From Girls' Education to Gender-Transformative Education: Lessons from Different Nations

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The examination of gender inequality in education around the globe reveals a multifaceted issue deeply intertwined with persistent challenges within education systems and society at large. Over the past three decades, girls' education has often been portrayed as a panacea, touted as the solution to a wide array of societal problems, including issues as diverse as high fertility rates and global warming. This essay explores gender disparities in education, employing case studies from Latin America to elucidate the intricate dynamics of this global phenomenon and to illustrate the potential of gender-transformative approaches. Drawing upon two decades of empirical research and theoretical insights from the capability approach, I discuss the linkages between gender, education, and social transformation.

Examining gender inequality in education globally brings to the surface many of the deeply rooted and persistent problems in education systems and society more broadly. For the last thirty years, girls' education has been presented as the "answer to everything," a cure-all for issues ranging from high fertility rates to global warming.[1] The importance of girls' education first gained attention in economic discussions during the early 1990s, notably by Lawrence Summers. In his speeches and writings, he argued that education for girls and women might offer the highest return on investment available in the developing world. Since that time, girls' education has become a global rallying cry for politicians such as Boris Johnson (who referred to girls' education as the "silver bullet, the magic potion, the panacea . . . that can solve virtually every problem that afflicts humanity") and celebrities like Lady Gaga, Priyanka Chopra Jonas, and Rihanna.[2] Movie theaters across the globe have shown full-length documentary films about the importance of girls' education, including *Girl Rising* (2013) and *He Named Me Malala* (2015). More recently, girls' education has been touted as a "powerful climate solution" capable of fighting the root drivers of climate change and cutting carbon emissions.[3] The importance of girls' education has galvanized action among individuals, organizations, and governments that span a wide range of academic disciplines and political dispositions.

But while some were praising girls' education as a strategy to improve health outcomes, reduce fertility rates, raise income, and improve democracy, feminist scholars such as Nelly Stromquist argued that the gender gap in education was the manifestation of gender inequality in society. Simply expanding educational access for girls and women would not address the underlying causes of their underrepresentation in education.[4] Getting girls into schools is a necessary first step, but schools often reflect and reinforce harmful social inequalities, including gender norms. An emphasis on empowering girls and women through education and other social interventions (such as small loans, vocational training) began to emerge in the mid-1990s. *Education* and *empowerment* of girls became and remain buzzwords, with little conceptual clarity as to what kind of education is empowering, in what context, and for what purpose.

Despite over thirty years of sustained advocacy among various stakeholders, including civil society, multilateral organizations, and networks of feminist scholars, significant gender gaps in education remain, particularly in secondary schooling. The promise of girls' education as a panacea has not materialized. Looking strictly at gender parity in education – that an equal number of male and female children are enrolled in school – it would appear that girls' education is a global development success story. But what are girls (and boys) learning in school? How is schooling changing or challenging the social norms that perpetuate inequalities and inequities? The attention to girls' education sparked a deeper examination in the field of international education development and raised fundamental questions about how to transform educational systems to become more appropriate for today's world.[5]

With the caveat that any brief review of international data is insufficient, it is a useful starting point for an exploration of gender and education around the globe. More girls participate in education and at higher levels than ever before. As Figure 1 illustrates, gender disparities continue to exist in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, but many countries have equal participation in schooling at the primary level. Significant historical turning points and international movements that have spurred this progress include the Education for all Movement (launched in 1990 and renewed in 2000) and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women and resulting Beijing Platform for Action. These convenings and subsequent declarations promulgated a set of principles, policy orientations, and actions. Among these were the goals of providing universal access to, and ensuring the completion of, primary education for all girls and boys and eliminating gender disparities in education. The United Nations' most recent international development goals, known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs, adopted by UN member states in 2015) include a target (4.1) to, "By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes."[6]

Figure 1

Gender Disparities Disadvantaging Girls in Primary Education
Persist in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia:
Gender Parity Index for Primary Enrollment, 2012 – 2022

Source: Figure developed by the author using data from UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), based on the most recent data available during the period of 2012 to 2022.

In 2016, the gender review that accompanies UNESCO's annual *Global Education Monitoring Report* found that by 2014, gender parity was achieved globally, on average, in primary, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary schools.[7] Key here (as the report points out) is that *parity* can wash away inequalities when comparing across countries or world regions. Parity is a statistical measure that provides a numerical value of female-to-male or girl-to-boy ratios. The problem is that in some countries and regions, girls are underrepresented in education, whereas in others, boys are underrepresented. Calculated as an average, these disadvantages are masked – and we have "global parity."

