34%	38%	25%
Year CESCR ratified	2008	1980	2006	1982	1993	1993	1997

Sources: UNDESA (2022); OHCHR (n.d.).

*LIC: low-income country, LMIC: lower-middle-income country, UMIC: upper-middle-income country, HIC: high-income country.

To varying degrees, the right to education is enshrined in the Constitutions of each country. The seven countries have also ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) (see Table 1) where Article 13 outlines the obligations of state parties to ensure access to education.

Pakistan's Constitution has provisions for free and compulsory education between the ages of five and 16. In 2010, the 18th Amendment to the Constitution devolved power to the four major provinces (Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan). Under the decentralised structure, each province is responsible for creating policies and laws on education delivery.

Sri Lanka's Constitution guarantees universal and equal access to education for all. Since 1947, education is free from primary through university (NEC, 2022). The central government develops and implements education policies, and the provincial councils administer education delivery (Arunatilake, n.d.).

Indonesia's Constitution includes provisions for the right to education and equal opportunity for citizens (GPE, 2024). Education delivery is decentralised to the provinces and districts, and children between the ages of seven and 15 are entitled to basic education (Mukminin et al., 2019). Policy formulation and curriculum development are centralised (ibid.). Introduced in 2019, the Merdeka Belajar (Emancipated Learning) reforms aim to address learning outcomes (OECD, 2023).

Viet Nam's Constitution recognises education and training as key national priorities. Primary education is compulsory and free while the state makes provisions to universalise lower secondary education (Education Law, 2019). Education policymaking and curriculum development are centralised, and service delivery is decentralised (Hoang, 2017).

Nigeria's Constitution contains provisions for making primary education compulsory, free and universal. Following the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act, 2004, primary and junior secondary education are meant to be compulsory, free and universal (FME, n.d.). The federal government is responsible for policies and tertiary education while secondary and primary education delivery lies with the state and local governments respectively (Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2019).

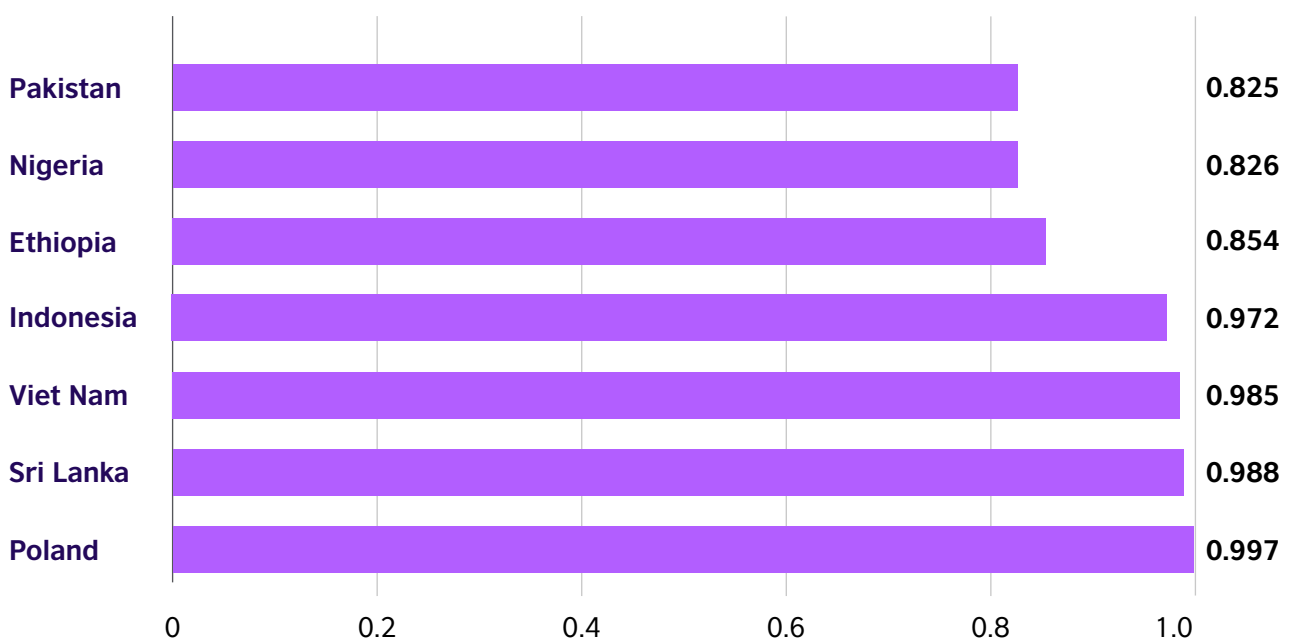
Ethiopia's Constitution recognises the state's obligation to provide citizens with access to education, which is compulsory for ages seven through 12.

Poland's Constitution enshrines the right to compulsory education for all until the age of 18. Education in public schools and higher education institutions is free. Service delivery is decentralised.

The World Economic Forum's (WEF) educational attainment sub-index is a useful measure to understand the performance of different countries on closing the gap between men and women. This sub-index captures the gap between women's and men's current access to education through the enrolment ratios of women to men in primary-, secondary- and tertiary-level education. A longer-term view of the country's ability to educate women and men in equal numbers is captured through the ratio of women's literacy rate to men's literacy rate.

