



Achieving the UK's Foreign Policy Objectives through Investment in Girls' Education

The British Foreign Policy Group and
the Global Partnership for Education

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Introduction

Globally, 131 million girls do not go to school¹ and two-thirds of the 774 million illiterate people in the world are female.² If current trends continue, equality in education will not be achieved for another 80 years³ and the global goals of ensuring all girls receive 12 years of quality education by 2030 will not be reached for another 150 years.⁴ This has been exasperated by the coronavirus pandemic and 10 million more girls are expected to drop out of school as a result, reversing much of the progress made on girls' education in recent years.⁵

The UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson has made clear that advancing girls' education will be a central part of his political legacy and the UK Government's policy agenda.⁶ This commitment has been shown through the launching of the Platform for Girls' Education,⁷ continued support for the Girls' Education Challenge Fund⁸ and significant financial commitments, including a £515 million commitment to education around the world, announced in September 2019.⁹ The UK Government has also stated that it will use its 2021 G7 Presidency as an opportunity to gain support for girls' education within the international community¹⁰ and, alongside Kenya, the UK will co-host the Global Partnership for Education summit in 2021 to lead global action to educate every child.¹¹

This report sets out the best available evidence regarding how investment in the provision of 12 years of quality education for every girl will not only advance the UK's global values mission, but directly help to achieve the UK's broader foreign policy objectives. It includes findings presented in a high-level evidence workshop hosted by the British Foreign Policy Group and the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) in July 2020, including contributions from two former heads of state and leading global academics and practitioners.

A 'Systems' Approach to Girls' Education

This report sets out how a systems approach to girls' education will enable the UK Government to achieve its key foreign policy objectives, including but not limited to:

1. A values-conscious, ethical trading policy that opens international markets to Britain and supports economic growth in our global partners.
2. Britain as a leading contributor to global peace and security, shielding the most vulnerable from international conflict, tackling radicalism and extremism, and improving national security in both the UK and abroad.
3. Britain as a global champion of action on climate change, helping to build robust commitments from emerging and advanced nations across the world.
4. Ensuring the global economic recovery in the aftermath of COVID-19 is a 'green recovery', built on more sustainable foundations that increases the resilience of societies against other upstream threats.

A systems approach to girls' education is two-pronged. It looks holistically at the role that education plays in individual and community development and considers where interventions could most effectively provide cascading benefits. It also considers the full suite of potential obstacles to realising these objectives - such as the safety and security of girls, sanitation needs, and other barriers that prevent them from accessing education if provision is made available. In the context of the Integrated Review, a coordinated approach from within the UK Government - bringing together all of the touchpoints of our international activities that could impact on and benefit from involvement in this agenda - could ensure that our investments are able to deliver the lasting change we seek to achieve.

An Evidence Roadmap

1. A values-conscious, ethical trading policy that opens international markets to Britain and supports economic growth in our global partners.

The development of an independent trading policy provides an opportunity to ensure that the UK is trading with developing partners on the fairest possible terms. The provision of girls' education plays a direct and foundational role in the economic stability of the UK's trading relationships and helps facilitate growth for the UK's current and future trading partners. This would allow our developing partners to move up the global value chain and enable the UK to build mutually beneficial trading relationships with its developing partners.¹² As COVID-19 moves through the Global South, and interrupts global supply systems, these often fragile pathways to growth will become even more critical.

An estimated US \$30 trillion in human capital has been lost as a result of women not having access to universal secondary education in their youth, and as such, universal girls' education could have a significant impact on the outputs that support economic growth.¹³ For example, if every child in lower-income countries receives an education by 2050, the GDP per capita of these countries could rise by almost 70%.¹⁴ This has been seen notably in Asia, where more than half the difference in growth rates between South Asian and East Asian economies between 1960 - 1992 occurred due to disparities in how gender inequalities in education were addressed.¹⁵ Furthermore, every additional year of primary school boosts girls' eventual wages by 10 - 20 per cent, and an extra year of secondary school by 15 - 25 per cent.¹⁶ A systems approach to education has been proven successful in facilitating growth and, for example, GPE-supported sector strategic plans helped Kenya focus education investments on achieving national priorities including graduating to middle-income status.¹⁷

