EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | Full report + interactive tools at Education.org

Beyond Access: Strengthening Girls' Transitions Across Learning Pathways

Leadership guidance grounded in evidence from 68 countries

Every year millions of girls enter or re-enter education through classrooms, community programmes, and alternative pathways. But progression is not equal – girls facing intersecting barriers of poverty, displacement, disability, and restrictive gender norms are far more likely to stall at critical transition points.

The consequences extend far beyond the individual, representing a profound equity failure and a major loss of human potential and collective prosperity.

Over the past decade, global efforts have expanded education access; yet, sustaining progression remains a major challenge. This is especially true at transition points between programmes, institutions, and levels of schooling, where responsibility shifts and support can weaken.

THE SCALE OF TRANSITION LOSSES

Secondary education is where many girls' learning pathways break down.

Sub-Saharan Africa
- 70% of girls complete primary school
- Just 26% complete upper secondary school

Disparities within countries are often even greater.

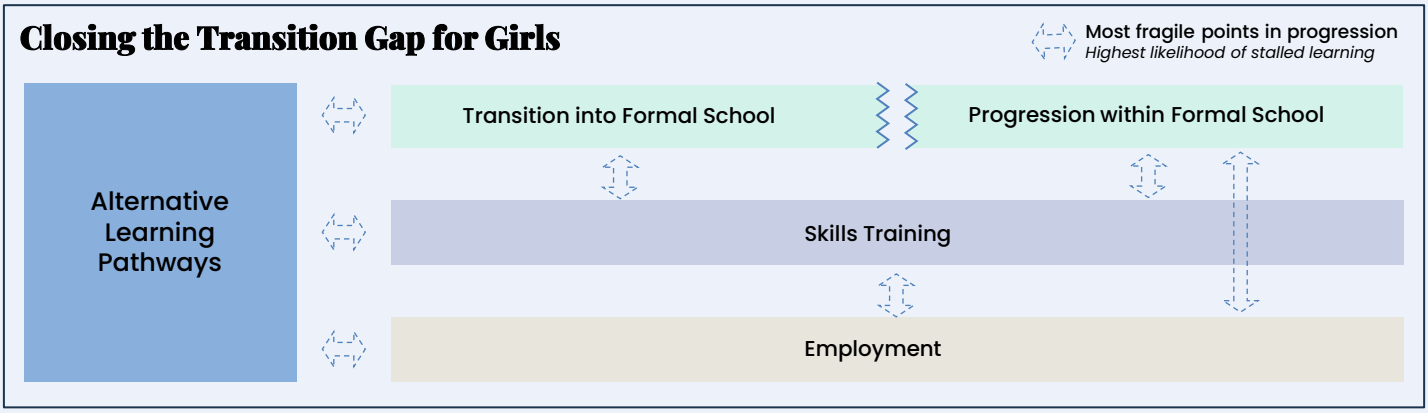
Nigeria
- Less than 13% of the poorest rural girls complete secondary school
- More than 90% of the wealthiest urban boys do

Vietnam
- 27% of girls from the poorest rural households complete secondary school
- 100% of boys from the richest urban households do

In crisis-affected contexts and low-income countries, these losses are even greater. This is the transition and accountability gap.

System design often drives these losses

These outcomes are often attributed to poverty, social norms, or crisis conditions. Yet system design also plays a critical role. Many education systems expand enrolment without ensuring continuity across stages. As learners move between programmes, institutions, and schooling levels, responsibility for progression can become unclear, while systems often track entry more reliably than sustained progression. Without intersectional data showing which girls are most at risk, and why, transition losses remain largely invisible to decision makers.



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Leadership decisions can strengthen girls' transitions

Global progress has expanded access for girls. The next challenge is ensuring that girls move successfully into, through, and between learning pathways from entry to progression and completion.

This requires leadership teams to make transition risks visible, clarify who is responsible, and sequence reforms realistically. It also requires a stronger sense of collective responsibility, reflected in principles such as Ubuntu, Igwebuike, and Buen Vivir, with governments working alongside communities, civil society, and the private sector, and recognising that boys and men are partners in building the conditions where everyone can learn and progress.

Education.org's Supporting Transitions through Evidence-based Planning (STEP) framework helps teams identify where progression stalls, diagnose why, and align policy, implementation, and financing to support stronger transitions. Developed by Education.org and reviewed with experts, STEP translates global and frontline evidence into practical pathways for stronger decision-making and delivery.