Of all seven countries, Poland leads with the highest score, 0.997, and ranks 50 out of 146 countries in terms of closing the gender gap in educational attainment between men and women. Pakistan has the lowest score, 0.825, and ranks 138 (WEF, 2023).²

Figure 1. Country scores on the educational attainment sub-index (0–1)

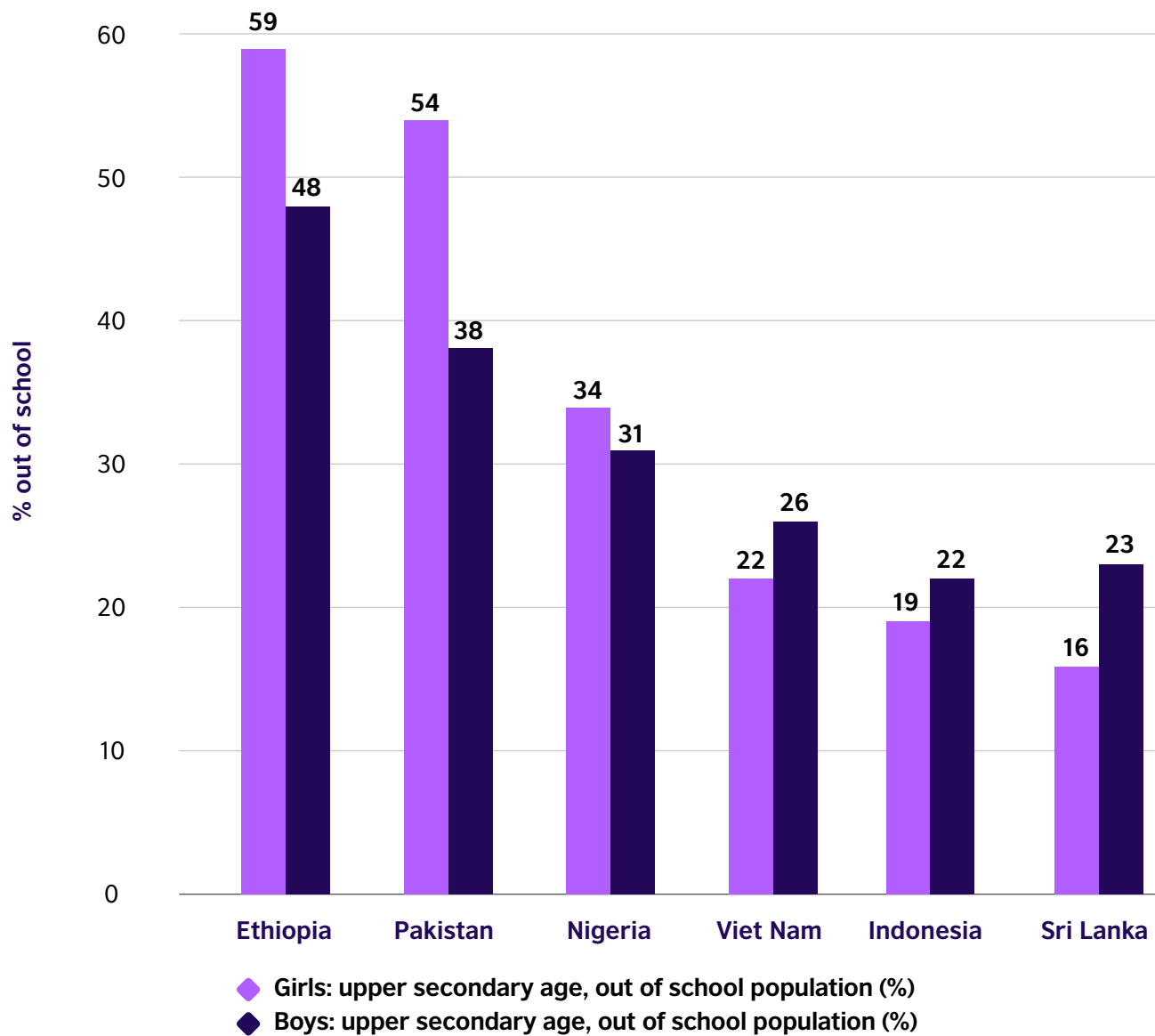


Source: WEF (2023).