A significant component of this upsurge is due to the increased skills gained through education. This has become increasingly important in the global market, as 40% of employers globally already lack workers with the necessary skills.¹⁸ Girls' education can therefore be utilised to enhance cognitive skills, making girls less risk averse and more willing to utilise new technologies.¹⁹ It can also be tailored directly to market needs, to meet the rapidly changing skills requirements of a globalised world. For example, in East Africa, educational opportunities through farmer field schools have been found to increase the value of crops and livestock, resulting in a 61% income increase.²⁰ Girls' education also considerably increases the labour force participation rate, empowering women to compete in the labour market. Women with a secondary education are 9.6% more likely to work than those with a primary education or less, and those with a tertiary education are over 25% more likely to work.²¹ These improvements to productivity and labour force participation are key to stimulating growth and enabling developing partners to move up the global value chain.²²

Girls' education also has a direct impact on positive health outcomes, which indirectly help to improve productivity. For example, women with post-primary education are five times more likely to know basic facts about HIV/AIDS,²³ and if all children completed primary education there would be 700,000 fewer cases of HIV/AIDS a year.²⁴ Those with primary level education are also 12% more likely to seek out healthcare when needed²⁵ and more likely to take important health precautions, such as purifying water, due to the cognitive skills and awareness around health developed through schooling.²⁶ Giving all women in lower-income countries at least secondary education would increase the probability of a child receiving immunisation against diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough by over 40%.²⁷ These improved health outcomes serve to improve productivity and output, helping developing partners to gain comparative advantage.

A systems approach to girls' education can also help to break intergenerational cycles of poverty and low productivity. Children of better educated mothers tend to have more years of schooling,²⁸

study more at home, and achieve higher test scores.²⁹ Better educated mothers are also less likely to have stunted children,³⁰ which is significant because stunted children typically have a lower human capital through decreased productivity and economic opportunities.³¹ Undernutrition has been shown to lead to economic losses equivalent to 4-11% of GDP in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia,³² and as universal secondary education for girls could help reduce stunting rates by over a third, this would also help to increase GDP long-term.³³

Centralising girls' education in the UK's international trade policy can, therefore, play a vital role in improving labour force participation and productivity, generating wealth creation and supporting our developing partners in competing on the world stage. In the long term, it can also be expected to reduce aid reliance by increasing human capital.³⁴ Investments grounded in a systems approach to girls' education, or one that integrates the UK's foreign policy apparatus to address girls' education on all fronts, would be most effective both in spreading prosperity within societies and establishing the UK as a vital partner in the economic COVID-19 recovery and beyond. Not only could this increase market access for the UK, but it would also ensure that the UK and its partners are able to secure mutually beneficial and sustainable trade deals, aligning with the ambitions of Global Britain and the values that British people expect the Government to uphold.

2. Britain as a leading contributor to global peace and security, shielding the most vulnerable from international conflict, tackling radicalism and extremism, and improving national security in both the UK and abroad.

The link between gender inequality and the propensity for conflict has been strongly proven, with more gender-equal societies being less likely to engage in intrastate conflict³⁵ or to relapse into civil war.³⁶ The relationship is so robust that emerging evidence suggests that gender equality could even exceed the role of democracy and economic development in determining a nation's peace and stability.³⁷ Similarly, the strength and parity of education systems have been found to impact the likelihood of state violence, with the probability of conflict doubling in countries with twice the levels of educational inequality.³⁸ Education, and particularly girls' education, is, therefore, a powerful antidote to conflict, and achieving equal school completion for boys and girls can be expected to decrease the likelihood of conflict by as much as 37%.³⁹

There are a number of associated influences contributing to the outsized role of girls' education in conflict and security at an individual level, a social level and in terms of governance. Firstly, better-educated people are more likely to engage in politics democratically and constructively,⁴⁰ and education increases the likelihood that individuals will channel discontent through non-violent civil means, such as protests and boycotts.⁴¹ Secondly, education provides critical thinking and communication skills, which enable governments and societies to better identify and understand how individuals become radicalised, and how to counter this process.⁴² Thirdly, the education of citizens is key to rebuilding judicial systems - both in terms of the establishment and governance of these systems, and also in the social trust to facilitate their functioning - which is essential to the maintenance of peace.⁴³ Finally, education enables children to earn more in the future and therefore reduces the socio-economic drivers that lead to conflict.⁴⁴

The lessons learned in school can also help create peace and security. Conflict-sensitive curricula can be used to promote tolerance and inclusion, and investments in peace education can bring communities together and increase students' resilience. Through its significant impact in reducing gender inequality, education is the one of the most effective and sustainable ways to empower women to stand up to violence against themselves, against others and in the home.⁴⁵ Investing in a systems approach to girls' education thus helps the UK support our partners in building stronger, more resilient and safer communities, whilst at the same time decreasing globally harmful instability and conflict.