WHERE GIRLS' PROGRESSION NEEDS STRONGEST SUPPORT

The Transition and Accountability Gap

Education systems have expanded access for girls, but sustaining progression across the learner journey remains a major challenge as learners move between programmes, institutions, and schooling levels.

Why transition points carry particular risks for girls and young women

Girls facing overlapping structural barriers, including poverty, displacement, disability, insecurity, and restrictive gender norms, face heightened risks at transition points. Where multiple disadvantages intersect, those risks compound, underscoring the need for planning that is both gender-responsive and gender-transformative.

Education systems measure entry but rarely plan for continuity. Global data systems track enrolment and completion but rarely follow whether learners successfully move between stages or show how gender intersects with poverty, location, disability, displacement, or other disadvantages.

Girls' and young women's learning and transition pathways are rarely linear—many move in and out of school or non-formal education due to barriers such as pregnancy, poverty, or mobility. At each re-entry or transition point, accountability often breaks down.

As a result, many transition losses remain invisible to decision makers.

Where accountability most often breaks down

Accountability is weakest at points of institutional handover, where responsibility shifts between programmes, ministries, or administrative levels without clear mechanisms to ensure learners continue progressing. Sector plans often outline commitments but do not specify who is responsible for which transition risk at which stage.

Policy reviews reflect the same gap: of 60 country education sector plans analysed, included strategies to increase girls' participation only four in accelerated education programmes, and **none included clear measures to support their transition into formal schooling.**

This gap is most visible when learners transition from accelerated or alternative pathways into formal schooling, where responsibility for placement, support, and continued progression is often unclear.

These patterns highlight a central leadership challenge: how education systems deliberately manage transitions across the learner journey. When transition risks remain invisible and responsibility is unclear, girls are far more likely to fall through the gaps between programmes, institutions, and schooling levels.

Key diagnostic questions for system leaders

- Where are girls **most at risk** of interrupted progression across the learner journey?
- Which **gender-specific and intersecting barriers** are driving that risk at each stage?
- Where is **responsibility for continuity** unclear or weak?
- Which **actions are feasible now**, and which require longer-term system reform?

STEP was designed for leadership teams to navigate decision-making and strengthen transition success.

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EVIDENCE ON WHAT SUSTAINS GIRLS' PROGRESSION

Evidence base: 11,000 sources screened | 387 assessed | 68 countries

Our comprehensive evidence synthesis draws on research, government documentation, programme evaluations, and frontline implementation experience. It shows clearly that while education systems lose large numbers of girls at transition points, well-designed responses can substantially reverse these losses.

Five Evidence-Based Insights for Sustaining Girls' Progression

1

Addressing structural barriers and harmful gender norms is critical to improving outcomes

Girls facing multiple and intersecting barriers, including poverty, displacement, disability, and restrictive norms, require planning that is explicitly gender-responsive and equity-focused. Systems that respond to girls' lived realities are far more likely to sustain progression.

2

Sustained academic and social support leads to lasting impact

Mentorship, peer networks, flexible learning pathways, and community engagement strengthen retention and completion, particularly when designed to address gender-specific risks such as caregiving responsibilities, mobility constraints, or gender-based violence.

3

Flexible and accelerated pathways can deliver cost-effective results

Well-designed accelerated and flexible programmes can improve learning and life outcomes while often operating at competitive, and in some cases lower, costs when integrated into national systems.

4

Innovations in alternative pathways strengthen formal systems

Practices from flexible learning programmes can strengthen the wider education system by improving safeguarding, placement, pedagogy, and support for returning or over-age learners, who often face the greatest barriers to participation and progression.

5

Girls are active and powerful agents in their own learning, and in their communities

When systems respond to girls' realities, girls show resilience, leadership, and commitment to learning, often supporting others as mentors and role models. Recognising this agency should reinforce, not reduce, systems' responsibility to remove barriers and sustain their progression.

Example: Nigeria

Rigorous programme evaluations illustrate the scale of change possible when girls are supported both to access education and to remain in it through key transition points. In Nigeria, the Pathways to Choice programme increased school attendance among participating girls by 680% and reduced child marriage by 76%. Economic modelling further suggests that scaling Pathways to Choice alongside a complementary Adolescent Girls Initiative for girls enrolled in critical transition grades between school levels would yield substantial returns: a $114 million national investment could generate up to $2.5 billion in long-term societal benefits, more than twenty times the original investment.