By 2022, the language around gender parity had softened somewhat, with UNICEF's launch of a website with the headline, "most countries have achieved gender parity in primary enrollment, but in many countries, disparities disadvantaging girls persist."[8] There are two key concerns associated with using gender parity as an indicator of gender equality. First, it masks both female and male disadvantage in education. As captured by a recent UNESCO global report on boys' disengagement from education, boys are more likely than girls to repeat primary grades in one hundred thirty countries, and more likely not to have an upper-secondary education in seventy-three countries (the report features in-depth case studies from Fiji, Kuwait, Lesotho, Peru, and the United Arab Emirates).[9] Second, parity in both educational enrollment (children currently enrolled in school) and attainment (highest grade completed) does not necessarily translate into parity in learning outcomes. In

a study measuring gender equality in education from forty-three low- and middle-income countries, the authors explain that in some settings, increases in enrollment may have led to a deterioration in the quality of education and a lower proportion of young people with basic literacy and numeracy skills.[10]

In addition to examining the flawed statistic of educational parity in enrollment, common indicators of gender inequality also include the number of children out of school, as well as the number who complete primary, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary education. According to data from the World Bank, the primary school completion rate for girls has reached 90 percent globally, with an equal number of boys and girls completing primary school in most countries. Between 2000 and 2018, the number of out-of-school girls of primary school age decreased globally from fifty-seven million to thirty-two million.[11] As of 2023, roughly thirty-two million girls of primary school age were still out of school, compared with twenty-seven million boys. So while a roughly equal number of girls and boys are enrolled in primary school (gender parity), this statistic misses the more than fifty million children that remain out of school, and that more girls are out of school than boys.[12] Figure 2 shows trends in the out-of-school population of primary school–aged children between 2000 and 2019. With regard to primary school completion, in 2013, only 70 percent of children in low-income countries completed primary school, and only 14 percent completed secondary school.[13] Five years later, in 2018, estimates suggested that just 54.8 percent of children in low-income countries completed primary school. The COVID pandemic only added to the obstacles that children face in completing their primary education.[14]

There is general agreement that achieving target 4.1 of the SDGs remains a "distant reality."[15] Global estimates of the gender gap in out-of-school rates are not informative because they mask regional variation. Additionally, looking at a global average can be misleading because the female advantage in some world regions zeros out the female disadvantage in others. As of 2023, the largest gender gaps disadvantaging girls remained at each level of the education system in sub-Saharan Africa and in Northern Africa and Western Asia. Likewise, in low-income countries, enrollment rates for young women in lower-secondary education were still 5 percentage points below that of young men; at the upper-secondary level, the female disadvantage was 9 percentage points. And most low- and middle-income countries have low overall rates of enrollment and attainment, particularly in the lower- and upper-secondary levels.

What can we take away from this picture? First, gender gaps in education are a misleading indicator of progress. Second, for schools to not reflect or reproduce social inequalities but rather change the underlying roots of students' gendered educational experiences, we need a more substantive understanding and recognition of what gender equality in education could or should entail across different contexts. The statistics help us see the symptoms of a much larger and more