An Evidence Roadmap

Girls' education is also critical to addressing the threat of global terrorism. When girls in fragile states are not given access to quality education, groups hostile to democratic interests educate them instead, often with harmful effects to themselves and the wider community.⁴⁶ As a result of these influences, in Sierra Leone, youth without access to secondary education are nine times more likely to engage in violent conflict than their peers who attended school.⁴⁷ By investing in girls' education, the UK Government is thus able to shield vulnerable populations from extremist recruitment, and diminish the appeal of terrorist groups - contributing to both local and global security. This includes strengthening the UK's national security by decreasing the likelihood of global terrorism.

However, education alone is not enough, as poor-quality education provision can lead to fostering support for extremism,⁴⁸ or work to undermine gender equality. It is important that systems strengthening and reform leads to high-quality education, promoting values consistent with the social conditions necessary to underpin gender equality. For example, the growth of female-only religious schools in Pakistan has limited girls' education to Wahhabi-style interpretations of Islam, which may cultivate and propagate regressive gender roles.⁴⁹ GPE has helped to counter this by supporting 'gender neutral' schools in which boys and girls are not segregated which, by 2018, had enrolled 28,000 children who were previously out of school.⁵⁰

Overall, girls' education is a valuable asset in building national and global security, as it reduces the vulnerability of girls to extremist groups and provides individuals with the skills and values necessary to build peaceful societies. It is integral that the entire education system works to provide high quality learning to capitalize on and maximise these positive effects.

3. Britain as a global champion of action on climate change, helping to build robust commitments from emerging and advanced nations across the world.

Educating girls will be one of the most effective ways to ease the escalation of the global climate emergency, as well as to prevent climate disasters in the first place.

Firstly, education can help to slow the pace of climate change through the lessons imparted on students in the classroom. Education improves climate literacy, leading to a greater likelihood of climate stewardship and more sustainable consumption patterns among both students and their wider communities,⁵¹ whilst also helping stimulate innovative solutions to climate change.⁵² Additionally, girls' education can increase individuals' capacity and opportunity to fill leadership and decision-making positions.⁵³ This is significant because female leaders are more likely to pursue sustainable futures,⁵⁴ which have been directly correlated to more sustainable global outcomes.⁵⁵

Educating and empowering girls is also an effective way to reduce the effects of climate disasters when they do emerge by increasing climate resilience.⁵⁶ This is a case of life and death, with one study finding that if at least 70% of women achieved a lower-secondary education, disaster-related deaths could be reduced by up to 60% by 2050.⁵⁷ Conversely, if education progress stalls, natural disaster-related fatalities could increase by 20% per decade.⁵⁸ Environmental resilience can and must be built into education systems through harnessing the protective power of schools, as demonstrated by GPE's work with governments in drought-prone Somaliland and Chad. Similarly, in Pakistan's Baluchistan province, GPE supported the development of twelve different climate-adaptive school building designs to ensure resiliency and effective learning in relation to extreme weather conditions.⁵⁹

The protective impact of education is in part because education builds adaptive capacity. Abstract cognitive skills, such as categorization and logical deduction acquired through schooling, enhance the way educated individuals reason, solve problems, assess risks and make decisions.⁶⁰ Cognitive reasoning skills and deduction of risk have proven to be essential in responses to natural disasters, and those with more education were better able to identify various environmental threats in 70 out of 119 countries.⁶¹

Notably, a comprehensive education, which includes curriculum on sexual and reproductive health and rights, can empower women to have greater agency over their lives, equipping them with the knowledge to make informed choices and develop the ability to enact them. As a result, if all girls received a secondary school education, there could be two billion fewer people on the planet in 2050 than are expected under current levels of growth.⁶² On average, girls with 12 or more years of education choose to have four to five fewer children than those with little or no education.⁶³ As lower population levels lead to lower consumption levels, by enabling women to enact their reproductive rights, girls' education also has the secondary benefit of reducing CO2 emissions.⁶⁴

Girls' education is, therefore, an extremely effective and often underutilised solution in both mitigation and adaptation to the challenges of climate change. Centering girls' education in the UK's climate policy would have widespread positive effects, whilst encouraging a more substantive normative change in the social and economic systems forming the root causes of climate change long-term.⁶⁵

4. Ensuring the global economic recovery in the aftermath of COVID-19 is a 'green recovery', built on more sustainable foundations that increases the resilience of societies against other upstream threats.

