UNESCO Committee – Study Guide

Voix du monde · Droits des femmes, bâtissons l'égalité ensemble

Topic: How can we ensure equal access to secondary education for women worldwide?

Model United Nations · Advanced committee · Working language: English

Figures in this guide come from UNESCO and partner publications released in 2026 and are listed in the sources at the end. Delegates should check the original reports before quoting a number in debate.

1. Letter to the delegates

Welcome to the UNESCO committee. Over the course of this conference you will represent a Member State and try to answer a question that touches every region of the world: **why do millions of girls still not complete secondary school, and what can governments, international organisations and civil society do about it?**

The topic looks simple, but it is not. Enrolment gaps between girls and boys have closed in most countries, yet girls still face obstacles that boys often do not: child marriage, early pregnancy, violence on the way to school, discriminatory laws and, in one case, a formal ban. Your task is not only to describe these problems, but to **negotiate realistic solutions** that a majority of very different countries can accept.

This guide will help you understand the topic, the key actors and the main points of disagreement. It also contains a list of the 35 delegations of the committee, with a short profile of each. Use it as a starting point, then do your own research on your country.

2. About the committee

The **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)** is the UN specialised agency for education, science, culture and communication. Its headquarters are in Paris. It was founded after the Second World War with the conviction that peace must be built through education and cooperation.

In education, UNESCO:

- coordinates the global agenda for **Sustainable Development Goal 4** (inclusive, equitable and quality education for all);
- publishes the **Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report**, the main source of data on progress;
- supports governments with technical advice, policy guidelines and standards;
- leads campaigns and partnerships for girls' and women's education.

What UNESCO can and cannot do. UNESCO cannot force a country to change its laws, nor can it impose sanctions. It adopts recommendations, declarations and programmes that Member States agree to follow. Resolutions in this committee should therefore focus on **cooperation, funding, standards, monitoring and technical support**, not on measures that only a coercive body could enforce.

Note on membership (2026). The United States announced its withdrawal from UNESCO with effect on 31 December 2026, and remains a full member until that date. For the purposes of this simulation, the organisers have chosen to keep the United States among the delegations. Its delegate can use the withdrawal as part of the country's position.

3. Key terms

Term	Meaning
Secondary education	Lower secondary (roughly ages 12 to 15) and upper secondary (roughly ages 15 to 18). Ages vary by country.
Enrolment	Being registered in school. It does not guarantee attendance or completion.
Completion rate	The share of young people who finish a level of education (for example upper secondary). This is where gender gaps are largest.
Out-of-school rate	The share of children of school age who are not enrolled in any school.
Gender parity	Equal numbers of girls and boys enrolled or completing. Often measured by the Gender Parity Index (girls per 100 boys).
Gender equality	Equal rights, opportunities and treatment, beyond equal numbers. Parity is a first step, not the end goal.
Gender-responsive education	Education that takes the specific needs and barriers of girls and boys into account.
Child marriage	A marriage in which at least one partner is under 18.
School re-entry policy	A policy allowing pregnant girls and young mothers to return to school after childbirth.
Conditional cash transfer	Money given to poor families when children attend school regularly.
WASH	Water, sanitation and hygiene in schools (toilets, running water, menstrual hygiene).
Digital divide	Unequal access to the internet and digital devices.
Intersectionality	The way several disadvantages (gender, poverty, location, disability, ethnicity) combine and reinforce each other.
ODA	Official development assistance: aid given by governments to developing countries.

4. Background: a short history

- **1948 – Universal Declaration of Human Rights** (Article 26): everyone has the right to education.
- **1960 – UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education**: States commit to eliminating discrimination, including on grounds of sex.
- **1979 – CEDAW** (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women), Article 10: equal rights for women and girls in education.
- **1989 – Convention on the Rights of the Child**: free and compulsory primary education, and access to secondary education for all.
- **1995 – Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action**: girls' education identified as a priority for gender equality.
- **2000 – Dakar Framework for Action and the Millennium Development Goals**: first global target on eliminating gender disparities in education.
- **2015 – Sustainable Development Goals and the Incheon Declaration**: SDG 4 (education) and SDG 5 (gender equality) set a 2030 deadline for free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education for all.
- **2022 – Transforming Education Summit** (United Nations): renewed political commitment, with a focus on inclusion and gender.

The international framework is therefore strong. **The main problem is no longer the absence of principles, but the gap between promises and reality.**

5. Where the world stands today

Good news

- According to UNESCO's 2026 GEM Gender Report, **gender parity in enrolment has been reached globally** from pre-primary to upper secondary education. For more than 15 years, more boys than girls have been out of school.
- Since 2000, the share of countries with fewer than nine girls enrolled for every ten boys fell from 18% to 5% at upper secondary level.
- Some countries made spectacular progress: Morocco and Vietnam cut their adolescent out-of-school rates by at least 80% over 25 years; Türkiye and Georgia did the same for youth. Nepal closed a 33-point gap in lower secondary completion between girls and boys between 1990 and 2024.
- In Africa, the out-of-school rate among girls of primary and secondary school age fell from 47% to 28% between 2000 and 2024.

