

English-medium education and gender equality policy brief

Keeping girls in secondary school in low- and middle-income countries: fair, equitable and accessible English-medium education



A call for action

In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), ‘mother-tongue based multilingual education’ (MTB-MLE) allows for children to develop basic literacy in their mother tongue. At secondary school level, however, where literacy is often further advanced, language-in-education policies may allow for English to be introduced – and demand for it is often high. Rather than promoting unrealistic and unimplementable MTB-MLE policies at the secondary level, this policy brief calls on governments in LMICs to intervene to ensure that English-medium education (EME) is implemented in ways where it is fair, equitable and accessible to all.

Why intervention is important

Empowering girls and keeping them in school is part of the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) – and vital for lifting poorer countries out of poverty. Despite improvements, and out-of-school girls now only marginally outnumbering boys at 21.8 per cent compared to 20.4 per cent (UNESCO, 2019)¹, the unprecedented rise of English-medium education risks impeding the progress made.

New research shows that while English can bring opportunities to some, it can exacerbate challenges for others, particularly when used as

1. These figures are an average of young people who are out of secondary school across LMICs; it is important to note that there is considerable variation across countries.

a medium of education. Girls from poorer families and minority communities are underrepresented in English-medium education, which restricts their opportunities and perpetuates inequality (Hultgren et al., 2024). English-medium education also creates a ‘double disadvantage’ exacerbating challenges for those who are already disadvantaged (Milligan & Adamson, 2022).

This policy brief offers three actionable recommendations to implement English-medium education in ways that do not counteract, undermine or jeopardise attainment of the SDGs to keep girls in education.

Key insights

Where schools or municipalities offer a choice between English- and national-medium education, girls are underrepresented in English-medium education, with a ratio of one girl to every three boys (see Figures 2 and 4). National-level data, which does not distinguish between different mediums of education, has a more equal gender distribution (see Figures 1 and 3). English-medium education can thus act as a gender divider, creating a two-tiered system that separates out girls from boys.

Girls from poorer families and minority communities are particularly poorly represented in English-medium education. English-medium education thus creates and perpetuates a class- and gender-based system, where already disadvantaged girls face a ‘double disadvantage’ (Milligan & Adamson, 2022), limiting their exposure to English as well as their onward educational and professional opportunities.

Early marriage is a key factor explaining girls’ underrepresentation in EME at secondary school level in both Nepal and Nigeria. As many teenage girls drop out of school to get married, there is a perception that they ‘don’t need English’.

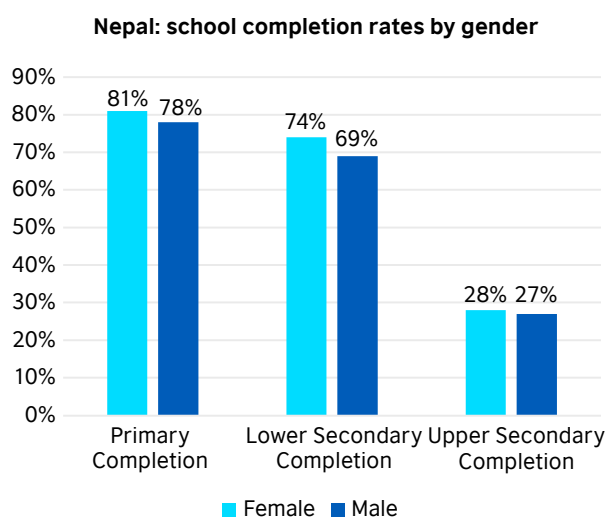


Figure 1 National-level data on school completion by gender in Nepal 2019 (Source: UNESCO, 2024)

Gender distribution in a dual-medium secondary school in Birgunj, Nepal

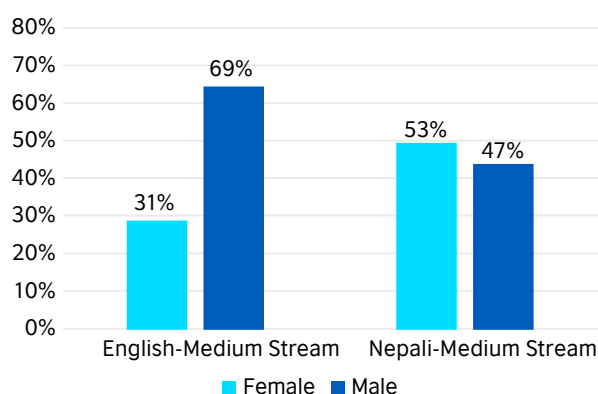


Figure 2 Attendance rates in Grades 9 and 10 Shree Durga Vawani Secondary School by language stream and gender. English-medium stream N=108; Nepali-medium stream N=137 (Source: Hultgren et al., 2024)

The dowry custom in some regions in Nepal can further disincentivise poorer families from sending their daughters to the more costly and prestigious English-medium education, as a better educated girl can incur a higher bride dowry.