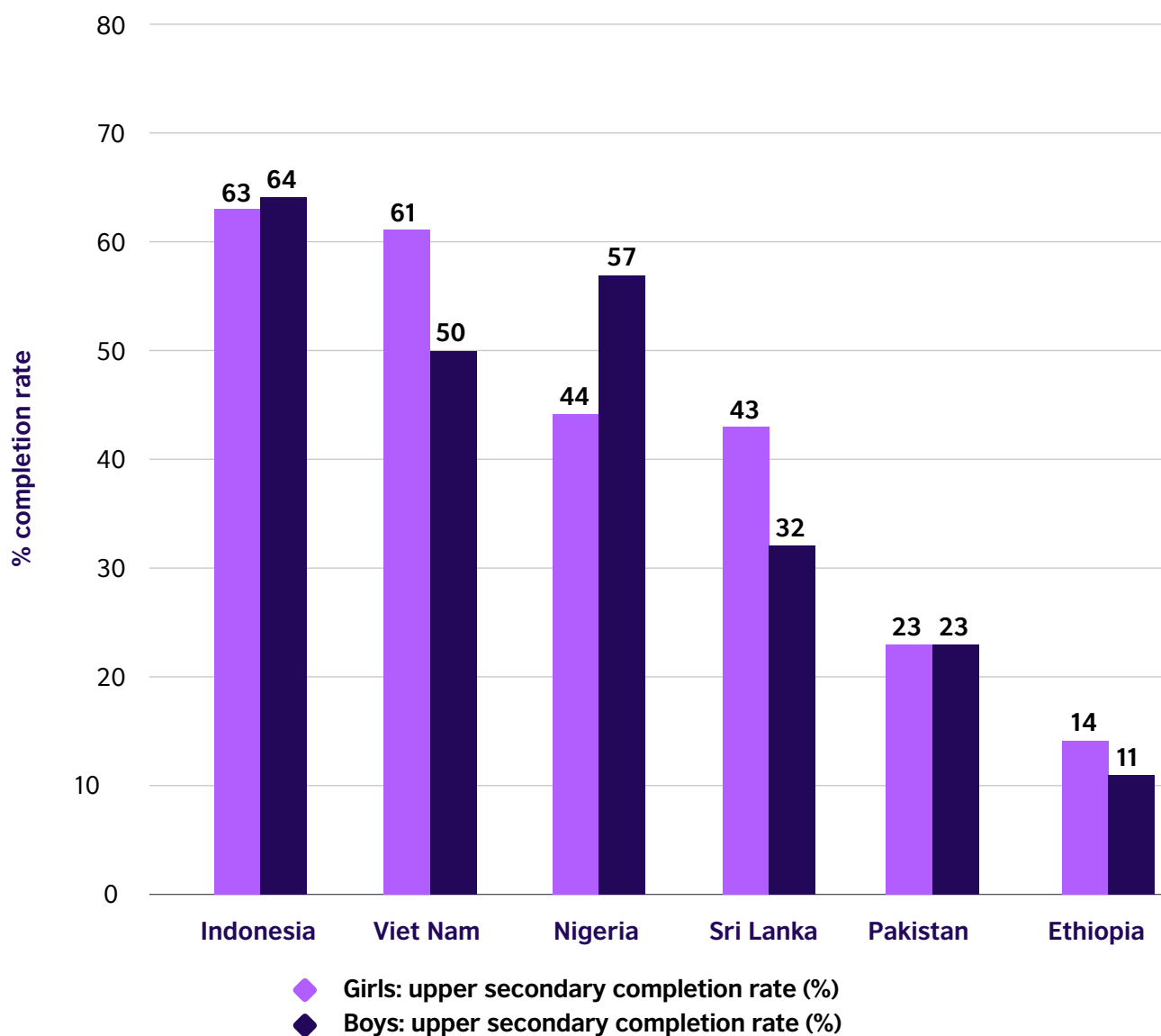
Progress on educational attainment is also evident in the case of Sri Lanka, Viet Nam, and Indonesia. However, except for Poland, access to education remains a key challenge especially for women and girls across the six countries.

Over 50 per cent of girls of upper secondary school age in Ethiopia and Pakistan are out of school (see Figure 2). Over 60 per cent of girls of upper secondary school age have completed secondary education in Indonesia and Viet Nam (see Figure 3).

² Other country rankings out of 146 countries on the Educational Attainment sub-index of the 2023 Global Gender Gap Index area as follows: Sri Lanka (85), Viet Nam (89), Indonesia (106), Ethiopia (135), and Nigeria (137) (WEF, 2023).

Figure 2. Rate of children out of school

Source: UNICEF (2022).

Figure 3. Secondary school completion rate

Source: UNICEF (2022).



Table 2. Notable laws and policies in each country with a focus on recent years

Country	Notable laws
Pakistan	The Constitution (1973); 18th Constitutional Amendment; Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2012 (applies to the federal capital only); Punjab Free and Compulsory Education Ordinance, 2014; Sindh Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2013; Balochistan Compulsory Education Act, 2014; Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Primary and Secondary Education Act, 2017; Policies for Students with Disabilities at Higher Education Institutions, 2019; Policy on Protection Against Sexual Harassment in Higher Education Institutions, 2020; Undergraduate Education Policy, 2020.
Sri Lanka	Free Education Act (1947); The Constitution (1978); National Policy Proposals on Higher Education (2019); National Education Policy Framework (2020–2030); General Education Sector Development Plan (2021–2025).
Indonesia	The Constitution (1945); Law 32/2004 on Local Government; Law on the National Education System (No. 20/2003); Medium Term Development 2020–2024; Merdeka Belajar reforms (2019).
Viet Nam	The Constitution (2013); Education Law (2019); Education Development Strategic Plan (2021–2030).
Nigeria	The Constitution (1999); Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act (2004); National Policy on Education (2004).
Ethiopia	The Constitution (1995); Education and Training Policy 1994 (and implementation 2002); Education Sector Development Plan V, 2016–2020; Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap (Draft).
Poland	The Constitution (1997); Law on School Education (2016); School Education Act (1991).



4 Enablers for education and skills

This chapter presents findings on the factors that have enabled access to education and skills for women and girls in the different countries.

4.1 Individual enablers

Positive outlook on education among young people

Young people recognise education as key to self-empowerment and success over time. In Pakistan, young people not only regard education as integral to empowerment at an individual level but also as a key driver of positive social transformation and innovation (Babar et al., 2023). They recognise that education instils confidence and equips them to address future challenges (ibid.). In recent years, this has been evident especially in the case of young women and girls, where signs of outperforming male students in science and engineering are increasingly seen (interviews, 2023).

