

# UNGEI FEMINIST NETWORK 2024

FOR GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION

REGIONAL DECLARATION FOR

GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION

SOUTH WEST ASIA

& NORTH AFRICA



# INTRODUCTION

This regional declaration on Gender Transformative Education (GTE) in the Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA)<sup>1</sup> region serves as a critical assessment and contextual analysis of the state of gender equality in and through education. Developed through consultations with around 100 experts—including academics, civil society leaders, activists, and policymakers—from 12 SWANA countries, this declaration identifies key challenges and provides actionable recommendations to advance GTE in the region. Supported by consultations and an online survey conducted through collaborative work between the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship at the American University of Beirut, Politics4Her, and FEMALE, the declaration offers a nuanced understanding of the structural issues and gaps in achieving GTE. It also highlights the role of international organizations, outlining strategic interventions needed to overcome these challenges.

## Contextual Analysis

The context of gender equality in and through education in the SWANA region has seen both progress and setbacks. Efforts to increase girls' enrollment and improve access to education have led to higher literacy rates and more girls attending school, particularly in urban areas. However, these gains are threatened by ongoing challenges such as deep-rooted gender norms, economic disparities, and political instability. These issues continue to restrict educational opportunities for girls, especially in rural and conflict-affected areas. Additionally, resistance to gender-sensitive and/or transformative curricula and the rise of conservative movements underscore the need for ongoing advocacy and

policy changes to achieve gender equality in education across the region. Although some regional progress has been made on gender-parity fronts, our consultations suggest gender equality in education spaces still remains a challenge, with continued instances of early, forced, child marriage and unions, unsafe school environments, gender-based violence (GBV), or even restriction of economic opportunities for girls compared to boys.

In conflict-affected regions, such as Palestine, Syria, and South Lebanon, these barriers are only enhanced by the political situation, putting an additional strain on education. Protection of marginalized and vulnerable communities is a core issue, especially for girls with disabilities, refugees and displaced girls, or members of the LGBTIQ+ community.

## Gender Transformative Education Terminology in the SWANA Region

It is important to note that the term 'Gender Transformative Education' remains unclear to some and needs further clarification. Survey feedback reveals that only 50% of respondents feel familiar or very familiar with GTE, while 26% are unfamiliar with the term. Our consultations also indicate that while professionals in education or gender fields understand the term, there are substantial concerns about its broader acceptance. More specifically, the term in Arabic may be misinterpreted to imply gender 'switching', which can provoke resistance in the Arab Region. It is advisable to review and refine the term in Arabic to ensure it is clearly understood by all societal members and to mitigate any potential backlash.

<sup>1</sup> We are intentionally using the term SWANA to refer to the Southwest Asia & North Africa region, which is also known as Middle East & North Africa (MENA).

# BARRIERS TO PROGRESS ON GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION

This section presents the challenges that hinder the advancement of GTE in the SWANA region.



1. **Social and cultural factors.** Social and cultural factors, including gender-based violence (GBV), early, forced, child marriage and unions, cultural stereotypes, and religious influences, significantly hinder the progress of GTE. Notably, 75% of respondents identify cultural norms and stereotypes as the primary barrier to GTE. These issues are particularly concerning as ideological and cultural beliefs frequently overshadow educational goals. Patriarchal societies, commonly found in the SWANA region, have played a role in enhancing social and cultural barriers to education. By segregating certain activities or subjects by gender, certain professions, notably STEM jobs, eventually become male-dominated, due to biases in early schooling systems. Also, many families prefer to invest in the education of boys rather than girls, believing that girls will end up getting married, while boys are responsible for taking care of their families.



2. **Safe access to schools.** In regions affected by war and conflict, access to education becomes increasingly difficult and dangerous, posing a severe threat to educational opportunities. However, accessibility issues are not limited to conflict zones. In rural areas, the lack of nearby schools and public transportation makes it challenging for girls to attend school. Effectively, a third of respondents mentioned limited access to education to be one of the top obstacles to GTE. For girls with disabilities, these challenges are even more pronounced, as few educational institutions are equipped to accommodate their needs, further exacerbating the accessibility problem.