Figure 2
Out-of-School Population (Millions) among Children of
Primary School Age by Gender, 2000–2019
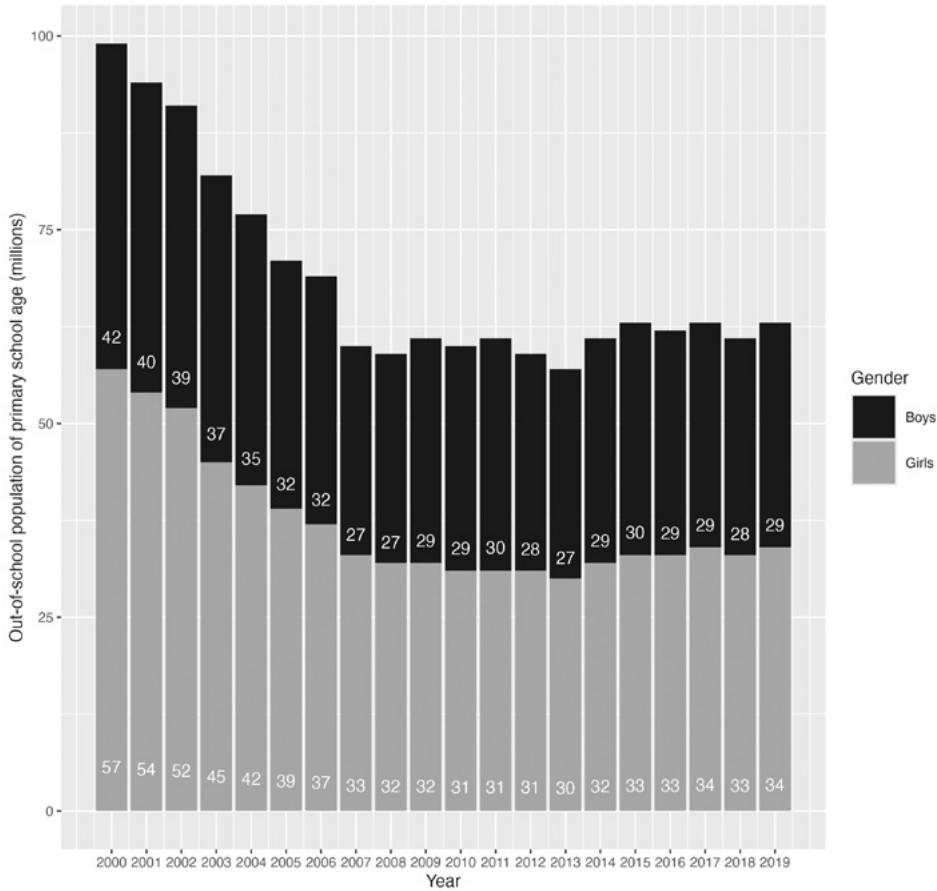
Source : Figure developed by the author using data from the World Bank's Education
Indicators, 2023.

complex disease. Education, particularly gender-transformative education, could
be leveraged as a process to heal and repair social systems that reflect patriarchy,
colonialism, and racism.[16]

In a recent article, Elaine Unterhalter, a world-renowned comparative and in-
ternational education scholar, reviews four key ideas that have framed the
formulation of girls schooling and gender equality in education. Her delinea-

tion of these four framings helps conceptualize what gender equality in education should (and should not) entail. She calls these framings "what works," "what disorganizes," "what matters," and "what connects."[17] As general categories, they are useful tools to help understand the range of perspectives, policies, and interventions that characterize the field of girls' education.

"What works" is the approach consistent with the idea that girls' education is a sound investment that has positive spillover effects in a variety of different domains (health, economic growth, civil society). It seeks to attain parity: an equal number of boys and girls enrolled in and completing school. This approach is concerned with girls' education as something that "works" as an intermediary strategy to promote other desirable outcomes (such as poverty alleviation, improved child health and nutrition), as well as being a desirable outcome in and of itself. From this vantage point, policy and research have focused on interventions that increase the number of girls in school and the duration they stay there. These interventions might include reducing or abolishing school fees and/or providing girls with scholarships, reducing the distance to school, building toilets or latrines, providing school meals, and training teachers to improve their pedagogy. The what-works framing proposes largely technical solutions to address girls' underrepresentation in education. The research methodology to test these approaches involves large-scale, randomized control trials to evaluate the effectiveness of a different combination of intervention characteristics. These research studies have helped us understand a great deal about certain kinds of barriers that girls face in attending school, particularly by providing clear and consistent findings that the costs associated with schooling are a huge deterrent for poor families.[18]

A second framing, what Unterhalter calls "what disorganizes," concerns policies and actors that undermine or distract from what works and what matters – and is related to how girls' education has been identified as a panacea.[19] These are instances where girls' education is co-opted to promote the interests of large corporations and organizations. An illustrative example of this approach, Nike Inc.'s Girl Effect, is documented extensively in Kathryn Moeller's book *The Girl Effect: Capitalism, Feminism, and the Corporate Politics of Development*.[20] Corporations such as Nike, Coca Cola, and Unilever have used the narrative guise of girls' education and empowerment to expand their markets, improve their reputations, and grow their workforce. But as Moeller points out, their instrumental logic shifts the burden of development onto girls and women without transforming the structural conditions that produce poverty. Their efforts sidestep the practices of harmful business and working conditions, promoting a logic wherein consumption is the goal of development. In one project Unterhalter tags as "disorganizing," Coca Cola and the British Department for International Development sponsored a £17 million training program for girls who would ultimately "join the Coca Cola value chain."[21] Corporate social-responsibility initiatives such as these have also been

called "gender wash": corporations clean up their image by using gender, girls' empowerment, and education as a palatable marketing tool.