Young Sri Lankans think that education plays an integral role in fostering social cohesion across diverse groups in their post-war society. According to them, an inclusive curriculum that values diversity across the board can instil a sense of unity from a young age (Perera et al., 2019). Key informants state that sustained access to education also enhances social protection among marginalised youth (interviews, 2023). Additionally, young women and girls have higher aspirations compared to the previous generation and are increasingly assertive in pursuing education beyond high school, partly motivated by the desire to migrate elsewhere after attaining educational and professional qualifications (ibid.).

In Indonesia, youth underscore the role of education as vital to character formation and equally important in terms of creating a shared sense of identity that reinforces national identity and pride (Allison et al., 2022). Having supportive parents who understand that quality education leads to stable employment is also a key factor (ibid.). Moreover, a greater proportion of young women compared to young men (43 per cent and 39 per cent, respectively) view education as important in preparing young people for life in general (Next Generation data). This sentiment resonates strongly in Viet Nam, where many young people say that education is important in defining their personal identity (Lamphere-Englund et al., 2020).

Similarly in Nigeria, young people find that education and skills enhance not only a person's potential but also their voice – including being aware of social issues and their rights (Curran et al., 2020). Additionally, 71 per cent of young women and 68 per cent of young men consider good education to be essential for success in life (Next Generation data).

While this view prevails among young people with access to education, key informants draw attention to the increasing awareness among marginalised girls and boys from remote rural communities of the need to read and write (interviews, 2023). Although financial constraints of the household contribute to most dropping out of secondary school to work, when asked about what they want, girls eagerly express their desire to study or at the least be able to read and write to become independent (ibid.). In Ethiopia, where young people generally feel that access to education has improved in recent years, they attach the value of completing education with self-improvement (De Schryver et al., 2019).

4.2 Interpersonal enablers

Supportive families

Family support is critical to sustaining young people's interest and engagement in education and skills. In Indonesia, 46 per cent of young women and 44 per cent of young men reported that their families encouraged them to get a good education (Next Generation data). Key informants note that parental support for young people, especially with respect to allowing girls the freedom of choice, increases the likelihood



of studying in different fields (interviews, 2023). In recognising that a delicate balance prevails between the personal choices of a girl and the overriding mindset of her immediate family, initiatives aimed at addressing the concerns of the family and creating awareness about gender equality goes a long way in developing a solid support system (ibid.). Some interviewees also state that family support is critical for young mothers, particularly those living in remote areas with limited opportunities, who seek ways to go back to education (ibid.). Key informants note that when families create enabling environments for young women to study again, benefits materialise both in the short and in the long run not just for the individual (ibid.).

In Viet Nam, family plays a central role in defining a young person's identity where young people state that it is the topmost factor in making them who they are (Lamphere-Englund et al., 2020). This is reflected in the views of key informants who highlight that supportive families enable women and girls to pursue their dreams, be confident, and excel in their education and career (interviews, 2023).

In Ethiopia, 56 per cent of young women and 53 per cent of young men attribute positive encouragement from their families as a key driver in their pursuit of education (Next Generation data). Key informants stress that where girls do not easily have access to formal education, families play an important role in encouraging them to pursue vocational training or relevant short-term training programmes that enable them to continue their learning journeys and seek employment (interviews, 2023).

In Pakistan, key informants note that families' overarching expectations on young people strongly influences whether they engage in education and skills development in the long run. In the case of women and girls, key informants stressed that families constitute the first layer of encouragement to not only perform well in but continue with their education (interviews, 2023). Supportive parents strongly motivate and empower daughters to excel in their chosen fields of study (ibid.). Moreover, with higher levels of education, young women and girls become effective agents of positive change not just in their families as role models for siblings but within their network of friends and their community (ibid.).

4.3 Organisational enablers

Alternative forms of learning

Alternative forms of learning fill a critical gap for those who cannot access or drop out of formal education. Education service providers address the needs of young people with limited socio-economic opportunities. These efforts help them to continue their education and amplify their social status within their communities. In Viet Nam, informal education has a wide outreach in relation to young women and girls who cannot attend formal institutions because of costs, distance, and family obligations (interviews, 2023). Service providers of informal programmes address these concerns and facilitate students with manageable schedules and access to locations closer to the target group. In Ethiopia, key informants highlight the benefits of non-formal education to include a flexible schedule and a functional curriculum with an emphasis on skills development (ibid.). This is most relevant for young individuals who do not have access to formal education and those living in rural areas.

Vocational training is also a pragmatic way for young people who are outside the formal education system to access learning that can lead to gainful employment (interviews, 2023). Key informants from Indonesia drew attention to the role of non-formal vocational training in facilitating young women and girls with necessary skills to find employment (ibid.). This is especially effective since non-formal training tends to be relatively shorter in duration, less expensive and provides young people with an opportunity to develop their portfolio and exhibit their skills to companies that do not require formal qualifications (ibid.). In Poland, young people find vocational training to be a viable alternative to traditional academia in seeking employment because curriculum design is better aligned with the needs of the job market (Raven et al., 2021).

