



UNESCO's role in empowering rural women in developing countries

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Abstract

This report presents highlights of UNESCO's work in 2024 to advance gender equality in and through education. This article proposes a conceptual framework for how education can promote adolescent girls' empowerment and, by mapping the field, highlights promising examples of empowering education programs. We conclude by identifying both research and programmatic opportunities for the future that will harness the expertise of a range of specialists from the interdisciplinary fields of gender studies and adolescent development in collaboration with experts from the fields of education, health, and labor.

Keywords

UNESCO, developing countries, Gender, adolescent girls, empowerment, conceptual framework, formal education

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1. Introduction

Empowering adolescent girls through education has become a priority goal of multiple stakeholders, including aid agencies, non-governmental organizations, foundations, and corporations.² In the popular media, educating girls is touted as the most powerful force to transform society, and the way to break cycles of poverty in just one generation [2,3]. However, there is growing awareness of the poor quality of many schools in developing countries due to new data on learning outcomes [5,6]. In addition, experts increasingly question the “relevance” of prevalent educational approaches, particularly for adolescent girls [4, 7]. Initially, efforts to promote girls’ education focused on a younger population of girls not yet able to access primary school. This focus reflected international commitments (Education for All [EFA] and Millennium Development Goals [MDGs]) to achieve universal primary schooling in the context of persistent gender gaps.³ In more recent years, as most countries have achieved or are approaching universal primary enrollment and gender gaps at the primary level are narrowing, disappearing and in some cases even reversing, attention has shifted to secondary school-age (adolescent) girls. More and more girls are in a position to transition to higher levels of schooling where the economic returns in terms of gains in future earning are estimated to be even greater than the returns from primary school completion [4 , 8 , 9].

Recognizing the need for and potential of adolescent girls’ education programming, many donors and NGOs are working to improve the quality and relevance of education, sometimes in collaboration with the government (e.g. ministries of education), sometimes by creating formal educational alternatives either in NGO or private schools, or by creating non-formal alternatives. These efforts are intended to broaden girls’ range of competencies both to reduce the special risks they face during adolescence and to enhance their social and economic assets as adults. As the focus has shifted toward the education of adolescent girls, so too has the emphasis on empowering adolescent girls through education (in part due to the recognition that access to education alone is insufficient). Given the recent nature of this shift, scholars and organizations are only beginning to conceptualize and research the process by which education can promote adolescent girls’ empowerment [4 , 10 ,11]. Much of the earlier research and theory on empowerment focused on adult women and assumes that they are not living in their parents’ households [12,13]. Therefore some of the ways in which empowerment is conceptualized (e.g. freedom of movement, control over household resources, decisions regarding fertility) are not yet relevant for adolescent girls. For example, Duflo (2012) provides a clear and holistic definition of empowerment in her review article investigating the directionality of women’s empowerment and economic development. She conceptualizes women’s empowerment as “improving the ability of women to access the constituents of development” (2012: 1). This includes access to health, education, earnings, rights and political participation. While comprehensive, the domains of earnings, rights (e.g. property ownership), and political participation would be less germane to adolescent girls because they are minors [4].

This article focuses on adolescent girls’ empowerment, and attempts to clarify the linkages between education and empowerment by proposing a conceptual framework for how education can promote adolescent girls’ empowerment. Furthermore, we identify promising examples of educational interventions with empowerment potential. We identify both research and programmatic opportunities for the future that will harness the expertise of a range of specialists from the interdisciplinary fields of gender studies and adolescent development in collaboration with experts from the fields of education, health, and labor. Before proceeding, we acknowledge a key dilemma: while there is an acute need for adolescent girls’ empowerment programs, a

continued emphasis on girls' education can exacerbate gendered tensions in communities and is an incomplete strategy to promote gender [4 , 14]. In the short term, programs and policies should justifiably target girls due to their marginalized status, but these efforts should be carried out with a focus on changing gendered relations and norms, so that the underlying causes of girls' disadvantage can be addressed. An emphasis on gender, rather than girls, will permit a broader discussion around how gender inequality limits the potential of both girls and boys to fully develop their capabilities. As such, the framework that we propose can be used to conceptualize educational opportunities that promote gender equality and empowerment for all adolescents. We focus our discussion here on adolescent girls due to the nature of the programs that we reviewed, many of which exclusively work with girls [4].

