

Girls' Performance in Mathematics Equal to Boys According to UNESCO Report

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Global Education Monitoring Report

In mathematics, the gender gap favoring boys in early grades gradually disappears, according to a new publication by UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report. The report calls for us to think harder about gender inequality and the barriers that still hold girls back from realizing their potential.

Deepening the debate on those still left behind, an annual UNESCO gender report analyzed data from 120 countries in primary and secondary education to offer a global picture. The

findings show that in the early years, boys perform better than girls in mathematics, but, this gender gap disappears later. This research confirms that the gender gap in learning has closed even in the poorest countries. And in some countries, the gap is now reversed. For example, by grade eight, the gap favors girls in mathematics by seven percentage points in Malaysia, by 3 points in Cambodia, by 1.7 points in Congo, and by 1.4 points in the Philippines.

However, biases and stereotypes are still likely to affect learning outcomes. Even though girls catch up in mathematics in upper primary and secondary education, boys are far more likely to be overrepresented among the highest performers in mathematics in all countries.

In middle- and high-income countries, girls in secondary school, are scoring significantly higher in science. Despite this advantage, girls are still less likely to opt for scientific careers, indicating that gender biases could still be obstacles to the pursuit of further education in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields.

While girls perform well in mathematics and science, they perform even better in reading. More girls achieve minimum proficiency in reading than boys. The largest gap in primary education is in Saudi Arabia, where 77 percent of girls but only 51 percent of boys in grade 4 achieve minimum proficiency in reading.

In Thailand, girls outperform boys in reading by 18 percentage points, in the Dominican Republic by 11 points, and in Morocco by 10 points. Even in countries where girls and boys are at the same level in reading in the early grades, as in Lithuania and Norway, the gap in favor of girls rises to roughly 15 percentage points by age 15.

“Girls are demonstrating how well they can do in school when they have access to education. But many, and particularly the most disadvantaged, are not getting the chance to learn at all. We shouldn’t be afraid of this potential. We should feed it and watch it grow. For example, it’s heart-breaking that most girls in Afghanistan do not have the opportunity to show the world their skills,” said Malala Yousafzai, co-founder of Malala Fund.

“Although more data is needed, recent releases have helped paint an almost global picture of gender gaps in learning outcomes right before the pandemic. Girls are doing better than boys in reading and in science and are catching up in mathematics. But they are still far less likely to be top performers in mathematics because of continuing biases and stereotypes. We need gender equality in learning and ensure that every learner fulfills their potential,” said Manos Antoninis, Director of UNESCO’s Global Education Monitoring Report.