Role of international organisations and civil society

International organisations and civil society actors address crucial gaps in knowledge that are often overlooked in educational settings. Key informants from Indonesia, Viet Nam, and Poland stressed on the role of these actors in filling gaps in information on gender rights, reproductive health, and sex education in several ways including via advocacy and helping governments with inclusive policy formulation as well as programme development and implementation. Notably, initiatives by UN

agencies (UNICEF and UNFPA) in Indonesia addressing knowledge gaps in menstruation and sex education, along with the Young Catalyst's role in comprehensive conflict resolution education (covering issues like mental health and bullying) were highlighted as actions to counter limitations of existing curricula (interviews, 2023). In Viet Nam, civil society trainings for education providers on gender and sexuality, healthcare, and empowerment were also found to be valuable (ibid.).

Extra-curricular activities for personal development

Young people value extra-curricular activities for their role in cultivating new skills for personal development and voice. In Indonesia, young people view opportunities to engage in extra-curricular activities as key to nurturing their personal development and voice (Allison et al., 2022). In addition to focusing on academic pursuits, student participation in a variety of spaces including youth clubs constitute important channels for young people to develop their analytical skills (ibid.). In Viet Nam, students regard extra-curricular activities as key to addressing existing skills gaps where learning foreign languages and technology are viewed as vital to pursuing career goals (Lamphere-Englund et al., 2020). Young people further note that institutions that provide opportunities to develop soft skills improve their competitiveness in the labour market (ibid.).

In Pakistan, extra-curricular activities are identified as pivotal sources of confidence and skills development. Being involved in school-run societies and debate clubs is considered an important predictor of young women's self-confidence in the long run (interviews, 2023).

In Ethiopia, students regard participation in extra-curricular activities as an important driver of personal development (De Schryver et al., 2019). According to key informants, clubs for young women and girls on campuses enable them to develop leadership skills, confidence in public speaking, and interest in topics such as gender roles and relationships that empower female students to question discriminatory and regressive norms (interviews, 2023).

Safe spaces for learning

Safe school and university campuses enable young people to remain motivated. In Poland, key informants note that some schools have weekly sessions for teachers dedicated to anti-discrimination that create a safe space for them to speak about a wide range of topics, including gender, identity, privilege, poverty, disability, and immigration (interviews, 2023). The sessions allow participants to reflect on critical and current issues that would otherwise not be addressed at large or be considered taboo. Similar conversations have been replicated for teenage girls and boys and these help them to speak about topics such as gender stereotypes (ibid.).

In Indonesia, some organisations take a proactive approach to addressing sexual violence on campus through prevention programmes that positively contribute to students' sense of safety and eagerness to learn (interviews, 2023). In Viet Nam, interventions such as installing cameras in classrooms help to reduce incidents of teacher-student violence (Lamphere-Englund et al., 2020). This has implications for students' associations with educational environments.

Key informants in Ethiopia note that institutions that create spaces for young women to hold conversations without fear of reprisal (such as women's clubs) encourage them to discuss various topics (interviews, 2023). They also highlight an intergenerational transformation where increasing levels of awareness among young women and girls through targeted campaigns empower them to seek assistance on health matters (including menstrual hygiene) without feeling embarrassed or ashamed (ibid.). Another important initiative in Ethiopia relates to monitoring levels of violence on campus alongside training for the school management and faculty on how to address the issue (ibid.).

4.4 Policy and legal enablers

Education policies

Education policies play a critical role in strengthening education systems for young women and men. In Viet Nam, 75 per cent of young women and 76 per cent of young men reported improvements in the quality of education (Next Generation data). Equal shares of young women and men (73 per cent) also stated that the government has good education policies in place. These policies have translated into improvements in the type and quality of education provided in the public education sector. These range from an improved curriculum with an increasing focus on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and technical and vocational

education as well as the provision of better facilities (Lamphere-Englund et al., 2020).

Key informants also found Viet Nam to be relatively advanced in terms of education compared to other lower-middle-income countries, and that girls perform well in education (interviews, 2023). Women and girls are becoming increasingly represented in STEM education, where the proportion of female graduates has increased in recent years (ibid.). State support for ethnic minority students, including waivers on school fees and entrance exams – as well as policies to preserve minority languages – has also contributed towards improvements in the education system (Lamphere-Englund et al., 2020).

Table 3. Summary of enablers of education and skills

Level	Enablers of education and skills
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive outlook on education among young people
Interpersonal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive families
Organisational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alternative forms of learning • Role of international organisations and civil society • Extra-curricular activities for personal development • Safe spaces for learning
Policy and legal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education policies

Source: Authors' analysis.



5 Barriers to education and skills

This chapter explores the barriers to education and skills among young people, with a focus on women and girls.

5.1 Individual barriers

Lack of financial resources

While a range of financial constraints hinders young people from accessing education and skills, insufficient household income is a key factor in dropping out of school. In Pakistan, 19 per cent of young women and 23 per cent of young men cited financial barriers as a major reason for dropping out (Next Generation data). Key informants note that travel-related expenses alone can impede young people's access to education owing to the lack of public transportation and affordable alternatives (interviews, 2023). Women and girls, especially those living in rural areas, are disproportionately affected by the cost (or unavailability) of private transportation.

Similarly in Sri Lanka, monetary constraints play a key role in students dropping out in the early stages of schooling and looking for employment to support their households (Perera et al., 2019). Low household income was cited by 20 per cent of young women and 27 per cent of young men to be the main reason for discontinuing studies (Next Generation data).

