

# Panel Conversation in Collaboration with World Bicycle Relief: Improving Rural Girls Access to Education-- how integrating solutions to transport poverty reduces systemic barriers

Moderated by [Lauren Rumble](#), Director Gender Equality for UNICEF,

Panelists:

- [Safeena Husain](#), Founder of Educate Girls, a non-profit focused on mobilizing communities for girls' education in India's rural and educationally backward areas.
- [Susan Silika](#), the national director of CAMFED, Malawi, a pan-African movement revolutionizing how girls' education is delivered through a model that radically improves girls' prospects of becoming independent, influential women.
- [Nicole Haberland](#), a senior associate at Population Council, a leading research organization in health and development issues, particularly girls education and empowerment. She leads the Evidence for Gender and Education Resource ([EGER](#)) project, and co-authored the recently released [Girls' Education Roadmap](#),
- [Winnie Sambu](#), Research and Evaluation Manager for World Bicycle Relief, an organization partnering with communities for 16 years to improve rural access to education, economic opportunity, gender equality and healthcare.

Lauren Rumble framed the urgency of the issue. Education is currently in crisis, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Shuttered schools and other disruptions to children's learning were particularly devastating for girls, increasing risks of child marriage (by an estimated 10 million additional child brides by 2030) and violence. Adolescent girls are especially at risk of dropping out of school, never to return due to social norms re their roles, etc. An estimated 11 million girls dropped out because of COVID-19.

**Often overlooked is the part that mobility and transport poverty play in affecting girls' access to education.** Transport poverty is the inability to fully participate in social life due to the cost of transportation; mobility poverty refers to the process by which people are prevented from participating in the economic, political and social life of the community because of reduced accessibility to opportunities, services and social networks, due in whole or in part to insufficient mobility. **Evidence exists of solutions that work to address the holistic barriers girls face accessing education, including transport poverty. What is needed is increased willingness to act by policymakers and funders.**

Safeena from Educate Girls highlighted the urgent need to address the "4 P's: **poverty, patriarchy, policy, and the pandemic** to get to the root causes of girls' exclusion from

school. There is no single solution to exclusion: changes in patriarchy are imperative to shift the social norms that affect girls' access.

Nicole shared major findings from Population Council's recent systemic review on policies and interventions to remove engendered barriers to girls' education, which identified myriad of holistic barriers broken into 18 general categories within the community, school and household levels. (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/cl2.1207>). The review noted which interventions have proven to improve educational outcomes for girls, which have promise, and which have not shown to impact educational outcomes. Interventions rated as effective exist for three gender-related barriers: inability to afford tuition and fees, lack of adequate food, and insufficient academic support. Promising interventions exist for three gender-related barriers: inadequate school access, inability to afford school materials, and lack of water and sanitation. More research is needed for the remaining gender-related barriers, including school-related gender-based violence, and inadequate menstrual hygiene management.

**The review identified lack of access to school as a key household barrier.** The review highlighted some promising interventions to address household access (impact of bicycles on girls' school access in India). She referenced the randomized control trial carried out by Innovations in Poverty Action of World Bicycle Relief's bicycle education empowerment program (the results of which came out after the systemic review), indicating were very exciting and the study would be added in a future review update.

Nicole noted the complexity in teasing out which components of complex multi-layered projects work and generate good return on investment to inform scaling. More work is needed to better tease out the specific interventions that drive specific outcomes. For example, gender-based violence and menstrual health clearly need to be addressed for various critical reasons, but how and those linkages to educational outcomes is not yet fully backed by rigorous research.

Safeena pointed out and panelists agreed that research may not show attribution, but investments in menstrual health contribute to dignity and **education is a basic human right and much more investment is needed in all elements.** **"We need a war chest, or we will lose a generation."** Lauren agreed there is a complete lack of urgency in restoring children's education and it is a human right. There is a paucity of operational research and it's a yawning gap.

Susan from CAMFED shared the experience of rural girls who face major barriers accessing the education they need to become leaders and change agents in their communities. Mobility and transport poverty are key issues given the time poverty, and safety challenges girls face in low-income rural communities with few affordable, safe transport options available. She highlighted the important role of bicycle mobility for both students and the community outreach to support them. Holistic approaches are key to improving girls' access and transport and mobility need to be part of efforts that build in shared accountability with communities, schools, and parents.

**Lauren noted she had seen firsthand the power of the bicycle**, especially given that girls carry two or three times the household chore responsibilities vs boys and the burden it places on girls to get to school, study, etc.

Winnie from World Bicycle Relief shared the results of the randomized control trial in rural Zambia ( [https://worldbicyclerelief.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/WBR\\_IPA-Research-Brief\\_031522.pdf](https://worldbicyclerelief.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/WBR_IPA-Research-Brief_031522.pdf)), which looked at the impact of bicycles on girls' educational outcomes, specifically:

- Time taken to reach school
- Learning outcomes
- Absenteeism, punctuality and mobility
- Dropout rates and grade transitions
- Empowerment measures including locus of control

Results of the RCT and follow up evaluations showed **girls with bicycles were 19% less likely to drop out of school**. They decreased travel time by a third, absenteeism dropped 28%, and punctuality improved by 66%. They also reported feeling safer traveling to school and had improved empowerment outcomes. She explained how the community-driven approach in partnership with government, schools, and students was supported by wrap-around programming to provide mechanics and access to affordable spare parts to sustain the bicycle riders during their

Panelists agreed that business as usual won't address the glaring needs of the moment. We need governments, funders to increase investment. Lauren summarized:

- We have a massive education crisis
- When schools reopen, we need to do more than provide quality learning, we need greater support for menstrual health and hygiene, mobility and transport, and other holistic types of support.
- We need to embed bicycles within community-driven strategies
- There is no single solution, governments need to work with partners to ensure wrap around solutions are supported, based in behavior change

**Atalanti issued our call to action:** join us to address all the reasons why girls are not getting an education. Access is denied due to distance, but a host of barriers are wrapped in gender norms that need reform, for policy to change. Policy change needs gender norms change. Reach out to World Bicycle Relief to join this effort:

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