

GIRLS' EDUCATION LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS

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March 2026

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Executive Summary

This report reflects a summary of historical literature on the evolution of the girls' education field, current resources summarizing the state of the field, and interviews conducted in early 2026 with 23 experts in girls' education, including civil society leaders, researchers, and multilateral practitioners based in East Africa, India, the UK, and the United States.

This review took place against a backdrop of significant disruption: the dismantling of USAID, major cuts to bilateral aid, the absorption of the UN Girls' Education Initiative into UNICEF, and ongoing gender backlash globally. The picture that emerged was of a field that is facing threats and uncertainty, but also ready to reorient itself to better meet the needs of girls around the world. Key findings include:

What Should Be Preserved

- Flexible, multi-year funding for civil society organizations
- Social norms change programming in schools, including on comprehensive sexuality education, gender-responsive pedagogy, and violence prevention
- Regional networks and national coalitions that support cross-country learning
- A focus on gender equality, beyond gender parity
- Population-level data, including the Demographic and Health Surveys

What Should Be Adjusted

- Stronger focus on marginalized girls, including girls with disabilities, girls in conflict settings, and pregnant and parenting girls
- A streamlined approach to global norm-setting that includes fewer indicators, focused on equality, is driven by the Global South, and integrates education and gender targets

What Should Be Built

- Center the relationship between governments and people by supporting governments to deliver and civil society to hold them accountable, rather than creating parallel systems
- Translating data and evidence to meet the immediate needs of policymakers, in part through a help desk approach that is responsive, tailored, and Global South-led
- A structured cohort-based Global South learning exchange
- Narrative and accountability leadership, including bolder messaging about the value of gender equality and education

A full summary of themes emerging from the 23 discussions is included in Appendix 1. Table 1 summarizes some of the main institutional actors in the girls' education ecosystem.

PAST: Where Has the Girls' Education Field Been?

Brief History of the Girls' Education Ecosystem

The evolution of the global girls' education field can be summarized across five phases, each with major themes and institutional developments that have shaped progress. Some of the key global and regional institutions that have played an important role in girls' education are summarized in Table 1 at the end of this report.

Phase 1 (1960s-1980s): Foundations of Global Norms

The first phase established the foundation of global norms around women's rights and education as an essential part of achieving those rights. Beginning in the 1960s, many countries experienced large increases in primary school enrollment for both boys and girls, alongside narrowing gender gaps. In parallel, international agreements recognized education as a fundamental human right, such as the [1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women \(CEDAW\)](#) and the 1989 [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#). UNESCO emerged as the primary institutional champion, and the World Bank began incorporating education into its development lending, though gender-specific programming remained limited.

Phase 2 (1990s): Mobilizing for Universal Education

International institutions began pushing for measurable commitments to universal education. Reflecting these shifts, the Education for All movement was launched at the [1990 World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand](#), convened by [UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA, and the World Bank](#). The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action further solidified education as one of twelve critical areas for women's advancement, with specific targets for achieving gender parity in primary and secondary education. The [Forum for African Women Educationalists \(FAWE\)](#) was founded in 1992 by African Ministers of Education to advance girls' education in the region. As girls' education was more closely linked to economic growth, the World Bank and regional development banks expanded funding to support it. Bilateral donors also increasingly earmarked funds for gender parity in access to education.

Phase 3 (2000s): The MDG Era

The Millennium Development Goals, adopted by 189 countries in 2000, made education central to the global development agenda. MDG 2 (universal primary education) and MDG 3 (gender equality and women's empowerment) made education central to the global development agenda, with specific targets to eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and at all levels by 2015. In 2002, the [Education for All – Fast Track Initiative \(EFA-FTI\)](#) was launched, later renamed the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). Hosted by the World Bank, GPE was designed as a compact between recipient countries and donors to accelerate progress toward universal primary education. Global funding for girls' education continued to increase, while trust funds and pooled funding mechanisms like GPE aimed to improve coordination. The [UN Girls' Education Initiative \(UNGEI\)](#) was also launched during this period as the first UN-hosted global coordination platform for girls' education.

Phase 4 (2010s): From Access to Quality

This phase marked an evolution from focusing solely on school access to emphasizing quality, learning outcomes, and secondary education completion. In 2016, [UNESCO's Gender Review](#) stated that, while gender parity had been achieved globally, on average, in primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education, countries were not on track to achieve even universal *primary school completion* by 2030. The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, particularly SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 5 (gender equality), expanded the education agenda beyond school access to include equity, inclusion, and lifelong learning by 2030. This period also saw a [proliferation of education funds](#) aiming to bring additional financing into the education space, including the launch of [Education Cannot Wait](#), focused on conflict and emergency settings, the launch of [GPE's multiplier fund](#), and launch of the [International Financing Facility for Education](#) (IFFEd), focused on leveraging education financing from regional and multilateral development banks.