In Indonesia, young people living in rural areas and in the eastern part of the country underscore that a certain level of household income is needed to support their academic aspirations and how many of them need to find employment to meet household expenses (Allison et al., 2022; interviews, 2023). This resonates with young people in Viet Nam, where hardship experienced by their families pushes them to enter the workforce early in life (Lamphere-Englund et al., 2020). For young people from ethnic minorities, poverty and remote locations compound challenges in accessing education (interviews, 2023). With limited resources, households invariably prioritise boys over girls (ibid.).

In Nigeria, despite public sector education being officially free at the primary and lower secondary levels, costs associated with purchasing uniforms

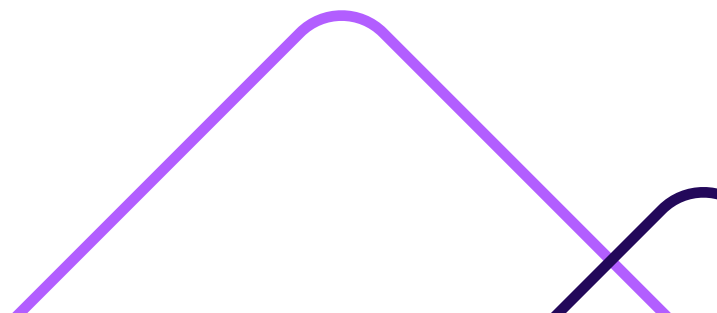
and books significantly impede access to education among poor households (interviews, 2023). In Ethiopia, boys in rural areas tend to drop out when transitioning to secondary school to meet the financial obligations of their families (De Schryver et al., 2019). Owing to a scarcity of high schools in rural areas, students are required to relocate to urban areas, but the costs associated with renting accommodation, meals, and transport constitute hidden barriers to education and skills development (interviews, 2023).

At the other end of the spectrum, where young graduates aspire to attain further qualifications, domestically or abroad, the costs of higher education tend to be prohibitive. In Indonesia, for example, most students who go abroad need to cover expenses from their own resources, with only one in ten receiving scholarships or grants (Allison et al., 2022). In Viet Nam, despite young people's willingness to explore opportunities for advanced degrees at home and globally, educational costs create significant barriers (Lamphere-Englund et al., 2020).

5.2 Interpersonal barriers

Family influences and expectations

Despite young people's aspirations to pursue education and acquire skills, the mindsets of their families pose significant barriers. In Pakistan, a higher share of young women (19 per cent) relative to young men (12 per cent) stated that their families did not want them to continue their education (Next Generation data). Around 16 per cent of young women also dropped out to carry out domestic responsibilities (ibid.). According to interviewees, parents' perceptions are biased against young women and girls – particularly in rural areas, where high drop-out rates are associated with less buy-in from parents (interviews, 2023). The overriding mindset is both dismissive of girls' ability to achieve anything and resigned to believing there are no opportunities for women and girls (ibid.). Additionally, women and girls are automatically expected to assume several roles that range from carrying out domestic tasks to looking after younger siblings or elders as well as working in the field (ibid.).



In Viet Nam, families impinge on young people's decisions to pursue education, particularly among dropouts (Lamphere-Englund et al., 2020). Broadly, where households struggle financially, boys are prioritised, and girls are invariably obliged to drop out (interviews, 2023). The situation is particularly prevalent among girls who belong to ethnic minorities and face multiple challenges: poverty, remote locations, poor access to quality education, and discrimination (ibid.). Girls with disabilities are far less likely to pursue education at all levels owing to family restrictions (ibid.). Early marriage and subsequent motherhood are also key factors that hinder girls' access to education (ibid.).

In Nigeria, women and girls have fewer educational opportunities than boys (Curran et al., 2020). According to key informants, in the northern areas, parents' decisions significantly contribute to girls dropping out after lower secondary school to get married (interviews, 2023). Girls get left behind in education because they are expected to fulfil the requirements of the household, which can range from taking care of siblings, undertaking domestic chores, or even helping parents with odd jobs related to their trades (ibid.). As a result, girls do not have the opportunity to regularly attend schools (ibid.).

In Ethiopia, despite improvements in access to education over the past decade, women and girls tend to discontinue their studies over time. Factors such as a disproportionate share of household responsibilities, early marriage, pregnancy, and expectations that they follow the wishes of their husband are key impediments over and above parents' influences (De Schryver et al., 2019). This resonates with the reflections of key informants who note that while girls' access to formal primary education is almost on a par with boys, or even ahead in some instances, girls tend to drop out at the junior and secondary levels. A key reason is that families grossly undervalue the significance of educated girls, and boys are generally prioritised (interviews, 2023).

5.3 Organisational barriers

Mismatch between existing curricula and priorities of young people

Existing curriculum design and delivery does not match the priorities and preferences of young people. In Pakistan, 50 per cent of young women and 60 per cent of young men regard university curricula as outdated (Next Generation

data); 56 per cent of young women and 61 per cent of young men report that the education system does not provide them with the knowledge and skills needed for jobs in the 21st century (ibid.); while 74 per cent of young women and 73 per cent of young men say that online learning can provide them with the skills needed for future work (ibid.).

In Indonesia, young people feel that existing curricula emphasise science and mathematics rather than the humanities and creative subjects, thereby limiting the possibilities to explore specific areas of interest (Allison et al., 2022). There is also a strong demand for skills related to information technology, financial literacy, and business development, reflecting a gap in the current educational offerings (ibid.). In Viet Nam, youth stress the need to learn both practical and soft skills: their appreciation of the demand for communications, creativity, teamwork, and time management skills reveals a broad understanding of labour market requirements domestically and internationally (Lamphere-Englund et al., 2020).