Perceptions that ‘girls don’t need English’ are also linked to the gendered roles they are expected to fulfil in society when they leave secondary school. Some girls discontinue their education to get married, have children, look after family members or take up jobs in the public sector, where the need for English is lower. Boys, on the other hand, are more likely to pursue jobs, careers or further studies which require English, such as working in the Gulf States or university studies in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects.

English-medium education is associated with ‘superior quality’ education and is sometimes conflated with ‘private education’, despite also being offered by many government schools. However, English-medium education is not intrinsically superior to national-medium education, since good quality education cannot be considered separately from investment in infrastructures and educational resources.

Where English-medium education is associated with tuition fees, poorer parents are less likely to send their daughters than their sons to English-medium education. As more resources are invested in English-medium education, it is more conducive to learning, benefiting students who are already advantaged while perpetuating disadvantage for those students who don’t have access, the majority of which are girls from poorer families.

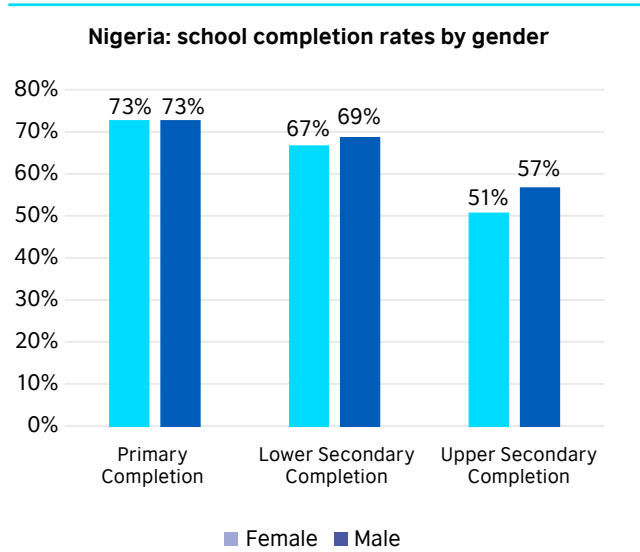


Figure 3 National-level data on school completion by gender in Nigeria 2019 (Source: UNESCO, 2024)