The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to bring about the worst global recession since the Second World War, jeopardising decades of progress in increasing human capital, championing equality and reducing poverty worldwide.⁶⁶ However, this turbulent time also presents opportunities to 'build back better'. In the next 6-18 months, it is estimated that the world will invest over US \$20 trillion in recovering from the impacts of COVID-19.⁶⁷ This provides the perfect opportunity to prevent further crises by strengthening education systems and ensuring human capital investments are resilient to 21st century threats, whether health, conflict or climate induced. In the Eastern Caribbean states, GPE has helped develop long-term resilience through online learning systems in response to COVID-19, which not only enable learning continuity during the pandemic but also prepare the region - as the second most environmentally hazard-prone in the world - for future shocks.⁶⁸

One of the most effective ways to achieve desired sustainability outcomes is, therefore, through investment in a systems approach to girls' education. By March 2020, COVID-19 closures had forced 290 million children out of school, and many of the most vulnerable girls may never return, as the pressures of poverty, child marriage, gendered violence and domestic expectations keep them out of school.⁶⁹ By investing in education systems that meet the needs of all girls and boys, the UK can prevent a lost generation of children whilst at the same time paving the way for a more sustainable future.

As structural shifts in employment have disproportionately affected women throughout the COVID-19 crisis, investing in systems that enable children to attend school will allow their mothers to contribute more to the economic recovery and prevent a regression of gender inequality as demands for childcare increase. Women are globally more likely to be employed as carers and to have become unemployed due to COVID-19.⁷⁰ Providing for girls' education will have a ripple effect on the participation of women in the labour market and on gender equality more broadly during a time when progress on equality is increasingly under threat.

As outlined in the previous section on climate change, girls' education builds the resilience of communities, nations and the world through addressing the challenges of sustainable development at their root. Investments in gender equality through education will thus be a central mechanism for ensuring that our economies and societies recover in a sustainable manner.

Conclusion and next steps

The integration of the UK's foreign policy activities and the momentum of the Global Britain project provides a generational opportunity to deepen and advance our contribution to girls' education in practice. Education is the root of communities' resilience, the seed of their prosperity, and the linchpin of local and global security. Investments in girls' education, therefore, need to be approached from a systems-level that integrates all aspects of the UK's foreign policy infrastructure to ensure maximum efficiency and impact.

As outlined in this report, there is already an extensive evidence base to be leveraged in supporting this fundamental 'rethink' of the prioritisation and allocation of UK Government resources towards girls' education. Not only does this evidence demonstrate that British investment in girls' education can be transformative for individuals and communities, but that there is a meaningful relationship between these investments and the UK's ambitions for advancing free trade, addressing climate change, and tackling global conflict, terrorism and insecurity. In turn, this facilitates more peaceful and prosperous societies, stabilising conflicts and reducing regional security risks - with a collective global benefit.

It is therefore evident that there is no touchpoint of the UK Government's foreign policy objectives that would not benefit from adopting a systems approach to girls' education, and that, if the UK Government can help to build public support for investment in girls' education, the integration agenda in the UK's foreign policy activities provides the perfect opportunity to maximise the benefits of mainstreaming and centralising girls' education at the heart of the Global Britain project.

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The British Foreign Policy Group is an independent, non-partisan think tank dedicated to advancing the UK's global influence, at a crucial time in the nation's modern history. To achieve this, we produce dynamic events and high-quality research, and facilitate networks amongst stakeholders with a vested interest in Britain's international engagement.

Our core objective is to bridge the link between the domestic and international spheres – recognising that Britain's foreign policy choices and obstacles are shaped by our social landscape at home. Through pioneering research into the UK's social fabric, we seek to build understanding of the nuances of public opinion, and how our foreign policy can become more inclusive, responsive and relevant to citizens' lives.



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