In Nigeria, young people note a greater emphasis on theoretical learning rather than practical skills development (Curran et al., 2020). This is also the case in Ethiopia, where students raise concerns about the disconnect between what is taught and real-world applications – for example, being taught biology without access to a microscope or a laboratory (De Schryver et al., 2019). Young people in Ethiopia also draw attention to the need for training in practical terms such as finance and accounting related to entrepreneurship and skills related to technology to transition to professional life (ibid.).

5.4 Community barriers

Discrimination associated with gender, disability, and minority status

Discrimination against young people based on gender, disability, and ethnicity creates barriers to education. In Pakistan, sons are prioritised over daughters, especially in the rural areas, resulting in higher drop-out rates among girls (interviews, 2023). The challenges regarding access to education become more complex since close to two-thirds of people with disabilities are women and girls, half of whom are denied education (ICRC, 2023; UNDP, 2023). In the survey data, a higher share of 25–35-year-old women with disabilities reported having no formal education in comparison to those of the

same age with no disabilities (15 per cent vs 3 per cent) (Next Generation data). Almost 50 per cent of women and girls in rural areas from religious minority communities never attended schools (Chaudhry, 2021). For some interviewees, constraints to education arise from a pattern of systemic discrimination against minority communities that ranges from negligible provision of education facilities in Hindu-majority areas to ongoing harassment of minority girls and forced conversions to Islam, all of which cause parents to not want to send their girls far from home (ibid.; interviews, 2023).

In Nigeria, discrimination based on gender, disability, and minority status manifests in several ways to limit access to education and skills. This is particularly evident in the case of young women with no partners (whether single, divorced, or widowed) including teenage mothers (Curran et al., 2020). Women also face discrimination when they pursue higher education (interviews, 2023). Gender and ethnicity further compound existing challenges for women from the northern parts of the country (Curran et al., 2020). Among 15–24-year-old girls and women with disabilities, 27 per cent have no formal education, compared to 13 per cent of those with no disabilities. For the older age group, the corresponding figures are 28 per cent and 13 per cent (Next Generation data).

In Poland, members of the ethnic Roma community face discrimination. While substantive gains are visible in terms of access to education arising from initiatives such as the Programme for the Integration of the Roma Community (2014–2020), key informants highlight Roma are commonly perceived as inherently lazy and have no aspirations (CoE, 2019; interviews, 2023). The key barriers to education are poverty and social exclusion which, over time, reinforces existing patterns of deprivation and lack of empowerment (ibid.). Moreover, following Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022, an estimated 50,000 Ukrainian Roma refugees fled to Poland (Samber, 2023). Already stigmatised as a minority in Ukraine, refugee status in a new country adds another layer of dispossession reinforced through systemic discrimination and has negative consequences in terms of access to basic services (ibid.; interviews, 2023).

5.5 Societal barriers

Gender stereotypes inhibit uptake of STEM subjects

Existing stereotypes hinder women and girls from studying or pursuing a career in STEM. Key informants across several countries emphasise the role of prevailing social norms and gender stereotypes that deter women and girls from pursuing STEM education. They also argue that professions that highlight the role of women as caregivers have greater social acceptance. In Pakistan, women are more likely to study to become doctors or nurses – traditionally regarded as an appropriate occupation for females (interviews, 2023). Teaching is another occupation generally considered suitable for women (ibid.). Key informants in Sri Lanka also state that families discourage girls from pursuing engineering and ask them to consider other areas where they can assume the role of caregiver (ibid.). In this case, being a doctor or a teacher is considered acceptable (ibid.).

In Indonesia, key informants note that socio-cultural factors steer women away from subjects that are considered masculine. For example, despite grants and scholarships being offered to women to study a vast array of subjects, most are inclined towards programmes that relate to education and teaching (interviews, 2023). At the same time, programmes that pertain to nursing, midwifery, and pharmaceuticals are preferred because they are considered feminine, whereas engineering is considered masculine (ibid.). Consequently, those areas within STEM considered feminine are acceptable for women to pursue (ibid.). Additionally, subjects such as communication, psychology and/or the social sciences and the humanities are common among young women (ibid.).

Gender stereotypes in Viet Nam mean that engineering, physics, maths, and technology are seen as masculine and 'too difficult for women', whereas areas of study considered more appropriate for women include the humanities, social sciences, teaching, and nursing (interviews, 2023). These inclinations are symptomatic of a broader responsibility of women to assume the role of caregivers in predominantly domestic but also in professional settings (ibid.).

In both Nigeria and Ethiopia, the rural-urban divide is a key factor in the functioning of social norms. In Nigeria, interviewees find that young girls in rural areas are likely to be inspired by local role models such as teachers and midwives with whom they

associate positive attributes (interviews, 2023). In Ethiopia, interviewees believe that women and girls in urban areas have more freedom to choose what they want to study, including STEM. In rural areas, however, they are likely to conform to existing mindsets and settle for what is socially acceptable, thereby limiting their educational aspirations (ibid.).