Phase 5 (2020s): Crisis and Reckoning

The COVID-19 pandemic created the largest global disruption to education in history, exacerbating inequalities and revealing the inability of education systems to adapt to crises. Domestic and international education budgets also faced significant pressures to shift resources to respond to the pandemic, while budgets contracted due to a global economic downturn. Heads of state and civil society continued to [call for stronger commitments to education financing](#), including through the [2021 Paris Declaration](#), calling on governments to invest more in education equitably and efficiently, and calling on the international community to increase financial contributions and support national efforts at financial reforms. The 2020s have also been characterized by deep political disruption: the dismantling of USAID, sharp bilateral aid cuts, the absorption of UNGEI into UNICEF, and a global cultural backlash against gender equality programming. These disruptions have forced a reexamination of the architecture of the international education ecosystem.

Reckoning with the Old Girls' Education System

Before envisioning what the girls' education ecosystem should become, many experts called for an honest assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the “old” system. Multiple interviewees described the aid architecture that shaped girls' education as fundamentally colonial in structure, even when staffed by well-meaning people and institutions.

“We need to start by acknowledging that the system that was there, which we all were a part of and contributed to, was never there to serve us in the first place. It was always a deeply colonial, deeply racist system.”

Experts pointed to the misalignment of incentives built into the system: global institutions focused on producing evidence and advocacy about how less than half of one percent of the money in global education finance should be spent. Meanwhile, government education budgets — responsible for more than 90% of all education spending — were seen (often implicitly) as incapable without international

guidance. Even while critiquing the old system, many interviewees acknowledged that it contributed to real gains in girls' education. They noted that over the last 50 years, girls' enrollment has increased dramatically, child marriage rates have fallen in many contexts, and legal protections have been secured for many groups. However, it is difficult for those working within the system to know which parts of it truly drove that progress.

"What has really worked well over the last few decades is the enrollment. We've got girls enrolled into education almost like 90 to 100% now in [some countries]. And the whole thing around learning, and numeracy and literacy, the focus on girls completing school. A lot of that is really working well."

Even if the global system drove these gains, many experts felt that it was characterized by deep structural problems, including top-down agenda-setting, fragmented and duplicative programming, weak accountability to communities being served, and overreliance on donor-driven cycles rather than government-led systems.

"One of the areas that didn't work well was working in silos, where every institution is like, 'I have to protect my thing, I have to do my work.' And of course, that was driven highly by funding — competition for resources made organizations not work together, not create synergies, but work as individual organizations. So the impact was not really felt."

"Our ecosystem, over time, has been built largely on advocacy and underbuilt on accountability. You have a lot of conversations around: we need to see change, we need to see policies in place, we need to see laws in place. And then in countries... you have these laws and policies in place, but then accountability is missing. That, for me, is a misalignment to the lived realities of girls in our communities."

A recurring warning across interviews was against the temptation to either wait for the disruption to pass and return to previous arrangements, or to rebuild something similar to what existed before.

"We can't create something new and better if we are just saying, let's wait another three years and everything will be back to where it was."

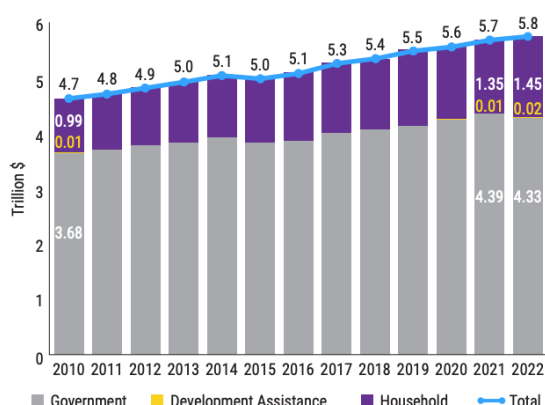
PRESENT: Where Is the Global Girls' Education Field Now?