Recognizing the contradictions and problematic assumptions of "what disorganizes" in the field of girls' education is important because it allows for a more profound questioning of "what matters." A what-matters framing of girls' education has a long history, as feminists have questioned the logic of "what works" for decades. However, as Unterhalter explains, this approach is supported by international organizations with less status and money, and uses different methods, including qualitative methods, that generate less respect in policy circles and more limited research funding. This makes it difficult to garner evidence that more wholistic, less technocratic approaches "work."[22] A what-matters stance situates girls' education in a wider, normative context linked to advancing human rights, gender equality, feminist advocacy, and ultimately a different vision of prosperity and well-being. Many writers and activists in this category emphasize girls' voices and empowerment, the limitations of policy texts, and the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural norms and practices connected with gender inequality across cultural contexts. Additionally, the meanings of "gender" and the questioning of gender binaries, heteronormativity, sexism, and patriarchy are considered from this stance.

Writers from this perspective, including myself, emphasize that girls' education makes up one element of advancing gender equality. To transform social structures and society at large, processes of change must come from political, economic, social, and cultural domains. Education, no matter how empowering, cannot singularly address all of society's ills.[23] A framework for human flourishing known as the "capability approach" also undergirds questions of what matters and serves as a lodestar for envisioning a more prosperous and just future. The capability approach, developed initially by philosophers Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, captures aspects of people's lives such as their education, health, and their political and religious freedoms, and shifts the discourse on education from one emphasizing human capital to one that focuses on human capabilities.[24] Informed by the capability approach, many feminist authors have called for educational reforms that reflect a more nuanced and complex theorization of the role of education in promoting social justice.[25]

Informed by the capability approach, Unterhalter proposes the framing of "what connects" to bring together what matters and what works. A coupling of these perspectives aspires to build bonds between differentially positioned groups. "Connecting" means building "a coordinated, curated, or articulated form of exchange that emphasizes the morally responsive connections and forms of kinship bond between communities engaged with policy, practice, and research on girls' education, gender equality, and women's rights."[26] It is not yet clear whether the what-connects framing will have traction as a policy idea or field of practice. It will require

critical thinking, use of evidence, and a simultaneous focus on changing the systems of oppression and exclusion that characterize local and global communities.

I n Latin America, the need for a what-connects approach to gender and education is palpable. Framed differently, one might conclude that gender is not an important educational issue because countries have either reached gender parity or have a female advantage. An analysis of gender and education in Latin America allows us to ask important questions and restate a set of principles.

First, gender is not synonymous with girls and women, as it often appears in policy documents and statements about education in developing-country contexts. Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, expressions, and identities of girls, women, boys, men, and nonbinary or gender diverse people. It is often categorized as male, female, or nonbinary. Gender is social and cultural. However, it is often used incorrectly as a synonym for the biological sex a person is assigned at birth. A simple google search for "gender and education" will result in scores of hits that immediately begin by discussing girls' underrepresentation in education systems, and the need to promote girls' education as a strategy to advance gender equality.

But in Latin America (and several other world regions or countries including North America, Australia, and the United Kingdom), girls outnumber and outperform boys. Policy experts in Latin America have called this a reverse gender gap. In Latin America, boys and young men are more likely to drop out of secondary and tertiary education. They have lower rates of enrollment and completion of secondary education than girls, starting at the lower-secondary level. At the university or tertiary level, men have lower enrollment rates than women in all countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. These patterns are referred to as one of the greatest gender-related challenges in the region.[27] Studies identify a number of factors at play, including boys prematurely joining the labor market in low-skill jobs, gender norms of masculinity that diminish the importance of education and emphasize that of male physical labor, and features of schooling that lead to low interest or low aspirations.

In addition to a reverse gender gap, overall participation rates in secondary education remain low, despite an increase in the availability of secondary schools over the past two decades. Both boys and girls might initially enroll in lower or upper high school, but a very small percentage go on to complete twelve years of schooling, as illustrated in Figure 3. Dropout from secondary school is a major challenge, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Estimates suggest that the likelihood of completing secondary school in Latin America prior to the pandemic was 52 percent, and just 32 percent post pandemic.[28] Latin America had the longest school closures of any region in the world during the pandemic, with schools remaining closed for one and a half years, on average.