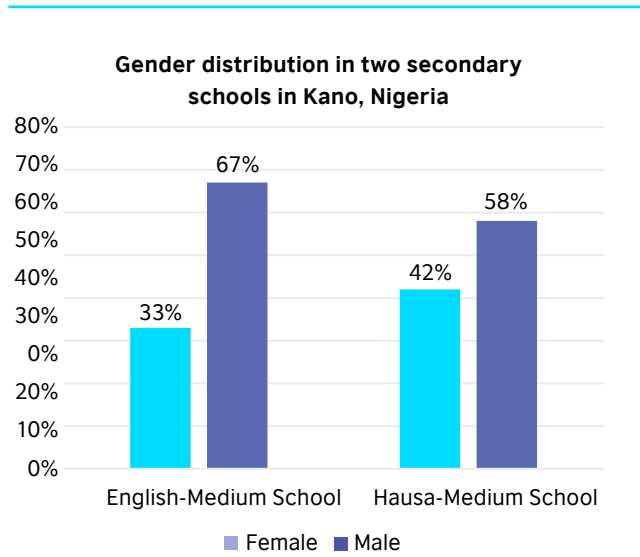
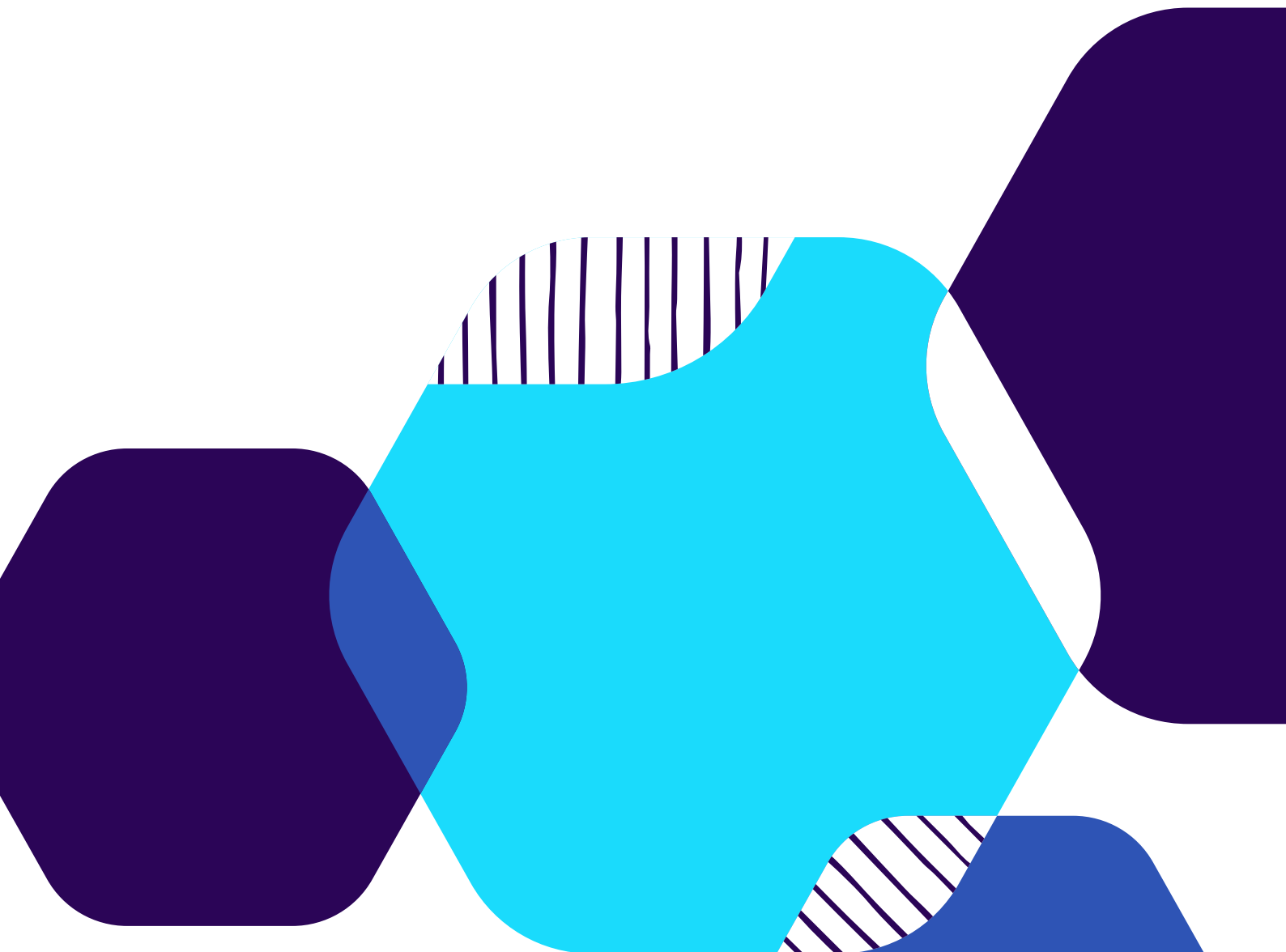


Figure 4 Enrolment rates in JSS 3 (13–14 year olds) in the English- and Hausa-medium schools by gender. English-medium school N=916; Hausa-medium school N=514 (Source: Hultgren et al., 2024)

Boys and girls in both Nepal and Nigeria view English-medium education as the more challenging, but also the more rewarding option. An overwhelming majority of students have a preference for being taught in English. Although many students report difficulties understanding the content through English, some also report challenges understanding in a national language, e.g. Nepali in Nepal and Hausa in Nigeria, because they speak a different language at home.

Classroom practices are considerably more multilingual than an English-medium policy may suggest. Translanguaging, i.e. the drawing on resources from multiple languages, frequently happens. Although the use of languages other than English tends to be discouraged by school leaders and teachers, it can support and scaffold learning thus mitigating challenges for girls and boys.



The research

The research underpinning this policy brief was carried out in 2022–23 by The Open University, supported by the British Council. The full research report is available [here](#) (Hultgren et al., 2024).

The research examined the extent to which the rapid rise in English-medium education across LMCI impacts differentially on girls' and boys' opportunities and challenges, and whether some groups of girls face particular challenges.