State of Global Financing for Education

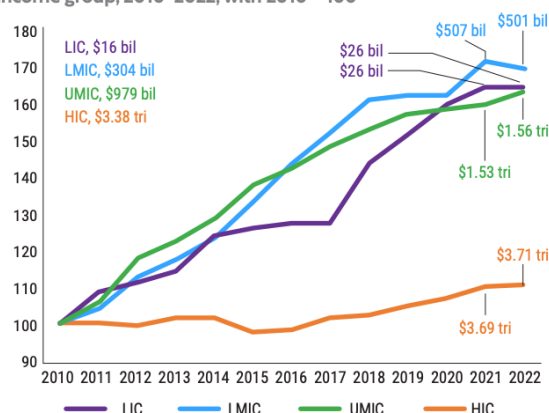
According to [Education Finance Watch](#), total education spending increased by 60 percent in low-income and middle-income countries since 2010, to about [\\$5.8 trillion annually in 2022](#) (*most recent data*). The vast majority of that annual education spending is from national budgets (about 75%), followed by household expenditures (about 25%), with a very small amount from international donors (less than 1%). In 2015, UN Member States agreed on benchmarks for domestic spending on education: 4-6% of GDP, or 15-20% of total government spending. Despite large increases in spending over time, about half of countries with available data had [failed to meet either target as of 2022](#). Many African and South Asian countries are also spending significantly [more of their budgets on debt servicing than education](#). According to Education Finance Watch, many LICs and LMICs will be unable to meet the global benchmarks for education through political will alone; they will also need to mobilize additional domestic resources or find substantial sources of external budget support.

Figure 1. Total education spending has increased by 60 percent in low-income and middle-income countries since 2010

a. Total education spending (government, aid, and household) in constant 2022 US\$, trillion, 2010–2022



b. Growth in real education spending (all sources) by country income group, 2010–2022, with 2010 = 100



Source: [Education Finance Watch 2025](#), World Bank.

Although the majority of education spending is domestic, in some low-income countries, such as Malawi and South Sudan, external education assistance accounts for as much as [20-40% of total education spending](#). These are the countries that are most vulnerable to cuts in donor funding. In 2023, about [\\$16.7 billion was provided in international education aid](#), up from \$12.6 billion in 2014. Although the absolute amount of aid for global education increased, the proportion of aid spent on education decreased from 7.4% to 5.8%, due to shifts in funding toward conflict and crisis response. In 2022-2023 the [top bilateral/multilateral donors](#) for education aid were: Germany (\$3.4 billion), IDA/World Bank (\$2.7 billion), France (\$1.7 billion), United States (\$1.4 billion), EU (\$1.4 billion). [UNICEF has projected a 24 percent drop](#) in official development assistance for education in 2026, compared to 2023 levels.

The Backlash Against Gender Equality

A recurring theme from experts was that the current moment of cultural and political backlash against gender equality is qualitatively different from previous cycles. Some noted the pressure on governments to avoid being seen as ‘disadvantaging’ part of their population when they focus on girls, and the need for clearer communication to counter this argument. Others observed that the girls’ education field has not adequately grappled with the fact that boys are now behind girls in educational attainment in many countries, and perhaps a shift in attention or framing may be needed. Both groups agreed that the field needs a more proactive communications and narrative strategy for this moment.

“We’re in a moment where it’s 100 countries where boys are behind. And it does feel like the world — the gender equality space, the girls’ education space — has not caught up with that. It’s treated as an existential threat: we have to change mission, and we’re not done. And it feels more oppositional than I think it needs to be. Most of the voices who come into the space are like, ‘Okay, enough of girls. Let’s go to boys now.’”

“There is some sort of formal equality being achieved for education — in data you can see that at some level, gender parity is being achieved. But girls’ education can become a very mechanical thing — girls in school, but really just making girls come to school without changing anything about their lives. Unless education is helping me become a person to think critically, to ask questions — if we are going to reproduce the same social norms and social structure, and education is just one of the vehicles for it, then access is really not a big issue. I would say even if access is achieved across the globe, we will still be the same society.”

“If I say, let’s talk about equality, nobody listens. If I say, let’s talk about fairness, many people run toward me. The message matters as much as the content.”

Many also noted that the current backlash goes beyond questions of including boys and is a more fundamental challenge to the legitimacy of focusing on girls and women at all.

“We are now where you started in 1995. I am so sorry to put it like that. The women’s and girls’ movement has seen success first because of the advocacy — because people accept to listen to you. Now we are at a place where women themselves are pushing back. Men themselves are pushing back. How do we go back to that movement?”

“There has been progress — good to recognize the progress. But with progress has come the backlash. And the backlash isn’t because we’ve exceeded expectations on what we need to do in relation to girls — it’s because of perceived perceptions that girls have unduly benefited.”

