Some interventions may improve girls’ education performance, but there is insufficient evidence on others

Gender disparities in education persist in many countries. Interventions that address financial barriers to school, such as inability to afford tuition and fees and lack of adequate food, as well as those that address insufficient academic support, may be effective at improving girls’ education outcomes. Interventions to increase access to schools, to provide school materials, and to improve water and sanitation in schools, especially toilets, are promising approaches for girls as well. However, for many gender-related barriers to education, the dearth of evaluations and lack of clarity about pathways through which they operate makes it difficult to determine whether many common interventions are effective.

What is the aim of this systematic review?

This systematic review summarises evidence from 82 experimental and quasi-experimental studies from low- and middle-income countries to assess what programmes may help to improve girls’ education outcomes and narrow gender disparities.

Evidence gaps exist for the majority of gender-related barriers to education for girls, particularly for school-related gender-based violence, and lack of sports programmes, health services and childcare services.

What is this review about?

Gender disparities in education persist in many low- and middle-income countries. A clear understanding of the most effective approaches to improving education outcomes for girls, and to narrowing gender gaps, is largely missing from literature and practice. This review looks at whether interventions that address gender-related barriers to girls’ education help improve education outcomes for girls, specifically attainment, enrolment, absenteeism and academic performance.

What studies are included?

This review includes 82 experimental and quasi-experimental studies of interventions that address at least one gender-related barrier to schooling and measure impact on girls’ education outcomes. Study locations spanned all regions of the developing world. Both peer-reviewed journal articles and grey literature were included, with publication dates from 2004 to 2020.

What are the main findings of this review?

We identified no evaluations of the effects of school-related gender-based violence interventions on girls’ education. Also, too few studies examined sports programmes for girls, school-based health and childcare, child marriage and adolescent pregnancy, and menstrual hygiene management to draw strong conclusions.
Interventions that address financial barriers to school (such as inability to afford tuition and fees and lack of adequate food) as well as those that address insufficient academic support, may be effective at improving girls’ education outcomes. Interventions that aim to improve girls’ access to schools and materials, and improve water and sanitation in schools, especially toilets, are also promising approaches.

For interventions addressing the remaining gender-related barriers to school, existing evidence was inconclusive, though some programmes were effective in some settings. In many cases, interventions included multiple components, and studies were often not designed to test the effects of each individual component.

What do the findings of this review mean?
Although some clear findings emerged in terms of promising practices, evidence gaps exist for the majority of gender-related barriers to education for girls, particularly for school-related gender-based violence, lack of sports programmes, and lack of health and childcare services.

The majority of included studies evaluate complex multi-component programmes, rather than narrowly defined single component programmes, and few employ a factorial design, often making it difficult to determine which components are most important for driving improvements in education outcomes for girls.

Differences in implementation also make it difficult to compare interventions. Because the importance of each gender-related barrier varies between settings, findings from existing research may not be relevant to all settings. Too few studies disaggregate results by sex, representing a missed opportunity to close gaps in evidence.

Finally, the dearth of studies looking at pathways linking the interventions to education outcomes makes it difficult to determine why certain interventions “worked” in some settings and not in others.