Figure 3
Boys' Lower-Secondary School Completion is Lower Than Girls'
in Most Latin American and Caribbean Countries (Completion Percent
of Relevant Age Group), 2021–2022
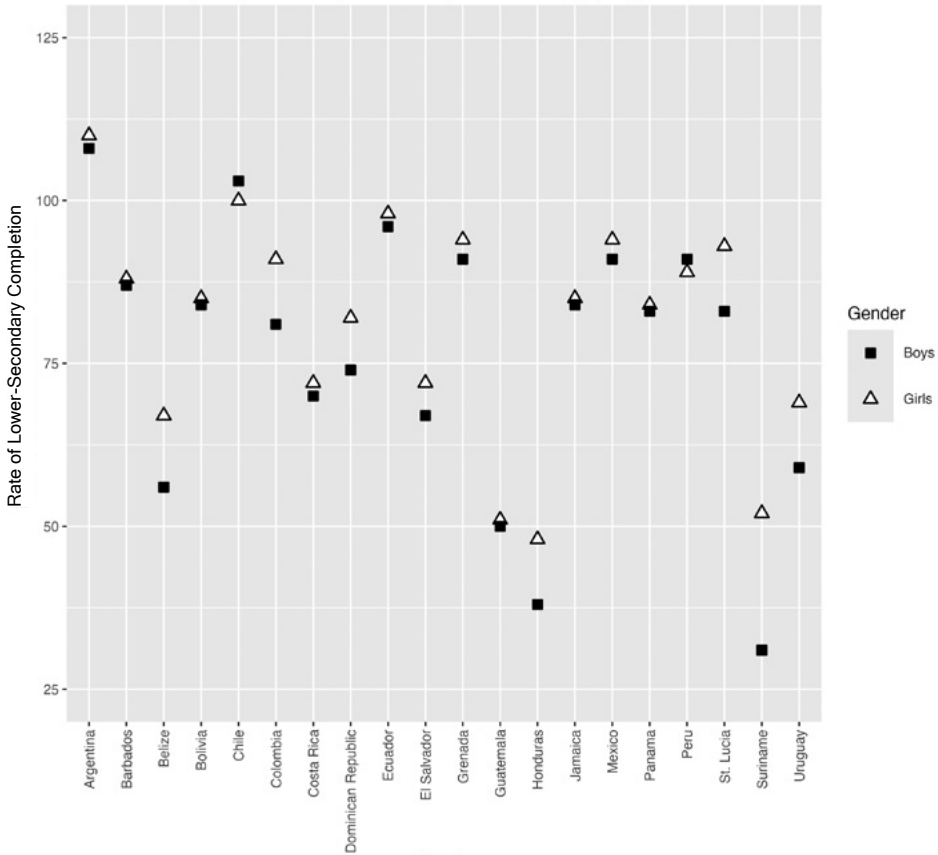
Note: Rates can exceed 100 percent due to late or early school entrants and overage children repeating grades. Denominator reflects children at entrance age for the last grade of primary education. Source: Figure developed by the author using data from the World Bank's Education Indicators, 2023 (latest data from 2021–2022).

In addition to (and as a partial explanation for) the very low secondary-school completion rates, Latin America has one of the highest rates of adolescent pregnancy globally. It is the only region of the world where adolescent pregnancies have not decreased. It also has comparatively high rates of early union or marriage (prior to age eighteen). One-in-four young women in Latin America were married

before their eighteenth birthday. In rural areas, these rates tend to be higher, and age younger, with one-in-ten girls marrying before the age of fifteen. There are a number of hypotheses for why this is the case, including 1) conservative mobilization to block gender and sexuality education, 2) regressive policies and abortion bans, and 3) social norms that restrict adolescent dating and sexuality and thereby push girls to have clandestine relationships or elope with their boyfriends.

The experience in Latin America defies the underlying assumption that if more children and youth have access to secondary education, more girls will enroll, and society will reap the benefits of girls' education. It also illustrates that a gender-girls' perspective is problematic because addressing the reasons why girls are out of school will not automatically improve boys' situation as well. While access to secondary schooling has expanded, dropout rates are soaring. The reasons for dropout are different for boys and girls, but a sense of disillusionment with the education system is widespread. It is only through the kinds of questions and research methods that connect a what-works with a what-matters perspective that we can gain a deeper understanding of what is happening in Latin America and what is needed to support systematic change.