Bad news

- About **273 million** children, adolescents and young people were out of school in 2024, the seventh consecutive year of increase (2026 GEM Report).
- **Enrolling is not completing.** In summaries of the 2026 GEM Gender Report, upper secondary completion for girls in sub-Saharan Africa is reported to fall as low as 25%. Parity in numbers hides big differences between regions.
- **Disadvantages combine.** In India, parity has been reached in urban areas but only 59 girls complete upper secondary education for every 100 boys in rural areas. In Angola, parity exists

among the richest households, but only 30 girls from the poorest households complete upper secondary for every 100 boys.

- **Marriage and pregnancy.** An estimated **six million** pregnant girls and young mothers aged 10 to 19 were out of school in sub-Saharan Africa in 2024, and fewer than 5% of pregnant and parenting girls in the region return to school.
- **Weak legal protection.** 58% of countries legally guarantee education without discrimination on grounds of sex or gender, but only **35%** explicitly protect the education rights of pregnant and parenting girls.
- **Digital gap.** In low-income countries, about nine in ten adolescent girls lack internet access, according to summaries of the 2026 report.
- **Conflict.** More than one in six children now live in conflict-affected areas, which leaves millions more out of school than official statistics capture.

The extreme case: Afghanistan

Afghanistan is the only country in the world that formally prohibits girls and women from education beyond primary level. In August 2026, five years after the Taliban took power, UNESCO estimated that **2.4 million girls** were excluded from secondary school. A joint UNESCO–UNICEF report published in November 2026 speaks of more than **2.6 million girls** denied access since 2021. UNESCO has called for the immediate and unconditional restoration of girls' and women's right to secondary and higher education, and has warned of a shortage of more than 11,000 qualified female teachers by 2030.

6. Why do girls leave school? The main barriers

A. Poverty and cost. Even where school is officially free, families pay for uniforms, books, transport and exam fees. When money is short, many families prioritise sons, or send daughters to work.

B. Child marriage and early pregnancy. The share of girls married before 18 has decreased globally, but marriage and motherhood remain the main reasons why girls drop out at secondary level. Re-entry policies often exist on paper but are not applied.

C. Household work and care duties. Girls are often expected to look after siblings, fetch water or do housework, which reduces time for school.

D. Distance, safety and violence. Long and unsafe routes to school, harassment, and gender-based violence in or around schools push parents to keep girls at home.

E. Poor school facilities. A lack of toilets, privacy and menstrual hygiene products leads girls to miss classes. Few female teachers can mean fewer role models and less trust from families.

F. Social norms and discriminatory laws. Beliefs about the role of women, or laws that exclude pregnant girls or married girls from school, limit access. In Afghanistan, the exclusion is state policy.

G. Conflict, displacement and disasters. Armed conflict, forced displacement and climate shocks destroy schools, interrupt studies and increase risks for girls. In many crises, secondary education is the first to be abandoned.

H. Digital exclusion. As learning moves partly online, girls without devices or connectivity fall behind, and later find it harder to enter the modern job market.

I. Intersecting disadvantages. Girls from the poorest households, rural areas, ethnic minorities, or with disabilities are far more likely to be left out than urban, wealthy girls.

7. What works? Evidence and examples

The 2026 GEM Report insists that **no single policy is enough**; a mix of measures is needed. The following approaches have shown results.

Approach	Example or evidence
Make secondary education free and compulsory by law	In 14 African countries, making lower secondary free and compulsory raised girls' educational attainment by 1.6 years and secondary completion by 14 percentage points.
Reduce financial barriers	Cash transfers, scholarships and school meals consistently improve enrolment, attendance and completion, especially for girls. Cash transfers tied to attendance raise the likelihood of enrolment by 36%. In Mali, the Jigisemejiri social safety net programme doubled the enrolment of girls of upper secondary age.
Protect pregnant and parenting girls	Legal guarantees of the right to return to school, combined with childcare and support, as in several African countries that lifted bans on pregnant students.
Make schools safe	In Mozambique, training school staff to address gender-based violence and encouraging girls to report incidents reduced violence and increased enrolment.
Improve infrastructure	Safe transport, separate toilets, water and menstrual hygiene support increase participation.
Recruit and train female teachers	More women teachers improve trust, safety and role-modelling, especially in rural areas.
Fight child marriage	Enforce minimum age laws, work with families and communities, and offer girls alternatives.
Target the hardest-to-reach	Focus resources on poor, rural, minority and disabled girls and on conflict zones rather than on national averages alone.
Use data	Collect data by gender, location and wealth, and track completion, not only enrolment.