What Should Be Preserved

As part of the discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of the current girls' education ecosystem, experts discussed what is worth preserving. Several categories came up repeatedly:

Asset	Why It Matters
Flexible, multi-year funding for civil society organizations	Organizational capacity built by Echidna grantees and similar partners is not easily rebuilt once lost. FAWA, CAMFED, and similar organizations are most effective when funded over the long term.
Social norms change programming in schools	Experts felt that this area is at immediate risk from donor cuts, including comprehensive sexuality education, and work on gender norms and violence prevention.
Regional networks and national coalitions	The connective tissue for cross-country learning was described as essential but underfunded. FAWA's network of 33 countries, with ministry representation on national boards, is a model for government-rooted regional coordination.
Gender equality, beyond gender parity	Multiple experts noted that parity and equality are different. In many contexts where parity is nearly achieved, equality in learning experience, safety, and outcomes remains far off.
Population-level data	Potential loss of Demographic and Health Surveys is a serious threat. Alternatives discussed include strengthening citizen-generated data systems and district-level government data.

What Should Be Adjusted

Experts also discussed parts of the girls' education ecosystem that should be preserved in some form but updated or adjusted to better meet the needs of the field.

More Focus on Marginalized Girls

Several experts argued that designing the ecosystem, including priorities, messages, and metrics of success, based on the needs of girls from marginalized groups will produce better results for everyone.

"When you are trying to design something for the girl who's at the extreme margin, you automatically will create a system that will work for everybody. Keeping continuously that girl in the extreme margin in sight is very important — because then that itself will help us to create better programs."

Experts identified several marginalized groups whose needs have not been sufficiently addressed by girls' education programming to date:

- Girls in humanitarian and crisis settings: a growing and underserved category, particularly as climate change and conflict multiply disruptions
- Girls with disabilities: consistently mentioned as underrepresented in data, programming, and policy
- Girls from minority and marginalized communities: for example, pastoralist and indigenous girls are often missed by national data systems
- Pregnant and parenting adolescents: despite re-entry policies in many countries, enforcement remains poor and stigma persists
- Girls at the secondary transition: multiple interviewees noted that the critical juncture is no longer primary enrollment but the period around puberty and secondary school entry

A New Approach to “Global” Norm-Setting

For more than fifty years, UN agencies have played a key role in setting global norms around education broadly and girls’ education specifically. Experts were divided on the value of global norms in terms of regional or national legitimacy. Some CSO leaders described SDG processes as bureaucratic, top-down, and largely irrelevant to their daily work. Others affirmed that global norms have real effects — through their translation into laws, driving donor conditionality, and providing civil society with external reference points to hold governments accountable.

“The international conventions have a big impact on the country because the Constitution says any document the country ratifies becomes part of the law. So SDG 5 and SDG 4 — we are mirroring their indicators. But sometimes they are up here, and the country is grappling with other issues... If we say the world is a forest, and [my country] is a tree — mostly the UN will look at the forest.”

“Whether [country] acknowledges it or not, the new national education policy was a direct outcome of the SDGs reframing education. But the norms at a global level have to be informed by Global South experiences.”

“When SDGs are initially drafted, every government is galvanized, and there's so much energy around it. As we come closer to the deadline and nothing much has happened, there's the same sort of dip in energy. Then everyone starts looking for another set of 15 years. I can see everything in the same loop. There were no programs, no special interventions, no specific strategies to address SDG targets — except the paperwork. When they present to the SDG, they use that language. When they present to the CEDAW Committee, they use different language. It's just the same program reported across using different languages.”

Despite disagreement about the value of international norms, experts were more aligned on important considerations for a post-2030 agenda:

- Too many indicators: The SDG process produced a proliferation of targets that diluted focus. Future frameworks should be simpler.
- Parity vs. equality: The SDGs focused on parity, not equality — a fundamental flaw that missed what actually matters for girls.
- Bottom-up legitimacy: Norms rooted in local community experience and elevated to regional and global levels carry more weight than those imposed from outside.
- Regional bodies as translators: Regional bodies (African Union, East African Community) are the most legitimate entities for translating global norms into actionable frameworks.
- Integration: SDG 4 and SDG 5 were reported on separately, causing actors to miss the cross-cutting data. The next framework must integrate them.

“If I was to develop indicators for education, I would start with the East Africa Community. That is what speaks to us. You compare education in Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi — those are your people. And then it should mirror what is in the African Union, and the AU ticks up to the UN.”