The research was carried out in Kano, Nigeria and in Birgunj, Nepal, two countries which have different histories of English-medium education. Both are highly multilingual countries, with around 124 languages spoken in Nepal and over 500 in Nigeria. The research was designed to include both English- and national- or regional-medium schools in order to reveal gender-differentiated patterns between them.

The research focused on the secondary level of education, where reasons for gender differences in school participation are more complex, variable and less well understood than at primary level. Secondary level is also often a crucial point at which girls drop out of school, often to get married, have children or to take care of family members.

Because relatively little is known about gender patterns of enrolment and participation in secondary school, in-depth, ethnographic research was carried out over two months in three government secondary schools to bring to the fore the voices of those directly involved in English-medium education: girls and boys, parents, teachers, principals and policymakers.

Across Birgunj and Kano, we conducted questionnaires with 221 students; interviews with 88 participants (students, parents, teachers, principals and policymakers); 36 classroom observations; and asked 12 students to keep a diary over two months. Where available, the research also drew on hard data in the forms of attendance and enrolment data, drawing comparisons with UNESCO's national-level data.

The research was carried out by local researchers in both Nepal and Nigeria in order to build trust with participants and to build up rich and situated understandings. While this approach offers in-depth and contextually rich findings, their transferability to other contexts should be considered.

Birgunj, Nepal: location of fieldwork sites



Kano, Nigeria: location of fieldwork sites



Recommendations

This policy brief offers three recommendations to ensure EME is implemented in ways that do not undermine or counteract the Sustainable Development Goals to improve gender equality and quality education for all.

Three research-evidenced recommendations are proposed, grouped into three categories: learning, training and investment.

Recommendation 1: Learning

Ensure English-medium education does not adversely affect learning for girls and marginalised groups.

While there is a sizeable literature suggesting that children acquire literacy best in their mother tongue, the case for mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) is less well evidenced at secondary level, where literacy development is for most children further advanced. English-medium education may develop students' English language skills and lead to a greater range of professional and educational opportunities post-school, together with the prospect of social mobility. On the other hand, English-medium education may be more challenging for some students, particularly those who are already disadvantaged, notably girls from poorer families and minority communities. The challenges and opportunities for different learner groups will vary according to context and must be studied and understood contextually.

- ▶ Schools must report on their rationale for introducing English-medium education and account for how it will not create a two-tiered class, and gender-based system of education.
- ▶ Governments, municipalities and schools must work together to collect robust data on male/female enrolment, participation, literacy rates, progression, dropout and

attainment in English- versus national-medium education.

- ▶ Consider the balance between English-medium education and English as a taught subject in the curriculum. The latter can mitigate any challenges experienced in the former.
- ▶ Monitor the hard data and intervene as necessary to ensure gender- and class-based inequalities do not develop as a result of English-medium education.

Recommendation 2: Training

Teachers in English-medium education must undergo professional development training to ensure their pedagogy is suitably adapted for English-medium education in order to maximise learning for all.

Teachers in English-medium education do not always have the language or pedagogical skills needed to teach successfully in English. Often, high-quality teaching depends more on the pedagogical skills of the teacher than on the specific language they use. One way to ensure English-medium education does not adversely affect learning for girls and marginalised students is to mandate teacher professional development.

- ▶ All teachers must have opportunities to participate in high-quality teacher professional development.
- ▶ Translanguaging (drawing on resources from multiple languages), which frequently happens in classrooms to facilitate learning, should be encouraged at policy level.
- ▶ Gender-inclusive pedagogies should also be promoted at policy level and in practice to ensure teachers develop skills and knowledge to include girls and other marginalised groups in classroom interactions.

- ▶ The research has produced a set of freely available and adaptable Open Educational Resources (OER) <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/publications/case-studies-insights-and-research/english-medium-education-and-gender-equality> to offer continued professional development to teachers of all subjects at secondary level to extend their existing practices.

Recommendation 3: Investment

Invest in government schools (infrastructures, teachers and resources) to complement the private educational sector.

- ▶ Government schools in LMICs are often poorly resourced, with a lack of basic material and equipment, and high teacher absenteeism. Policies that focus only on medium of education are unlikely to be effective unless they also address the root causes of educational inequality and the fundamental lack of investment in government schools. EME is intrinsically linked to a privatisation of education which produces and reinforces class- and gender-based inequalities between the private and the public sector, and within the public sector. Girls, particularly those from poorer and minority communities, are vastly underrepresented in EME. They may also be perceived as not needing EME because of entrenched norms about the roles girls and boys fulfil in society.
- ▶ Governments, municipalities and schools must work together to ensure requisite resources are invested to implement gender-egalitarian English-medium education.
- ▶ While private schools can provide educational opportunities where none would otherwise exist, care must be taken that these do not undermine or usurp the quality of government schools.
- ▶ Consider fee waivers for girls from underrepresented communities to enable them to access high-quality English-medium education.
- ▶ Educate stakeholders (school leaders, teachers, parents and students) on the importance of English for girls, to raise awareness of entrenched and potentially damaging sociocultural norms.