Over the last two decades, I have been engaged in research partnerships that explore questions related to how education can empower youth and challenge harmful gender norms in Latin America. Much of my research has been in Honduras, a country that has faced challenges typical of many countries in the region, including stagnant and uneven economic growth, natural disasters, political corruption and instability, increased violence due to narco-trafficking and gang activity, and mass migration to the United States. Together with colleagues and students at the University of California, Berkeley, the Honduran National Pedagogical University, Wellesley College, and the Honduran civil society organization Asociación Bayan, I have conducted research to better understand how education can empower youth and what "quality" education means in rural contexts. We have also explored the process by which girls decide to enter into early marriage, and the extent to which they demonstrate agency in that process. And we have examined, using both qualitative and quantitative methods, why youth discontinue their studies, and the intersections between dropout and gender.

Beginning in 2008, our research team began a longitudinal study of rural Honduran youth. At the time of first data collection, research participants were just completing primary school (approximately twelve years old). We stayed in touch with these youth and conducted additional rounds of surveys and interviews one year, two years, and, in 2016, eight years later when they were young adults (approximately twenty years old). The longitudinal, mixed methods nature of our study allowed us to examine intersections between schooling, child marriage, and adolescent pregnancy, as well as decisions around school dropout. We found

that household income in early adolescence predicts school discontinuation, early union, and early childbearing. Additionally, most girls had already discontinued their studies when they entered a union and/or became mothers (meaning that they did not drop out of school *because* they were pregnant or wanted to get married). The most common reasons for leaving school included a lack of financial resources and no longer wanting to be a student. Largely due to social norms and the responsibilities of childcare, only a small percentage of girls returned to school after becoming wives or mothers.

We also explored the data from surveys and in-depth qualitative interviews to determine the pervasiveness of traditional views on gender roles among Honduran youth, and how these norms are related to control of girls' sexuality in rural areas of Honduras. We examined how these social norms converge with the biological, psychosocial, and cognitive changes experienced during adolescence and the social contexts in which adolescent girls' lives are embedded. In Honduras and other countries in the region, formal or legal marriage is rare in rural communities; as such, we employ the term "early union." While not legally binding, these relationships carry the cultural significance of marriage in rural communities, and individuals use the terms husband/wife and the verbs *casarse* (to marry) and *unirse* (to join together/unite) to characterize their roles and relationships.

Our interviews suggested that parents' desire to control girls' sexuality ironically can backfire and influence girls' decision-making to enter a union. In particular, the belief that sex should only occur within the context of a union encourages girls to see marriage as the only way to be involved in a romantic relationship. While girls are expected to adhere to these expectations and live in restrictive environments that control their mobility, their socialization opportunities, and their sexuality, girls are simultaneously going through normal developmental processes of adolescence. More specifically, they are developing a greater sense of autonomy, experiencing an emerging interest in intimacy and sexual relationships, undergoing the physical and emotional changes that come with puberty, and developing sophisticated cognitive abilities connected to decision-making processes. The excessive protectiveness and the parental control of sexuality experienced by girls in rural areas of Honduras clash with the natural developmental changes that occur during adolescence, which ultimately influences their decision to enter early unions. Drawing upon these findings, we provide a rationale for why educational initiatives that explain and normalize the changes that occur during adolescence (particularly around attraction and intimacy) as well as challenge social norms and constructs that promote gender inequality should be a central component of child marriage education programming for adolescents, parents, and community members.

In addition to better understanding how early unions and pregnancy intersect with secondary school dropout, we also wanted to examine other issues related

to gender. We were interested in why students were "no longer interested" in being students, despite having access to secondary school. Through statistical analysis and rich qualitative interview data, we discovered that dropout is patterned by schooling structures, such that more dropout occurs, for all adolescents, at the standard transition points (to lower-secondary school, to upper-secondary school, to tertiary school). We also observed that for both males and females, once a student drops out, they rarely return to school. Drawing from the capability approach, we used the concept of "conversion factors" to help explain our findings. Conversion factors refer to individuals' ability to convert resources into "valued functionings," to whether youth can reap the benefits of secondary education. We illustrate that, in the context of where these youth live, they have scarce opportunities to convert the resource of a high school diploma into a valued functioning, including a job. The youth we interviewed questioned whether education would lead to any change in their life trajectories, particularly in a context in which their future roles as wives and mothers (for girls) and breadwinners via agricultural or other manual labor (for boys) was all but certain. In particular, our findings regarding male school discontinuation provide further evidence that boys are distrustful of schooling as a guarantee of future employment and social mobility. The experience of Latin America shows that simply increasing the supply of schooling is not enough to address gender inequality in society.