“I’m not quite willing to throw in the towel on a global set of standards. But I would hope the process for determining those doesn’t feel so top-down — all these disconnected people living in rich countries telling poor countries what to do. Global standard-setting should still exist, and perhaps the UN makes sense to coordinate it, but done in a way that feels more in touch with national-level actors, especially in LMICs.”

Related to global norm-setting, UNGEI’s absorption into UNICEF was viewed as posing a risk that the girls’ education agenda would be subsumed by the demands of a generalist UN agency. Some noted that a new coalition or mechanism is needed that carries the girls’ education flag in global processes, ensures a gender lens in the post-2030 agenda, and provides the convening and coordination function UNGEI once offered.

FUTURE: Building a Stronger Girls' Education Ecosystem

Across interviews, a picture emerged of what a redesigned girls' education ecosystem would prioritize. Rather than a single architecture, interviewees described a reorientation: from donor-led to state-centered, from global prescription to local legitimacy, and from siloed programs to systemic change.

Center and Support the Relationship Between Governments and People

The most consistent structural argument across interviews was that the central relationship in any effective education system is between the state and the people who live within it, and that the role of the global ecosystem should be to strengthen that relationship rather than supplant it. This framing has practical implications for what international actors should do: support civil society to work with governments, elevate national voices in global spaces, and build government capacity for sustained delivery rather than funding parallel systems that bypass the state.

"We have to actually center the relationship that matters the most in the global system — the state and the people who live within the state. Everything else we do should support that relationship instead of undermining it, supplanting it, or trying to do everything to work around it."

"I haven't met a single bureaucrat who doesn't know about the problem within their government systems. They know it better than what we want to tell them. So when you go to them with a problem, they're not interested — they know the problem and they're struggling. You have to go to them with a solution, and the solution has to make sense within their systems — not what a donor says, or a single NGO, or a group of organizations coming together."

"Ultimately, governments should be funding their own stuff. None of this lending world, none of this ODA world, should really exist in the way that it does. Everything, to me, is a band-aid fix right now of a fundamentally broken international financing architecture. More attention needs to be paid on fixing the system and fixing the inequity of that system, so that governments are funding their own education systems at the right rates — but that's the work that local actors and local advocates can work with their governments on."

With this framing in mind, interviewees across regions also described recurring gaps in how the girls' education ecosystem has functioned that point toward areas of improvement. They described programs

that succeed at a small scale but fail to become durable government systems, governments who pass new laws and policies but do not effectively implement them, and governments who scale up effective programs but water them down to the point where they lose their focus on gender. In contrast, the ecosystem they would design would prioritize:

- Whole-school systems change that transforms pedagogy, leadership, safety, and teacher training in an integrated way
- Education embedded in communities, where relationships between schools, parents, faith leaders, and local governance are not peripheral but central to the system
- Hybrid and climate-resilient models so that education systems can continue to function during disruptions, which they described as occurring more frequently

Despite skepticism about existing global structures, virtually all interviewees affirmed that some form of global girls' education architecture is needed — not to replace national action, but to enable it. However, interviewees broadly agreed that the role of international actors must shift from setting the agenda to supporting national actors who are already setting theirs. Several described what this looks like in practice:

- Technical exchange is valuable when structured as genuine peer learning, and harmful when framed as expert knowledge flowing from outside in.
- Bridge funding to build government systems is more valuable than perpetuating donor dependency.
- Ensuring consistent and predictable partnership and support, including following through on commitments, especially when partners are asked to spend time and resources in planning processes.

Translate Data and Evidence for Policymakers

Almost every interviewee affirmed that evidence matters to their work and to governments — but that they continue to struggle with translating data and evidence to answer immediate questions facing policymakers. Numerous experts talked about the importance of converting complex research into specific, actionable, context-relevant forms that civil society actors and policymakers can use.

“If you look at the data...they say: it is standard deviation this point. What does that mean? A researcher will be very excited — but the government doesn't know what that means. You just have to say: ‘If boys do not harass girls coming to school, girls' attendance goes up by 30%. It has to be that simple. Girls stay longer in school if the classrooms are safer for them to raise questions.’”

“We generate a lot of data, but it’s so far from what government actually wants to understand. We must be able to package this data to speak to what government stakeholders will easily understand — but also what is aligned to their needs. Where is the place where the commissioner in charge of policy will find relevant information well-packaged, speaking to the things they should be able to do?”