3. **Non-inclusive curricula.** Inclusivity and gender equality are essential for advancing GTE, yet many curricula in the SWANA region still fall short. School programs often lack sufficient female representation and fail to adequately address gender equality. Additionally, topics related to sexual and reproductive health and rights are often underrepresented, particularly in countries where religious teachings heavily influence educational content. This educational gap is a significant concern, with 54% of respondents considering the development of gender-inclusive curricula as one of the most effective actions needed to advance GTE. The same can be said about representations and support of people with disabilities, or representation of the LGBTIQ+ community, which further influence school dropout rates.



4. **Affordability.** Affordability is a major obstacle to GTE, as many large families lack the financial resources to send all their children to school. As a result, boys are often prioritized. In addition to the financial expenditure, including school fees, schoolbooks, transportation and stationery, this is also due to the belief that boys' future economic contributions will outweigh girls'.

## OPPORTUNITIES TO ADVANCE

## GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION

International and regional organizations can play a pivotal role in advancing GTE by:



5. **Funding GTE:** Strengthening GTE efforts requires robust financial support. By forming partnerships with local NGOs, organizations can offer scholarships, reduce tuition fees, and help organisations secure consistent funding. Overcoming challenges such as stringent donor requirements and demonstrating measurable outcomes is key to ensure the sustainability of GTE programs. 41% of respondents classified funding as a top barrier to GTE, putting it high on organizations' priority lists.



6. **Non-inclusive curricula:** An important aspect of advancing GTE involves addressing knowledge gaps through targeted research. This includes exploring GTE terminologies and their reception in Arabic translation, assessing curricula, examining the intersectionality of various social factors, and establishing strong monitoring and evaluation frameworks. Key research areas should focus on the prevalence and impact of gender-based violence in schools, the role of technology in education, and the importance of community and parental engagement in fostering gender equality. Another key element would be exploring instances where children need to be pulled out of traditional academic tracks due to conflict or safety issues.



7. **Providing training and expertise:** To promote GTE, local NGOs must be equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge. Half of survey respondents mentioned training and capacity building to be the among most effective areas where organizations can support to advance GTE. International organizations can bridge this gap by offering comprehensive training programs and ongoing post-training support. Teacher training in educational establishments could also play an essential role to directly impact GTE in schools.



8. **Changing social norms:** Social and communal change is fundamental to advancing GTE. 70% of survey respondents ranked community engagement and awareness as the top most effective strategy to drive change. Organizations can play a pivotal role by launching awareness campaigns, conducting workshops, and engaging with communities to dismantle gender barriers, to foster a culture of gender equality. By creating a communal vision, GTE movements could then work to influence governments, institutions and regional decision makers.

# GOALS, ACTIONS, AND THE PATHWAY FORWARD

To tackle the challenges surrounding GTE, we have outlined actionable strategies across key priority areas:

## GOAL 1: ENSURE GIRLS' SAFE ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND INCREASE RETENTION RATES IN SCHOOLS ACROSS THE REGION

**Leverage the role of women role models and teachers:** Organize workshops and mentorship programs that feature successful women professionals. These role models can share their stories, challenges, and successes to inspire girls and communities to value education as a pathway to financial independence. Having women teachers could also help in creating a safe and inspiring space for young girls.

**Develop flexible academic schedules:** Partner with schools and educational authorities to develop policies that allow for open-ended school years. This flexibility would include multiple registration and exam periods, enabling girls who face interruptions in their education to re-enroll and continue their studies at any time during the school year. This policy can significantly reduce dropout rates by accommodating the unique needs of female students.

**Diversify educational pathways:** Encourage the development and expansion of both academic and technical education tracks in schools. By offering diverse pathways, girls can choose between traditional academic routes or vocational and technical training that aligns with their interests and career aspirations. This approach not only keeps girls engaged in education but also equips them with practical skills that can lead to sustainable employment and economic independence.