Gender-transformative education has emerged as a way to frame how, in order to tap its transformative potential, education must go beyond closing gender gaps. Gender-transformative education is now a shared orientation among United Nations agencies, including UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) and UNGEI (United Nations Girls' Education Initiative), as well as leading nongovernmental actors such as Plan International, the Population Council, CARE, and Girls not Brides. Gender-transformative education calls for "nothing less than a fundamental reset of how we approach education."[29] A recent joint statement by Plan International, UNGEI, and UNICEF posits that education has transformative potential, but to unlock this potential, change is needed in the way we educate. This approach recognizes that gender norms are extremely challenging to address because they are entrenched in every aspect of society, and education systems reflect and can reinforce these norms. And these norms are also harmful for men and boys. Dismantling patriarchy requires a transformative approach, one that recognizes how gender discrimination often intersects with discrimination based on poverty, race, class, ethnicity, caste, language, migration or displacement status, HIV status, disability, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Gender-transformative education actively seeks ways to address inequalities and reduce harmful gender norms and practices. As the joint statement explains:

> Gender transformative education is about inclusive, equitable, quality education (SDG 4, particularly target 4.7) and nurturing an environment for gender justice for children, adolescents and young people in all their diversity (SDG 5, particularly target 5.1). Gender Transformative Education would remove barriers to education and boost progress towards important social shifts, such as the reduction of gender-based violence and early marriage, the promotion of gender equality, and women's and girls' leadership and decision-making roles. . . . Gender transformative education completely transforms education systems by uprooting inequalities. Gender transformative education seeks to utilize all parts of an education system – from policies to pedagogies to community engagement – to transform stereotypes, attitudes, norms and practices by challenging power relations, rethinking gender norms and binaries, and raising critical consciousness about the root causes of inequality and systems of oppression.[30]

This is the most ambitious approach to gender and education that has been articulated to date. It goes beyond "gender sensitive" and "gender responsive" approaches that do not call for change in the social structures that cause discrimination and inequality. A gender-transformative approach recognizes that education alone cannot shift gender norms and power relations, but that addressing the social structures that cause inequality and discrimination is needed. To do so, a number of actions are identified as essential, including transforming policies and political engagement, pedagogy and the curriculum, the school environment, participation of children and young people, community leadership, stakeholder engagement, and evidence-generation. This approach connects efforts to address gender inequality in education with the broader quest for social justice. To use Unterhalter's framing, it connects what works with what matters.[31]

While ambitious, gender-transformative education is attainable. A recent report on gender-transformative programs to address child, early, and forced marriage and unions in Latin America and the Caribbean includes case studies of five promising practices from the region.[32] These five practices were identified through a scoping survey about encouraging approaches in the region, to which one hundred five organizations responded. The cases profiled include in-school gender-transformative sexuality education programs and what is known as safe-space approaches (which are outside of formal school settings). One of the programs profiled in the report, Holistic Education for Youth (HEY!), emerged from our research-practice partnership in Honduras. Despite a resurgence in opposition to comprehensive sexuality education and gender-transformative approaches in the region, the HEY! program offers a glimmer of hope that gender-transformative education is possible.[33]

HEY! works in tandem with the Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial (SAT) program, an innovative approach to lower- and upper-secondary school that operates in approximately one hundred twenty rural Honduran communities. Developed in Colombia by FUNDAEC (the Foundation for the Application and Teaching of Sciences), SAT was created in the early 1980s to promote development in the most disadvantaged rural areas of Colombia. In 1996, SAT began as a pilot program in Honduras, and was formally approved by the Honduran government as a formal education program (granting lower- and upper-secondary school degrees) in 2003. SAT has received several accolades, including inclusion as a "global solution" in the United Nations' Generation Unlimited initiative for youth. The Brookings Institution, through its Millions Learning initiative, also included SAT as an example of innovative, quality education.[34] In Honduras, students study in the SAT program for six years, spanning grades 7–12 (lower- and upper-secondary school). In 2016, we launched the HEY! program to enhance the already extensive focus on gender inequality present in the SAT curriculum, providing additional lessons and a podcast for parents that explicitly address the causes and consequences of early marriage and union in Honduras, as well as content about sexual and reproductive health.