8. Key actors

- **Member States**: responsible for laws, school systems and budgets.
- **UNESCO**: standards, data (GEM Report), policy advice, and campaigns. The current Director-General is **Khaled El-Enany**, according to the 2026 UNESCO statements on girls' education.
- **UNICEF**: programmes for children, including adolescent girls and child marriage.
- **UN Women** and **UNFPA**: gender equality, sexual and reproductive health, and child marriage.
- **World Bank** and regional development banks: loans and grants for education and cash transfer programmes.
- **Global Partnership for Education (GPE)** and **Education Cannot Wait**: funding for education in low-income countries and in crises.
- **Civil society and NGOs**: for example the Malala Fund and the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), which work on the ground and monitor governments.
- **Religious and community leaders**: influence on social norms, for or against girls' schooling.
- **Private sector and philanthropy**: funding, technology and training partnerships.

9. Points of debate and tensions

The committee will not be divided along a single line. Expect disagreements on:

1. **Sovereignty versus universal rights.** Some states stress that education policy is a national matter and that cultural and religious contexts must be respected. Others argue that the right to education is universal and that the international community has a duty to speak out.
2. **Funding.** Who pays? Donor countries talk about better use of existing funds, while many developing countries point to aid cuts and debt burdens and call for more predictable financing.
3. **Targeted or global approach.** Should efforts focus on the hardest-hit regions and groups, or on all countries? Should UNESCO also address boys' under-achievement in some regions?
4. **Afghanistan.** How can the international community support Afghan girls without legitimising or funding the authorities responsible for the ban? Options include support for community-based education, online and remote learning, scholarships abroad, and support for female teachers. Each has limits.
5. **Sexual and reproductive health.** Measures on early pregnancy, comprehensive sexuality education and re-entry policies are sensitive for some delegations. Be ready to find wording acceptable to several groups.
6. **Enforcement.** UNESCO relies on voluntary commitment. How to monitor progress without being intrusive? Peer review, shared indicators and reporting are possible tools.
7. **Technology.** Can digital learning bridge gaps, or does it widen them where connectivity and devices are scarce?
8. **Quality versus access.** Is it enough to get girls into school, if learning outcomes are poor? Or should access come first?

10. Questions a resolution should answer

A strong resolution will usually address several of the following questions:

1. How can **free and equitable secondary education** be guaranteed in law and in practice, including hidden costs?

2. How can **girls who are pregnant, married or mothers** be supported to stay in school or return?
3. How can **schools and school journeys be made safe** for girls?
4. How can countries **recruit, train and protect female teachers**, especially in rural areas?
5. How can **funding** be mobilised and made more predictable, and who should contribute?
6. How should progress be **measured and monitored** (completion rates, data by gender, location and wealth)?
7. What can be done for girls in **conflict, displacement and crisis**, including Afghanistan?
8. How can **technology** and **partnerships** (private sector, NGOs, communities) help without widening inequalities?
9. What should be UNESCO's concrete role, and what is the role of Member States?

11. Tips for delegates

Prepare your position

1. **Research your country** using UNESCO, the GEM Report, UNICEF, the World Bank and national ministries. Find: enrolment and completion data for girls, child marriage rates, laws on education, aid given or received.
2. **Identify your priorities** (three at most) and your red lines (what you cannot accept).
3. **Find allies** (regional groups, donors, countries with similar challenges) and think about who will oppose you and why.
4. **Prepare a position paper** (one page): the situation in your country, past actions, your position on the topic, and the solutions you propose.

Speaking in debate

- Open with a **clear point**, back it with **one or two figures**, and end with a **proposal**.
- Speak in the third person (**the delegation of France believes…**).
- Be **diplomatic**: criticise policies, not people. Use phrases such as *my delegation respectfully disagrees* or *we encourage*.
- Remember that UNESCO works by **consensus and cooperation**: offer compromises.

12.Sources and further reading

All links and reports below are the main sources used for this guide. Please read at least the first two before the conference.

- UNESCO, **2026 Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Gender Report** and press release “Gender gaps in education narrow globally, yet early marriage remains a major barrier to girls' education” (October 2026). unesco.org/gem-report
- UNESCO GEM Report, **2026 Report on Access and Equity**, and the World Education Blog article “Is girls' education a problem of the past?” (9 October 2026). world-education-blog.org
- UNESCO and FAWE, **Gender equity in access to education in Africa** (regional companion paper, 2026). fawe.org
- UNESCO and UNICEF, **Afghanistan Education Situation Report 2026** (November 2026) and UNESCO statements on Afghan girls (August 2026). unicef.org/afghanistan

- Statements and reports on the United States' withdrawal from UNESCO (announced 22 July 2025, effective 31 December 2026).
- United Nations, **Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 5**. sdgs.un.org
- UN Women, UNICEF, UNFPA, Malala Fund, Global Partnership for Education, Education Cannot Wait: websites and annual reports.