2. UNESCO's strategic context

Significant progress has been made in advancing gender equality and girls' and women's education. *UNESCO data* shows that girls' enrolment has improved dramatically over the past 25 years; 180 million more girls are enrolled in primary and secondary education. Between 1995 and 2019, the primary school enrolment rate of girls increased from 79 to 90 percent, while the percentage of boys enrolled increased from 86 to 92. Completion rates also improved, with girls' primary school completion rate increasing by almost 20 percentage points to 87 percent during the period [1 , 19]. The fastest progress was in Central and Southern Asia, where in 1995 just over half of girls completed primary school, but a generation later almost 90 percent of their daughters do so. And the pursuit of education continues; globally, 118 million women and 110 million men were participating in tertiary education in 2019. But many challenges remain: In 2020, 260 million children and youth were out of school – just over half of whom were boys. Women still accounted for almost two-thirds of adults unable to read in 2019 [1]. Digital literacy gaps are widening [1]. Among 10 low- and middle-income countries with data, women are less likely than men to have used a basic arithmetic formula in a spreadsheet in the 7 poorest countries, while parity exists in the 3 richest countries. Gender segregation by field of study continues to constrain girls' career choices. In Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, only 14 percent of girls who were top performers in science or mathematics expected to work in science and engineering, compared with 26 percent of top-performing boys. Girls still face the worst forms of exclusion. In Malawi, Nigeria and Sierra Leone, early marriage and pregnancy keep about 10 percent of adolescents – mostly girls – out of education. The COVID-19 pandemic continued to cast a dark shadow in 2021, with far-reaching consequences as outlined in the UNESCO 2021 report, *When schools shut: gendered impacts of COVID-19 school closures*. Gender norms and expectations impacted on children's ability to participate in remote learning. In poorer contexts, girls' time to learn was constrained by increased household chores while boys' time was constrained by income generating activities [1 , 16]. Limited access to internet-enabled devices, a lack of digital skills and cultural norms also restricted girls' use of technological devices. School closures also increased the risks of early and unintended pregnancies and gender-based violence. Data on school return are still lacking but gender differences are already appearing in many contexts. Beyond COVID-19, in 2021 the de facto authorities in Afghanistan effectively banned girls from accessing secondary education, undermining progress made over the previous decades and denying girls' right to education. Prior to this, the completion rate for girls in Afghanistan had increased from 6 percent in 1995 to 50 percent in 2018. Meanwhile, a ray of hope came from Sierra Leone. Following the removal in March 2020 of a ban on pregnant girls and adolescent mothers from attending school, the government adopted a 'radical inclusion' policy that reaffirms pregnant girls' and adolescent

mothers' right to education in March 2024. UNESCO's work on gender equality in and through education is now more relevant than ever [1, 15].