What Should Be Built

A ‘Help Desk’ for Evidence Translation

Interviewees consistently described the need for what several called a ‘help desk’ model: a responsive service that takes the existing body of evidence and translates it into bespoke, usable products for specific audiences, questions, and contexts. Rather than a database or portal alone, many described a service where users come with specific policy questions and receive a one-pager, a ministry brief, or a comparison across similar countries.

“What Echidna might need to fund is more of a help desk — where people can literally come with their questions and say, ‘We’re interested in whether female teacher housing is the right thing to do; what evidence is there from relevant contexts, and how would we go about it?’”

“Information is only good as long as it is being used. Creating that information in more snackable, bite-sized form — rather than sifting through chi-square diagrams and charts — is what’s needed.”

Supporters of this approach described a help desk model that is Global South-located and led, with deep knowledge of the governance and policy contexts it serves, accessible to both government actors and civil society organizations, and funded as infrastructure rather than a project that might disappear.

Cross-Country Solidarity and Peer Learning

Perhaps the most consistent proposal by experts, echoed by many in the Echidna Giving grantee survey, was for structured opportunities for organizations working in similar contexts to learn from each other — not in large conferences, but in smaller, curated, topic-specific, sustained engagements.

“If Echidna can get Global South players together, learning from each other, putting the data together at one point, using a communication agency that can make research accessible in the language civil societies can use — that is going to really help.”

“How do we curate more topic-specific, cohort-specific learning experiences, both within the country and also regionally? Conferences are great — I’ll go to a conference, I’ll be a panelist or speaker, and then finish. But it’s the journey of staying together with a group of people and learning from each other over a six-months to one-year period that is really meaningful. The sisterhood, the friendships — and it’s okay that everything doesn’t have to lead to a peer-reviewed paper.”

“Organizations don’t have a lot of brain space. They’re in catch-up mode, trying to recalibrate. It is tangibly very hard to take a step back and think about vision and planning for the future in a way that can be strategic and constructive and collaborative with others. Figuring out a way to give organizations some brain space — that would be really helpful.”

Several experts noted that the deepest learning often happens in longer-term cohort programs where people stay together with a group, learn from each other over time, and build real relationships and trust. Experts described both in-person and virtual gatherings around shared themes, such as teacher training for gender transformation, re-entry policy implementation, or social norms change at scale. They also suggested bringing together practitioners from Africa and South Asia who rarely interact despite facing similar challenges and including government representatives as learners and peers. An existing model for this type of ongoing peer to peer learning is the Brookings Center for Universal Education’s Collaborative Research in Action work, as well as FAWÉ’s approach to cross-country collaboration and learning.

Narrative and Accountability Leadership

Multiple interviewees identified a critical deficit in the girls’ education field: bold, accessible narrative leadership. They described opponents of gender equality as loud and confident, while the community focused on gender equality and education often hedges, qualifies, and waits to be perfectly accurate based on evidence before speaking.

“We shy away from being very bold and deliberate with our narratives. Narratives need stories, data, and lived realities, but they also need leadership. We need people who are not shying away from what is working and what we see is really the map to taking us forward.”

“The other side — they are saying absolute false things with so much confidence. Whereas subtlety is where education lies. You have to understand the subtle nuances. But the majority of the population is not going to stay with you for two, three minutes to understand: if you do this, this may happen, this may not happen.”

Experts proposed a range of solutions, some that echo earlier recommendations and others that would be complementary:

- A platform or series that centers stories from girls and women in the Global South — in their own voices, through mediums they use
- A network of young women leaders with gravitas and the platform to carry the agenda at global convenings without being instrumentalized, based on the ‘elders’ model
- Investment in communications capacity for CSOs
- Pushing the community toward simpler and more decisive messaging

Related to the need for a stronger narrative, experts noted that, in the absence of leadership from UNGEI, there is no dedicated mechanism ensuring that the post-2030 development agenda will incorporate a rigorous gender lens in education. Rather than a new UN initiative, some experts proposed alternatives, which may fit into other areas of investment. Options included building a small, agile coalition of foundations, Global South CSOs, and sympathetic governments organized around a shared platform for post-2030 gender-in-education advocacy or strategic investment in a few champions with a seat at the table in the post-2030 negotiation process, drawing on “bottom-up” recommendations of indicators.