In Poland, key informants note that women are generally associated with fulfilling traditional roles as caregivers (interviews, 2023). This affects what girls choose to study while at school and eventually the professions that young women pursue (ibid.). The predominant professions associated with women are teaching and nursing (ibid.). In rural areas, religion is a key factor that reinforces existing mindsets (ibid.). Some interviewees suggest that the indoctrination begins at an early stage at primary level and textbooks are an effective medium in communicating and reinforcing social norms and gender stereotypes (ibid.). For example, primary school textbooks commonly depict mothers and daughters cooking in the kitchen while fathers take sons out for bike rides; in depictions of work, women are shown as nurses, and men as doctors, but not the other way around (ibid.).

5.6 Policy and legal barriers

Uneven distribution of infrastructure

A key impediment to education relates to the uneven distribution of infrastructure between rural and urban areas. In most countries, infrastructure disparities between urban and the rural areas are highly pronounced, with substantial implications for young people living in remote places. In Pakistan, the absence of essential school infrastructure predominantly in the rural

areas affects access to education. A very small share of young women aged 15–24 from rural areas had attained tertiary education at the time of the Next Generation survey (3 per cent relative to 16 per cent in urban areas) (Next Generation data). Among 25–35-year-olds, the rural-urban gap was larger: 8 per cent of young women of this age group in rural areas had completed tertiary education relative to 25 per cent of young women in urban areas (ibid.). Inadequate road infrastructure and the lack of public transport further compound the challenges for rural women and girls trying to reach educational facilities. These factors demotivate families from sending them to school (Babar et al., 2023). Additionally, geographic disparities across the provinces are apparent where access to education is most difficult in less developed provinces (ibid.).

Indonesia's eastern provinces face critical gaps in infrastructure development, with implications for access to adequate educational facilities and training centres especially in remote rural locations (Allison et al., 2022). Challenges pertain to substandard educational facilities, insufficient space inside the classrooms and other key facilities such as laboratories and washrooms (ibid.). The inadequacy or absence of essential infrastructure demotivates young people.

Key informants in Nigeria and Ethiopia highlight that under prevailing circumstances, a lack of necessary gender-sensitive infrastructure also compounds barriers to education for young women and girls (interviews, 2023). They also note that to varying degrees, the uneven distribution of digital infrastructure translates into further impediments for rural households to access education services remotely (ibid.).

Table 4. Summary of key barriers to education and skills

Level	Barriers to education and skills
Individual	• Lack of financial resources
Interpersonal	• Family influences and expectations
Organisational	• Mismatch between existing curricula and priorities of young people
Community	• Discrimination associated with gender, disability, and minority status
Societal	• Gender stereotype inhibits uptake of STEM subjects
Policy and legal	• Uneven distribution of infrastructure

Source: Authors' analysis.

6 Conclusion and recommendations

This paper examines the enablers for and barriers to education and skills with respect to women and girls, across Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Viet Nam, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Poland. Broadly, the Next Generation reports and interview data draw attention to the following:

Young women and girls positively associate education and skills with self-empowerment. Supportive families, international and civil society organisations, extra-curricular activities, safe spaces, education policies as well as alternative forms of learning constitute key enablers. On the other hand, financial constraints, family expectations, discrimination against persons with disabilities and minority communities, gender stereotypes and social norms are key barriers. At a broader level, the uneven distribution of infrastructure services, including digitalisation, reinforces the rural-urban divide and constrains women and girls from pursuing education.

Recommendations

The findings of this paper reveal how different stakeholders can work to improve existing conditions for women and girls to pursue education and skills over time.

1. Family and community support is critical to sustaining long-term engagement of women and girls in education and skills. Specific efforts would include:
 - Increasing awareness of and engaging with families and communities to ensure that women and girls (including those with disabilities and from minority communities) are not undervalued but encouraged to pursue education and skills.
 - Investing in multi-purpose community infrastructure to improve access to education and skills facilities.
 - Creating inclusive and safe spaces within communities for women and girls to interact and network without fear of discrimination.
 - Enabling educated women and girls to act as role models for family and community members.
2. Civil society organisations (CSOs) and public and private education and training service providers are key to ensuring women and girls have access to quality education and skills development over time. Key initiatives based on public-private partnerships as well as collaboration between CSOs and the private sector would include:
 - Increasing advocacy on promoting gender equality in educational settings.
 - Leveraging existing expertise across CSOs and private actors (such as telecommunications and EdTech companies) through budgetary and technological support to pilot new initiatives as well as scale up best practices.
 - Improving learning and teaching quality through well-designed curricula and trained teachers who have knowledge of local contexts.
 - Providing progressive career guidance, mentoring, and breaking existing patterns of gender stereotypes so more women and girls pursue STEM education.
3. Policymakers' and legislators' work is essential to ensure women and girls have access to education and skills development. Areas to focus on would include:
 - Formulating long-term policies on gender equality in education and skills that are effectively implemented to increase representation.
 - Developing policies to mainstream cross-sectoral collaboration and partnership with CSOs and the private sector to scale up best practices.
 - Updating national curricula to ensure that education and skills training is relevant.
 - Ensuring geographic disparities between rural and urban areas are reduced with long-term infrastructure planning and development with an emphasis on reducing the digital divide.
 - Upgrading existing educational facilities to ensure gender-sensitive infrastructure and to enable access for persons with disabilities.
 - Ensuring development expenditure on education and skills training is concomitant with needs on the ground with greater emphasis on hard-to-reach communities.

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