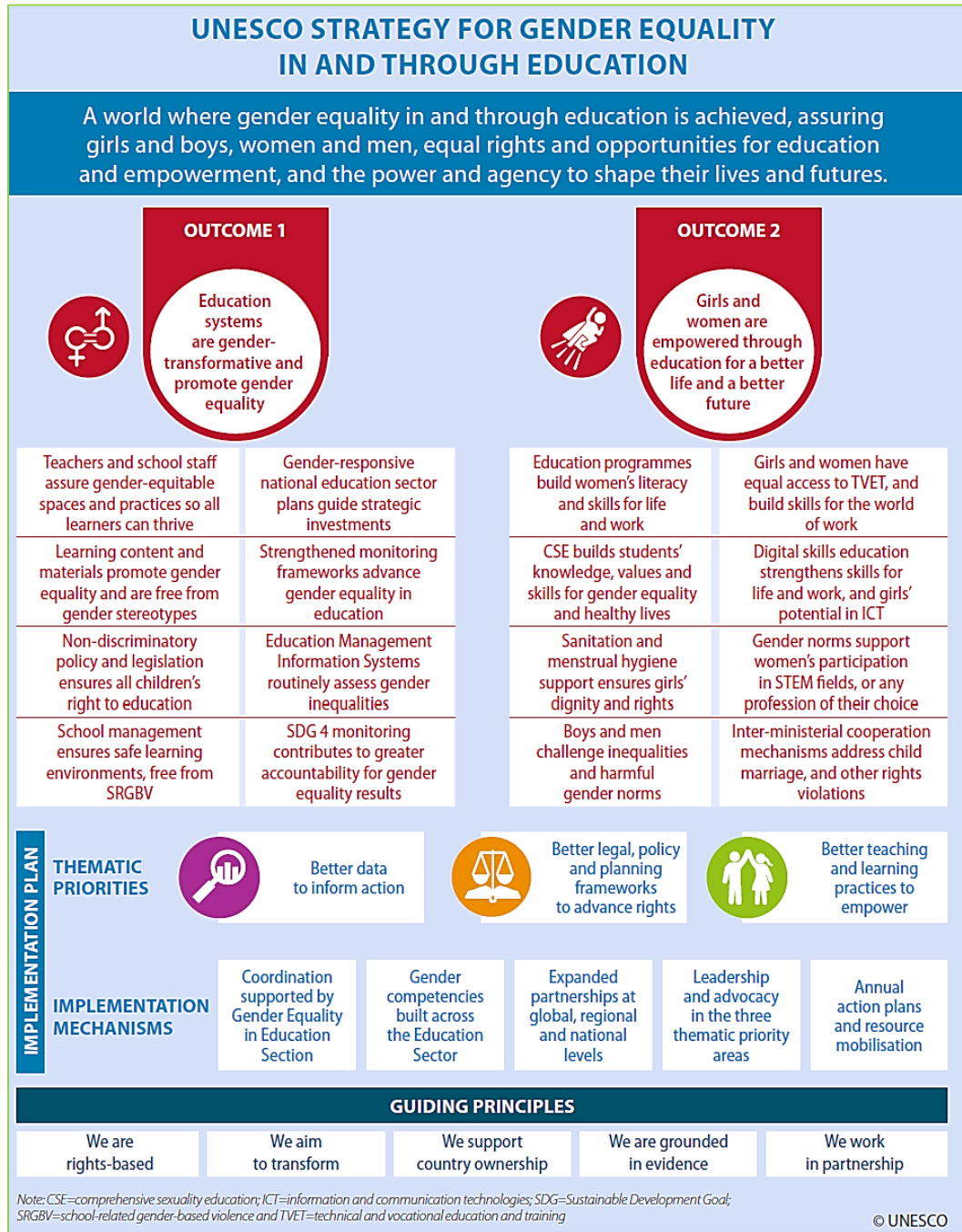


Figure 1: Theory of UNESCO's change [1]

3. Conceptualizing empowering education for adolescent girls

International organizations working in this field, including CARE5 and Room to Read, have made progress toward clarifying what girls' empowerment entails by developing frameworks to guide their programming [4, 21]. In the case of CARE, their "women's empowerment framework" focuses on agency, structure, and strategic relations⁶ and it is used with both adolescent girls and older women. CARE's website describing the framework explains that:

“women’s empowerment is a process of social change, and we only capture part of its richness when we assess the process of empowerment in terms of its outcomes.”⁷ The CARE framework stresses agency, structures, and strategic relations and emphasizes that it is essential to address the structures that inhibit empowerment (e.g. targeting community members or teachers who might foster or prevent empowerment of girls through education) [4 , 22 , 23]. Room to Read, which has an adolescent girls’ education program in nine countries, has created a Life Skills Education Framework, consisting of 10 core life skills to negotiate key decisions.⁸ While these frameworks provide an essential tool to guide program design, implementation and evaluation, they are less focused on underlying mechanisms through which education empowers adolescent girls. Here, we focus our inquiry on questions including: What kind of education will empower girls and lead to social transformation? What are the components of empowering education for adolescent girls? Our research extends theoretical understandings of how education can empower adolescent girls by attempting to more fully articulate the core conditions and competencies that education must entail. Aligned with previous research, we recognize that the potential of education to promote empowerment is “entangled with the sociocultural reality” [13 , 23 , 15]. Likewise, we propose that agency, or the culturally constrained capacity to act [15 , 16] is an integral component of empowerment [23 , 18]. Our conceptualization of empowerment is also informed by Murphy-Graham’s longitudinal research studying alternative secondary education in Honduras [4]. In *Opening Minds, Improving Lives: Education and Women’s Empowerment in Honduras*, Murphy-Graham (2012) explores how education can trigger the empowerment process through a longitudinal study of adolescent girls and adult women’s experiences who have attended an alternative secondary education program. She proposes that through education at its best, “empowered individuals come to recognize their inherent worth, the fundamental equality of all human beings and their ability to contribute to personal and social betterment. They develop the capacity to critically examine their lives and broader society and take action toward personal and social transformation” (2012: 3). A good education, a girl-friendly education, a relevant education, a quality education can do more to assure girls of a safe, productive and more empowered passage to adulthood than a typical or average education [4]. Murphy-Graham’s conception of empowerment demands even more of education than is typical in that it embraces action as well as recognition and critical thinking capacities. With this concept of empowerment in mind, we have developed our ideas further regarding how education can provide a strong foundation for empowerment of adolescents [4]. UNESCO continued to mainstream gender equality in education in 2024. This included a gender analysis of over 350 Education Sector workplans, and guidance on the integration of gender considerations across all thematic areas of work. *Operational tools to advance gender equality in and through education* were rolled out, responding to the recommendation of the *2020 IOS Evaluation of the UNESCO Global Priority Gender Equality*. This toolkit aims to strengthen individual and institutional capacity to integrate gender equality into education programmes. It is designed to enable a better understanding of the principles, tools and data needed for gender-transformative education programmes [1 , 20].

4. UNESCO's Funding highlights

UNESCO has adopted a mechanism – the Gender Equality tracking the proportion of funds devoted to advancing gender equality. In 2021, contributions to Priority Gender Equality – at US\$51.5 million – made up 28 percent of the Education Sector’s total expenditure, excluding regular programme staff costs. This represents three-fifths of the gender-related expenditure of the five UNESCO Major Programmes. While gender equality cuts across all expected results

(ERs), one ER is entirely dedicated to gender equality in and through education: ER 7 – National capacities strengthened to address gender equality holistically in national education systems. The regular programme budget for this ER was US\$704,000 for the 2020-2021 biennium and voluntary contributions in hand totalled US\$20.6 million for the 2020-2021 programme and budget cycle – leaving a funding gap of US\$8.6 million [1]. The funding gap designates the funds that still need to be mobilized to achieve the programmatic targets set over the biennium. Extrabudgetary funding is critical to the implementation of UNESCO’s work on gender equality in and through education, as evidenced by the many donors supporting projects across a wide range of settings and programme areas. This includes the governments of Bulgaria, France, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Pakistan, the People’s Republic of China, the Republic of Korea, Sweden and Wallonie Bruxelles International. CJ Group remained the primary funder to the multi-donor UNESCO Malala Fund for Girls’ Right to Education, which supports equal access to education for girls and women with a focus on the hardest-to-reach and those affected by conflict and disaster. Other companies supporting UNESCO’s work on gender equality in and through education in 2021 include Dior, HNA Group, Intel and Prada. UNESCO will continue to mobilize resources for gender equality in and through education to achieve the ambitions outlined in the *UNESCO strategy for gender equality in and through education 2019–2025*. In 2021, UNESCO’s Education Sector invested US\$ 51.5 million to advance Priority Gender Equality [1 , 22].