Further information

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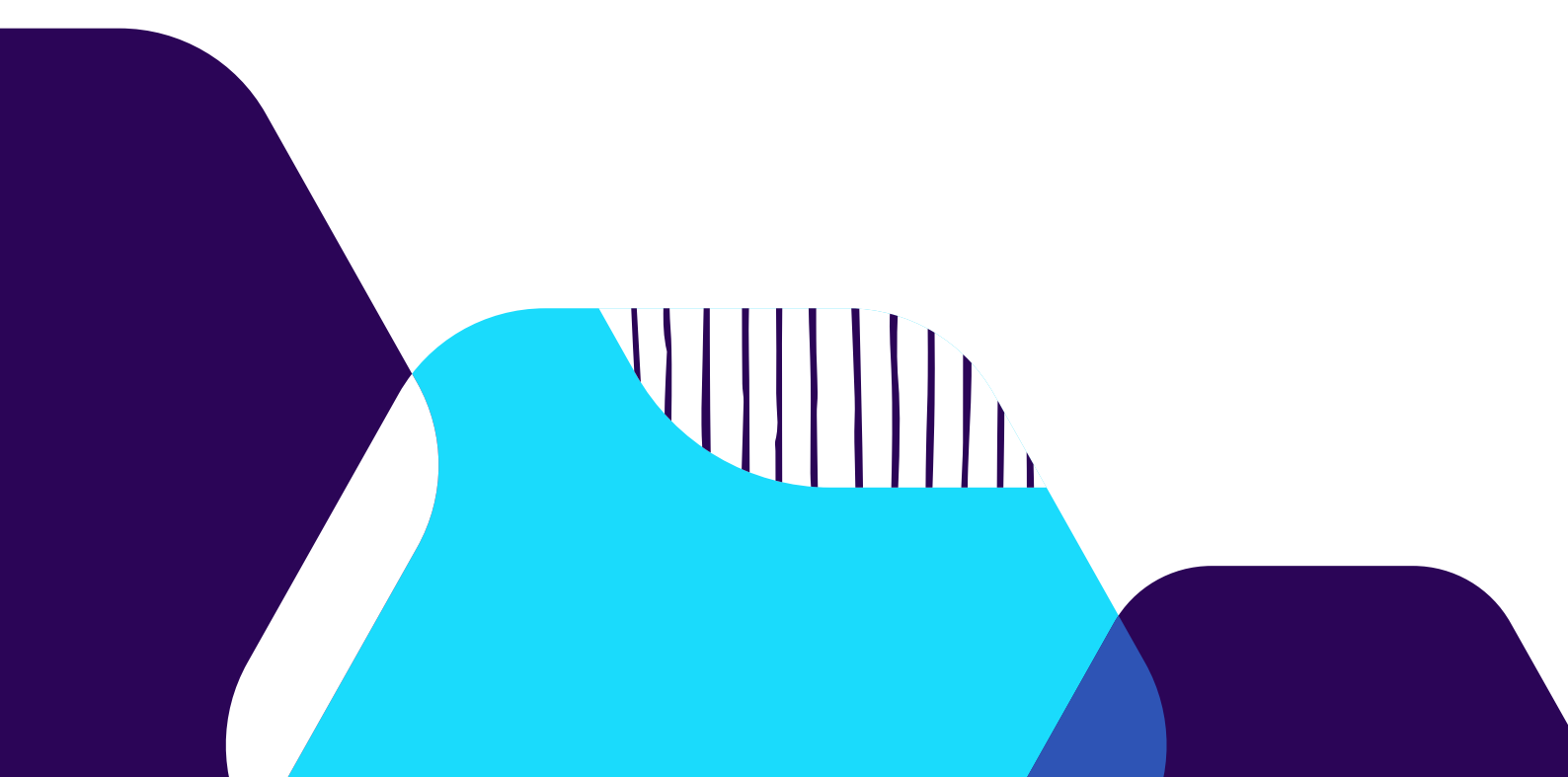
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