Table and Appendix

Table 1: Selected Major Institutions in Global Girls' Education

Institution (Founded)	Annual Budget	Role in Girls' Education	Recent Evolution
World Bank (1944)	\$26 billion on global education	Removing barriers, promoting safe schools, improving quality, empowering girls for labor market success	Focus on women's economic empowerment; IDA delivers 25% of all basic education aid worldwide
UNESCO (1945)	\$1.8 billion approved budget	Global authority on education standards and data; maintains UNESCO Institute for Statistics; produces annual Global Education Monitoring Report	After losing US funding in 2011, cut 20% of budget; increasingly in competition with UNICEF and GPE
UNICEF (1946)	~\$8 billion (21% on education)	Strong country presence, delivery in fragile/conflict settings, monitoring and evaluation; housed UNGEI since 2026	Undergoing major restructuring; some CSOs feel UNICEF has moved from sharing technical guidance to competing with them
UNGEI (2000, now within UNICEF)	\$3–5 million annually	Championed gender norms and systems change; influential advocacy and accountability role	Absorbed into UNICEF as a project in 2026; future autonomy uncertain
FAWE (1992)	~\$10–15 million	Deep regional and national legitimacy; membership includes Ministries of Education in 33 African countries; close relationship with African Union	Very focused on working with governments to make policy change; strong model for government-rooted regional advocacy
CAMFED (1993)	~\$80 million (2024)	Provides comprehensive support for most marginalized girls; supports young women into livelihoods; partners for systems adoption	Programs in Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe
GPE (2002)	\$4.7 billion raised	Strengthens education systems in low-income countries; Girls' Education Accelerator has strong gender focus	Aiming to raise \$15 billion in grants and innovative financing over 2026–2030
Malala Fund (2013)	\$56 million (2023–24)	Focuses on marginalized adolescent girls; strengthens civil society; drives systemic change in Pakistan and Nigeria; global advocacy	Aiming to raise \$100 million over next five years; 50% on advocacy, 50% to CSO partners
Education Cannot Wait (2016)	~\$200–300 million annually	First global fund dedicated to education in emergencies and protracted crises	Tracks percentage of girls reached (50–54% in recent reports)

Appendix 1: Key Insights Across the Expert Interviews

This appendix synthesizes themes from expert interviews, organized around the key questions that framed these conversations.

If we were designing the global girls' education ecosystem from scratch today, what would it look like?

Across all 23 interviews, one theme dominated: the current ecosystem was designed for a world that no longer exists, and the disruptions of 2025–2026 have made visible what many had long known privately.

Put governments at the center

The single most consistent insight across the 22 interviews was that the central relationship in any effective education system is between the state and the people who live within it. Governments control more than 90% of all education spending. Any architecture that treats governments as obstacles or incapable — rather than as the primary institution responsible for delivering education — is unsustainable and ineffective. Several interviewees described this as a colonial disposition that persists even among well-intentioned actors. This also does not, however, require unconditional deference to governments. Civil society's role is to hold governments accountable, push them toward more ambitious and gender-responsive policies, and support implementation when capacity is limited. The girls' education ecosystem should support that role, not supplant the government relationship.

Smaller, more agile, more local ownership

Virtually every interviewee, regardless of whether they worked in global or national roles, described the existing global architecture as too large, too slow, and too driven by institutions and interests in high-income countries. A redesigned ecosystem would be smaller, recognizing that most of the work happens at the national level. It would also be more agile, designed to respond to specific, time-bound policy windows. And it would be led by governments and national actors, because the knowledge, relationships, and legitimacy needed to drive change reside at the country level.

Focus on the full girl, not just the classroom

Multiple interviewees challenged the field to think about girls' education as a community-rooted, holistic system, not a classroom activity. This includes the safety of the school environment; the presence (or absence) of female teachers and role models; the unpaid care burden that falls on girl siblings; the social norms that shape what parents, teachers, and peers believe girls can and should do; and the economic realities that make school attendance a trade-off rather than a default.

What transnational efforts could support advancing girls' education over the next decade?

Despite skepticism about existing global structures, experts affirmed some value in transnational coordination. The disagreements were about what form it should take.

A different approach to global norms

CSO leaders working at the country level were largely dismissive of the Sustainable Development Goals and other global norm-setting processes as irrelevant to their daily work. But several also noted that global norms create external reference points that civil society can use to hold governments accountable, especially when those norms are incorporated into constitutions or legislation. The problem is not global norms per se; it is global norms that are too numerous, too parity-focused, and too disconnected from local experience. Several interviewees called for a post-2030 framework with fewer, better-integrated indicators, developed through processes with genuine Global South participation.

More translatable evidence systems

Experts affirmed the value of evidence but distinguished between evidence that is useful and evidence that is technically impressive but practically inaccessible. The recurring request was for a 'help desk' model: responsive, bespoke, and able to turn existing evidence into one-pagers, ministry briefs, and country comparisons that policy makers can act on. Those familiar with EGER similarly felt that its most useful products were those that were tailored to specific policy questions, or easily adaptable for use in national contexts (e.g. the mapping of types of barriers to school for girls).