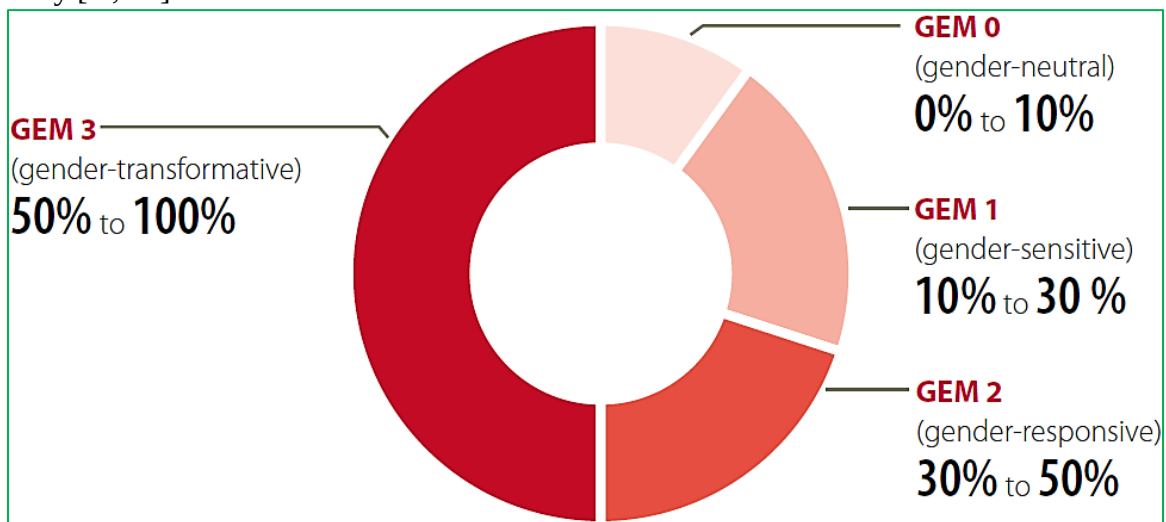


Figure 2: UNESCO’s Gender Equality Marker budget range [1]

5. Methods of developing countries

The process by which we have elaborated this conceptual framework resembles the iterative processes described by Maxwell (2013) and Jabareen (2009). We began by reviewing published literature that focused on the relationship between education and adolescent girls’ empowerment in developing countries, including a review of studies that conceptualize adolescent girls’ agency [22 , 15 , 13 , 5]. We then gathered for frequent conversations, discussing and debating our emerging framework, drawing upon our experiential knowledge that is informed by our previous personal and professional experiences (see [4 , 1] for a discussion of how experiential knowledge can inform conceptual frameworks). For Lloyd, the experience of serving as primary editor for