The additional content provided by HEY!, coupled with the existing SAT curriculum, make it a promising model of gender-transformative public education for other regions, which we document in our research.[35] The conceptual framework of SAT revolves around a few core beliefs: 1) the oneness of humanity, 2) that justice is integral to achieving human progress and is a capacity that must be developed in individuals, communities, and institutions, 3) that gender equality is essential to achieving human prosperity, 4) that knowledge has the power to raise humanity from its present condition, and 5) that social change – the transformation of human society – will not take place unless individuals and social structures evolve to reflect the aforementioned principles. Coupled with these core principles are a number of transformative features of the SAT program that contribute to increased awareness of the need for gender equality in students, and to a shift in how they think about gender relations in their everyday lives. In the SAT program, gender equality is not a one-off lesson, but is rather woven across the curriculum; gender is linked with the larger concept of justice; students engage in reflection, dialogue, and debate; teachers are given the opportunity to reflect critically on their understanding of gender in professional development sessions; and the curriculum emphasizes that gender transformation requires change among individuals and in social structures such as the family.

One example of many from the curriculum helps illustrate how this happens in practice. "Properties," which is typically the first curricular unit studied by SAT students when they are in seventh grade, aims to "help young people advance in the capabilities that will enable them to describe the world they experience with

increasing clarity."[36] In a lesson on truthfulness, presented as an essential quality or "property" of a human being, the following is provided to students for their reflection and discussion:

> There is more to truthfulness than not telling lies. We should, of course, always tell the truth as we know and understand it. But what benefit will come from such truthfulness if what we think to be the truth is, actually, false? Another aspect of truthfulness, then, is the intention and the will to seek the truth with an open mind. For many centuries people believed that the Earth was flat. Later it was proved that they were mistaken. Their belief did not agree with reality; it was an error. If the intention and the will to seek the truth had not existed, humanity would still be thinking that the Earth is flat.
>
> **Can you think of a few erroneous ideas that humanity needs to reject today?** What about the idea that some race is superior or inferior to another? *That men are superior to women?* That it is acceptable for one group of people to oppress another group? That it is acceptable for a few to possess extreme wealth while many suffer from hunger?[37]

The lesson is presented in such a way as to challenge SAT students to identify whether the assumption that men are superior to women is in fact a belief that they have been exposed to; whether they accept that such a belief is erroneous, and why; and where gender inequality is linked to other forms of oppression and injustice. Rather than simply list, in the various SAT books (or even an isolated book that might focus solely on gender), why men and women are equal, what the problems facing most women are, and what to do about it, SAT units instead require students to come back to these themes time and again, from different angles, repeatedly challenging students to reflect on what equality looks like in practice in their local reality, and what they can do to promote it. Additionally, SAT's "tutorial" pedagogy fosters an environment of healthy discussion and dialogue among members of the class.[38]

Through our research, we have documented how HEY! and SAT use culturally grounded, context-specific scenarios and ask questions at the beginning, middle, and end of each lesson to promote group discussion and invite students to analyze and reflect upon their individual and social realities as well as their roles in promoting social change. We have demonstrated that students who study in SAT also have higher academic achievement in standardized tests in Spanish and mathematics than a statistically equivalent set of peers who study in traditional secondary schools. In sum, our research, spanning two decades, documents innovative features of SAT, including its linkages to building trust, improving civic responsibility, empowering girls and women, and preventing early pregnancy and union. Taken together, these studies provide ample evidence that gender-transformative education is not a pipe dream.

Despite its potential, even gender-transformative education is not a panacea. Every school year, students in SAT drop out to migrate to the United States. Girls struggle to envision a future in which they have opportunities to work outside of their home, and they form unions with their boyfriends. Boys, not certain that their education will lead to improved employment prospects, prematurely begin working in manual labor. Even at its very best, an education system cannot change society without accompanying changes in other sectors, including the economy and politics. Education is potentially the most important long-term strategy to raise up individual and collective capacity for social change. Too often, quick fixes are touted as solutions to problems, solutions that might be important in the short term but are unlikely to result in deep and lasting change. Providing scholarships for girls is one example. While financial support might bring more girls into the education system, it does not address why they are underrepresented in the first place.

For genuine change to unfold, a different vision is needed, one not focused solely on equal numbers of boys and girls attending and graduating from schools. This vision draws on a notion of prosperity and feminism consistent with the work of the late bell hooks (and is also consistent with the capabilities approach).[39] This clear but transformative vision of feminism and human flourishing, articulated more than twenty years ago by hooks, should remain at the heart of our efforts to promote gender-transformative education around the globe:

> Imagine living in a world where there is no domination, where females and males are not alike or even always equal, but where a vision of mutuality is the ethos shaping our interaction. Imagine living in a world where we can all be who we are, a world of peace and possibility. Feminist revolution alone will not create such a world; we need to end racism, class elitism, imperialism. But it will make it possible to be fully actualized . . . able to create beloved community, to live together, realizing our dreams of freedom and justice.[40]

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ENDNOTES

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