



CSW 68 Gender and Poverty Brief

The Intersection of Gender, Education, and Poverty

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Large gender gaps exist in education around the world despite international efforts to expand educational access. While gaps most often disadvantage girls, in some cases it is boys who are at a disadvantage. Globally, 118.5 million girls and 125.5 million boys do not attend school.¹ The persistent educational inequality for women is reflected in adult literacy, with women comprising 2/3 of adults unable to read.² Poverty intersecting with geographical isolation, minoritized status, disability, early marriage and pregnancy, gender-based violence, and patriarchal attitudes about the status and role of women and men, are among the many obstacles that prevent women and girls from fulfilling their right to participate in, complete and benefit from education.

Fast Facts

Education provides important protection against poverty.

- In the US in 2021, 5.7% of women with bachelor's degrees lived below the poverty line compared to 16.9% with high school degrees, and 33.1% with less than high school.³
- Nearly twice as many white women (39%) complete their associate or bachelor's degree by the age of 29 than Black women (21%) and Latinas (20%), which contributes to the racial pay gap among women.⁴
- Lack of education contributes to the gender wage gap, to women's prevalence in low-paid occupations, to a lack of work-family supports, and to challenges involved in accessing public benefits.

Women's higher education participation does not translate into equal pay or savings.

- Women of all race-ethnicities attend school and graduate at higher rates than male peers. Even at the doctoral level, 54% of degrees in 2022 were conferred to women.⁵
- Women remain under-represented within many high earning fields such as engineering or computer science, leading to increased gaps in earnings between women and men.
- Women take about two years longer than men to repay student loans. From the moment women graduate from college, most face a gender pay gap — which compounds as they age. As a result, women often put off saving for retirement, buying a home or starting a business.

School closings during COVID increased women's economic insecurity.

- Low-income school districts and those with greater representation of Black and Latinx students were less likely to offer in-person instruction than others.
- Black and Latinx mothers were more likely to exit the workforce in the absence of in-person instruction, in addition to being disproportionately impacted by unprecedented unemployment.

Women's food insecurity is on the rise and linked to learning poverty.

- In 2021, 15.3% of children lived below the poverty line in the United States.⁶
- Hunger and food insecurity are consistently more common in some communities of color. For example, Black kids are almost three times as likely and Latinx kids are nearly twice as likely to experience hunger when compared to their white peers. One in four (24%) families headed by single mothers were food insecure in 2021.⁷
- Food insecurity in kindergarten is associated with *learning poverty*, or poor reading performance and impaired social skills in later grades.
- Food insecurity is on the rise among college students. Nearly 30% of students at four-year colleges reported food insecurity at some point during their college career, and the percentage is even higher for marginalized communities.⁸

Recommendations

- 1) Protect and expand Pell Grants for low-income students to **reduce the amount of student loan debt** they must take on to complete a degree.
- 2) Help to **eliminate the gender pay gap** by enforcing and strengthening equal pay legislation with measures such as the Paycheck Fairness Act.
- 3) Increase funding for public colleges and universities and support efforts to **move vigorously toward tuition- and debt-free options for students.**
- 4) Invest in **lifelong and life-wide learning** so that women can attend school and further their earning capacity while maintaining careers and families.
- 5) Address food poverty by providing **universal healthy, accessible, and free meals** to all students regardless of family income to eliminate stigma for low-income children.

Resources

American Association of University Women (AAUW) 2023. *Higher Education and Other Career Pathways*.
The Annie E. Cassie Foundation 2023. *Nearly 11 Million Kids Face Food Insecurity as Statistic Dips to 20-Year Low*.
Move for Hunger 2023. *How Hunger Is Affecting Millions of College Students*.
Hess, Cynthia and Stephanie Román 2016. *Poverty, Gender, and Public Policies*. Institute for Women's Policy Research Briefing Paper.

¹ UNESCO 2023. *Gender Equality and Education*.

² UNESCO 2023.

³ Hess, Cynthia and Stephanie Román 2016. *Poverty, Gender, and Public Policies*. Institute for Women's Policy Research Briefing Paper p. 3.

⁴ American Association of University Women (AAUW) 2023. *Fast Facts: Women of Color in Higher Ed*.

⁵ Reeves, Richard V. and Ember Smith 2021. *The Male College Crisis Is Not Just in Enrollment But Completion*. Brookings Institution.

⁶ Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention 2023. *Statistical Briefing Book*. US Department of Justice.

⁷ The Annie E. Cassie Foundation 2023. *Nearly 11 Million Kids Face Food Insecurity as Statistic Dips to 20-Year Low*.

⁸ Move for Hunger 2023. *How Hunger Is Affecting Millions of College Students*.