the book *Growing up Global: The Changing Transitions to Adulthood in Developing Countries* (2005), was particularly influential in shaping her understanding of the relationship between education and empowerment for adolescents. The book is the product of deliberations from a National Academies panel consisting of fourteen experts from a range of disciplines that met over four years and was charged with the task of examining the changing lives of young people in developing countries at the beginning of the 21st century. The panel reviewed many different literatures and conducted new data analysis. Lloyd served as the panel chair, primary volume editor, first author for five chapters of the volume, and co-author of the conceptual framework chapter. Lloyd also drew upon over ten years of in-depth research experience in countries including Kenya, Egypt, and Pakistan, where projects examined schooling outcomes for adolescents in relationship to the quality of schooling experiences as measured through direct objective school visits and assessments [4 , 20]. For Murphy-Graham, the longitudinal qualitative research on education and women's empowerment she conducted in Honduras and her publication of *Opening Minds, Improving Lives* (2012) were influential in shaping her understanding of the topic. Likewise, she drew upon research projects currently in progress, including a longitudinal mixed-methods study of the A Ganar program in Honduras and Guatemala, ongoing research on the alternative secondary education program Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial (Tutorial Learning System or SAT) and its 'sister' program Preparation for Social Action (see Ref [16]). Finally, Lloyd and Murphy-Graham both participated as co-authors of a UK Department for International Development (DFID) rigorous literature review on girls education and gender equality that deepened our knowledge of multidisciplinary scholarship (and research gaps) in this field [17 , 20]. This stage of the process helped us to identify and name concepts, organize, and finally integrate them into a preliminary schema that we used as a lens through which to examine programs working with adolescents [4 , 17 , 20]. Our dialogue also allowed for the contextualization of this theme within broader theoretical debates about the nature of development and the goals of the international community (a full discussion of this context is beyond the scope of this article, however, this informed our articulation of the conceptual framework described below). The next stage involved a review of educational programs working with adolescents in developing countries [4]. To identify these programs we first conducted a literature review of any published research on educational interventions that are explicitly designed to empower adolescent girls in low income countries. However, this strategy yielded few results [16 , 10 , 14]. The topic is sufficiently new such that published literature is scarce, as we found in the DFID rigorous literature review on girls' education and gender equality, there is a "lack of studies of the links between girls' education and empowerment outcomes" [4 , 22]. We then broadened our review of published literature to include studies that describe innovative education for youth [13]. Therefore the majority of these examples have been gathered from organizational reports and/or donor reports and evaluations as well as key informant interviews with program staff or researchers. The goal of this exercise was not to identify the impact of these programs, but rather the central goals and competencies each intervention is designed to address. It is not possible, with the available information, to quantify the extent of exposure to each competency separately or the weight of the mix of elements within each competency. Our inclusion of programs for review is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather a sample that reflects a range in terms of scale, regional coverage, and educational modality (e.g. formal/non-formal). After a comprehensive review of these programs, we returned to our draft conceptual framework and made additional modifications [4]. Finally, we have presented earlier versions of this framework at several international conferences, requested

feedback from professional colleagues, and continued to be engaged in dialogue with each other about the work. We expect that this framework will continue to be reconceptualized and modified “according to the evolution of the phenomenon in question or as a result of new data and texts not available at the time the framework was first developed” [13, 4]. It is our hope that the framework will help us to better understand how education can support adolescent girls’ empowerment, as well as inform future research and interventions [4].