More peer learning opportunities

Across all regional perspectives and all types of organizations, peer learning emerged as the single most consistent ask from experts. Rather than attendance at large conferences or global convenings, experts wanted sustained, curated, topic-specific exchanges with peers in comparable contexts. Although they noted some existing opportunities for peer to peer exchange, many experts felt that Echidna Giving was uniquely situated to bring together partners who might learn from one another's work.

Which parts of the ecosystem need to be preserved?

Civil society organizational capacity

Perhaps not surprisingly, experts working in civil society emphasized the important role of civil society organizations in holding governments accountable not just to design stronger policies in girls' education but to implement them effectively. Several experts noted the importance of sustained flexible funding for social change work, which may not produce tangible results in a short period of time, but is essential to long-term change. Multiple interviewees described the challenge of organizations that survive one grant cycle by cutting programs and staff, and never fully recover.

Gender-responsive school programming

Social norms change programming, including gender-responsive pedagogy, school safety, violence prevention, and comprehensive life skills education, was identified as the category of work most at risk due to funding cuts, and most worth preserving. Multiple interviewees described watching this work get cut or diluted when it is integrated into government systems, either because it is more difficult to implement at scale, or because governments and other donors do not see it as essential to their core objectives.

Population-level data

The potential loss of the Demographic and Health Surveys was raised as a serious threat by multiple interviewees in Africa and India. While DHS was not designed primarily for education, it has been foundational for baseline population-level data. Several experts described how they depend on DHS data for country-level engagements with ministries of education. One expert proposed an alternative path: strengthening citizen-generated data to be incorporated into national statistical systems, so that advocacy data can acquire the legitimacy of official statistics.

What should be built that was not here before?

An evidence help desk

Named by more interviewees than any other gap: a responsive, bespoke service that produces country-specific, policy-relevant synthesis documents on demand. This is not a database — it is a service. A CSO in Kenya working to convince a county government to invest in female teacher housing should be able to submit a request and receive, within days, a one-page brief citing relevant evidence from Kenya and comparable countries. The service should be Global South-led, use AI to accelerate the compilation of evidence, and invest human capacity in the contextual interpretation that requires expertise.

A narrative and storytelling infrastructure

Many experts described both a persistent debate about why they are focusing on girls instead of boys, as well as the more acute pushback on gender equality happening in many contexts. Interviewees across regions called for investment in bold communications leadership: better storytelling and bolder voices from the communities affected by work, rather than sterile reports. Several experts argued that qualitative stories from the ground often have more political power than quantitative trend data. They noted that the field has not invested in the infrastructure to capture and amplify those stories.

A post-UNGEI accountability coalition

Without UNGEI as an independent entity, no dedicated mechanism exists to ensure that the post-2030 development agenda incorporates a gender lens in education. Multiple interviewees called for a small, agile, Global South-led coalition to fill this gap — not a secretariat or a new institution, but a network of foundations, CSOs, and governments with a shared platform and a few key champions with seats at the negotiation table.

Climate-resilient and hybrid education models

COVID demonstrated that when schools close, girls bear a disproportionate burden. Climate change is making school disruptions more frequent. Several experts identified the need to build education systems that do not stop when schools close — mobile-friendly, low-bandwidth platforms curated specifically for girls with limited device access.

What architecture is best suited to advance girls' education for the most marginalized?

Design from the margin

Multiple interviewees offered versions of the same core argument: when you design for the girl at the extreme margin, such as a girl with disability in a pastoralist community or a pregnant adolescent in a conflict-affected zone, you inevitably build systems that work for everyone. The architecture best suited to reaching the most marginalized is one designed from the margins, not the center. This means that research and data systems should be designed to capture the experiences of marginalized groups, not just national averages. It means that interventions should be tested in the hardest contexts, not the most convenient ones. It means that evaluation frameworks should ask whether the most marginalized girls are better off, not just whether enrollment rates improved.

Citizenship and voice, not just enrollment

Several experts described a challenge in maintaining support for gender equality once parity in enrollment or completion is reached. They noted that the field has focused so long on getting girls into school that it has underinvested in what happens when they get there, and on what happens when they leave. The architecture best suited to advancing girls' education for the most marginalized is one that sees girls not as project beneficiaries but as citizens with rights, as future leaders, and as the primary evaluators of whether the system is working for them.