These findings show that large transition losses are not inevitable. When systems combine support for re-entry with support for retention at fragile transition points, girls' progression can improve dramatically. *Source: Accelerate Hub. (2025). High impacts and returns from investing in adolescent girls in Northern Nigeria.*

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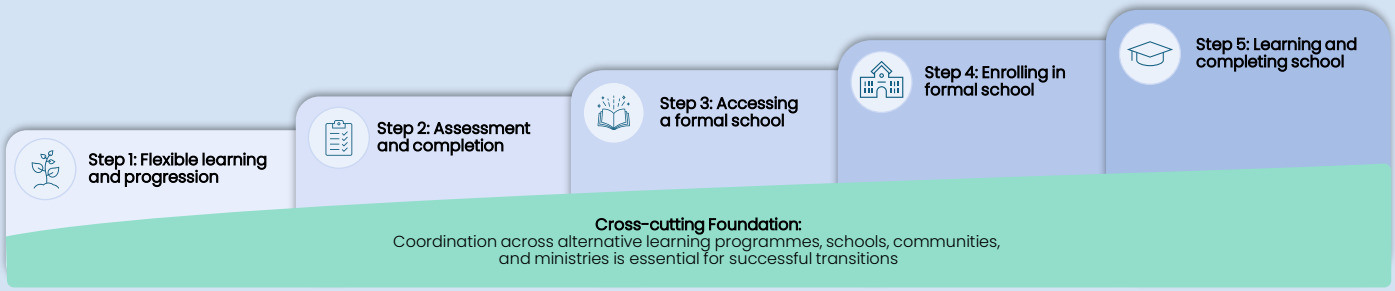
STEP IS A NEW FRAMEWORK TO NAVIGATE DECISIONS AND DELIVERY

STEP (Supporting Transitions through Evidence-Based Planning) is a structured framework that helps education leaders close the transition and accountability gap by making risks visible, clarifying institutional responsibility, and supporting gender-responsive planning.

Education.org's STEP Framework maps five transition stages and success factors across girls' learning pathways



Our interactive STEP Tool guides users through questions to analyse context, identify priorities across the framework, and explore risk-mitigation strategies. It generates a tailored risk assessment to help leaders prioritise foundational risks, sequence reforms, and plan system improvements grounded in local realities. Government teams can use it for sector analysis, policy review, and implementation planning, while partners and donors can use it to align programme design and target support along the transition pathway.

STEP recognises that while many girls transition into formal schools, others pursue alternative pathways such as vocational training or employment. At each stage, the framework identifies gender-specific transition risks and links them to practical policy and delivery actions such as enabling equivalency between programmes and schools, strengthening enrolment protocols, and sustaining academic, socio-emotional and financial support to prevent dropout.

Where public schools are overstretched, strengthening absorption capacity may also require understanding how recognised non-state and community provision fits within the wider education ecosystem and broader human capital goals.

STEP in Action

STEP is designed to be used within existing education sector planning and review processes, helping ministries identify which groups of girls are being left behind and ensuring that planning, financing, and implementation decisions systematically incorporate gender-responsive analysis.

Nigeria – In Lagos State, STEP informed refinement of the draft policy on non-state schools by clarifying progression standards and strengthening accountability across alternative pathways and formal schools.

Uganda – STEP is informing integration of flexible pathways and retention priorities into its national education sector strategic plan, including re-entry from accelerated education into school or skills training.

Pakistan – STEP is informing federal and provincial policy revision and feeding lessons from flexible pathway models into its national action plan.

Using STEP: Now, Next, Later

STEP helps teams identify where to start, based on their context and capacity. It can be applied during sector analysis, mid-term review, policy revision, programme design and budget alignment.

NOW
Address foundational risks, ensuring recognition of transition pathways and safeguarding learner wellbeing.

NEXT
Implement high-leverage reforms to enhance quality and inclusion for all learners.

LATER
Embed transitions in data systems and budgets to strengthen sustainability, scale, and efficiency.

This is an executive summary. The full evidence synthesis, interactive decision tool, and additional resources are available at education.org, along with references and acknowledgements. Feedback is welcome at info@education.org.

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