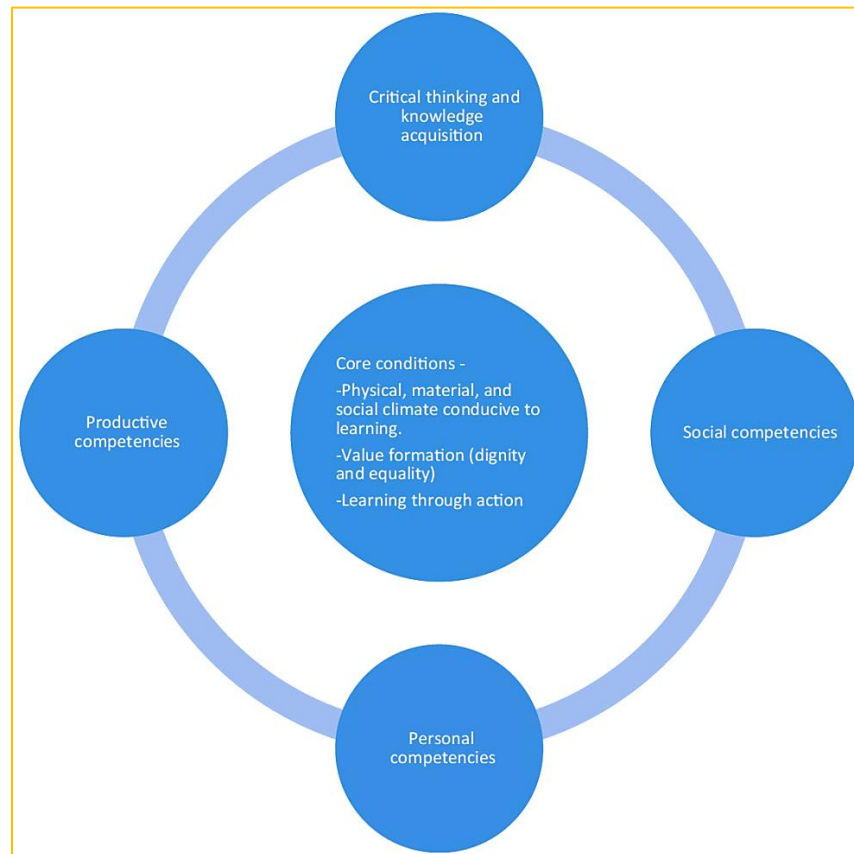


Figure 3: Conceptualizing empowering education for adolescent girls: Core conditions and competencies [4].

6. Conclusion

Within this diverse programmatic arena, key actors come from many sectors, including the education sector, the health sector, and the labor market sector as well as from the interdisciplinary fields of gender studies and adolescent development [4]. The rapid growth of interest in the unmet needs of adolescent girls has arisen at the same time as the global education reform movement has committed to improved learning outcomes as well as more “relevant” curricula and more effective pedagogies. Given resource constraints, it is important to cultivate cross-fertilization of ideas and experiences across these domains while at the same time avoiding duplication. Likewise, it is critical to have a shared conceptual understanding of how education can empower adolescent girls. We offer our conceptual framework as a starting point for future research and discussion [4]. To summarize, our conceptual framework of how education can support girls’ empowerment includes three core conditions: 1) the physical, material, and socio-cultural environment must be conducive to learning; 2) empowering education for girls should foster the recognition of their dignity and equal worth with others and; 3) empowering education

requires action, or learning by doing. These core conditions provide a supporting or permeating structure for specific content or the curriculum. We suggest that four competencies – comprising critical thinking and the acquisition of knowledge; personal competencies; social competencies; and productive competencies – must reflect and be informed by the core conditions. While we have created a typology of competencies, we recognize that these will likely overlap in practice. Finally, this is an ambitious framework, one that we recognize will be difficult to fully operationalize in severely under-resourced contexts [4]. Nevertheless well-designed, properly resourced educational interventions can foster these conditions and competencies. Our review of programs that target adolescent empowerment has identified a range of promising programs in the formal (including NGO schools, enhancements to existing school curriculum, and extracurricular programs) and non-formal (both single-sex and coeducational) sectors. While several impact evaluations are currently underway, there is very little evidence about the effectiveness of these programs, and thus there is a great need for mixed-methods research that investigates the process by which (and if) empowerment takes place. This is an opportune moment for deepening our understanding of the longer-term impact of existing approaches to educational investments for adolescent girls as well as testing new innovative approaches. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon recently launched his Global Initiative on Education during the same week as the launch of the International Day of the Girl (United Nations, 2012) [4]. At the same time, UNESCO and the Brookings Institution's Center for Universal Education (CUE) (2013) convened a Learning Metrics Task Force to develop standards and metrics for a broad range of competencies for the primary and postprimary levels. These include all the competencies identified in our framework as being particularly important for girls' empowerment. Additionally the Brookings Institution has recently convened a series of events (one of which included a keynote address by the US First Lady, Michelle Obama)²⁸ focusing on "second generation issues for girls' education." The issues they have identified include ensuring access and retention for girls in secondary school, ensuring that school facilities are safe and "girl-friendly," improving quality, and supporting girls in the transition from secondary to post-secondary education and/or to the labor market. Policy advocacy work such as this will hopefully provide opportunities for deepening of our understanding of what works best for girls' education and empowerment. While there is some overlap between these "second generation" issues and how we conceptualize empowering education for adolescent girls, we would like to see language reflecting the notion that quality education is empowering education [4].

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