**Provide essential facilities:** Provide facilities like free menstrual pads, free meals, and clean toilets in schools to help promote educational access for girls. Free menstrual products help eliminate the stigma and disruption associated with menstruation. By addressing these needs, schools create an environment that empowers girls to pursue their education with fewer barriers and greater confidence.

**Ensure safe access to schools:** Eliminate logistical barriers to physically accessing schools safely. Either in the context of conflict, or in times of peace, alternative transportation could encourage more girls to enroll in schools. In areas of conflict, partnering with the army, United Nations security bodies would mitigate danger risks associated with commuting to school. Providing school buses that have a specific routing could facilitate access to schooling establishments.

## GOAL 2: ELIMINATE EARLY, FORCED, CHILD MARRIAGE AND UNIONS THROUGH COMMUNITY AWARENESS AND EDUCATION

**Implement community-wide education programs:** Design and implement educational programs that address the root causes of child, early, and forced marriage. These programs should target both boys and girls, as well as parents and community leaders, to raise awareness about the harmful effects of these practices on girls' health, education, and future opportunities. By fostering a culture of gender equality these initiatives can help change behaviors that perpetuate early marriage. Dismantling patriarchal norms in the education setting could play a role to promote positive masculinities in society.

**Set up reporting systems and offer legal support:** Establish a mechanism for reporting suspicions or instances of child marriage. Offering legal support to holding perpetrators accountable by enforcing laws and providing free legal assistance. The building of an accessible reporting system allows community members, educators, and authorities to quickly address and intervene in potential child marriage cases.

## GOAL 3: PRIORITIZE THE BODILY AUTONOMY OF GIRLS BY SUPPORTING SEXUALITY EDUCATION AWARENESS

**Organize Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) Workshops and Youth Labs:** Establish workshops and youth labs within schools, community centers, and online platforms to deliver comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) education. These programs should be designed to be culturally sensitive and accessible, providing young people with accurate information about their bodies, relationships, and rights. In the absence of a formal SRHR curriculum, these alternative educational pathways are essential for educating youth on making informed decisions about their health and well-being.

**Create mechanisms to report sexual harassment and violence:** Creating a mechanism to report sexual harassment and gender-based violence in educational spaces is essential for fostering a safe and supportive learning environment. Creating a safe and accessible way for girls to come forward safely would empower by providing them with a trusted channel to seek help and justice, while also promoting accountability and transparency within educational institutions.

## GOAL 4: CREATE GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION SYSTEMS THAT PROMOTE EQUALITY AND INCLUSIVITY

**Promote gender inclusivity:** Work with educational policymakers, curriculum developers, and teachers to integrate gender-inclusive content into all levels of education and revise curricula as needed. Encouraging schools to also implement practices that promote gender parity in all aspects of school life is also necessary. This could include having class representatives from both genders, forming girls' sports teams, and ensuring equal participation in extracurricular activities.

**Prioritize the mental health of girls:** Providing access to psychologists in schools is crucial for fostering the well-being of girls. Access to professional mental health resources helps address issues such as anxiety, depression, trauma, body image issues, which affect girls due to increased societal pressures. This also promotes gender equality by creating a more equitable learning environment.

**Establish monitoring and evaluation guidelines:** Monitoring school dropouts, enrollment levels, and other metrics is essential. By having access to these numbers, progress could be monitored frequently, and adjustments in school systems made accordingly to support girls in schools. By developing a mechanism for accountability to monitor progress and invest in research, GTE matters could be evaluated in a more streamlined manner, and governments and institutions held accountable for their actions or lack thereof.

**Exploring diversified tracks and approaches to education:** Identifying alternate routes to educational tracks can be key to adjust to unpredictable barriers to education. By developing reliable schooling online platforms, girls could potentially be offered courses despite their physical access to schools and provide gender-sensitive training through educational videos to broader communities. It can introduce girls to various fields and provide opportunities to acquire new skills, allowing them to explore both unconventional subjects and innovative learning methods. That being said, it could also serve as a means to facilitate technical and voluntary education especially in instances where girls are under prioritized in education.



# ANNEX

## SURVEY FINDINGS

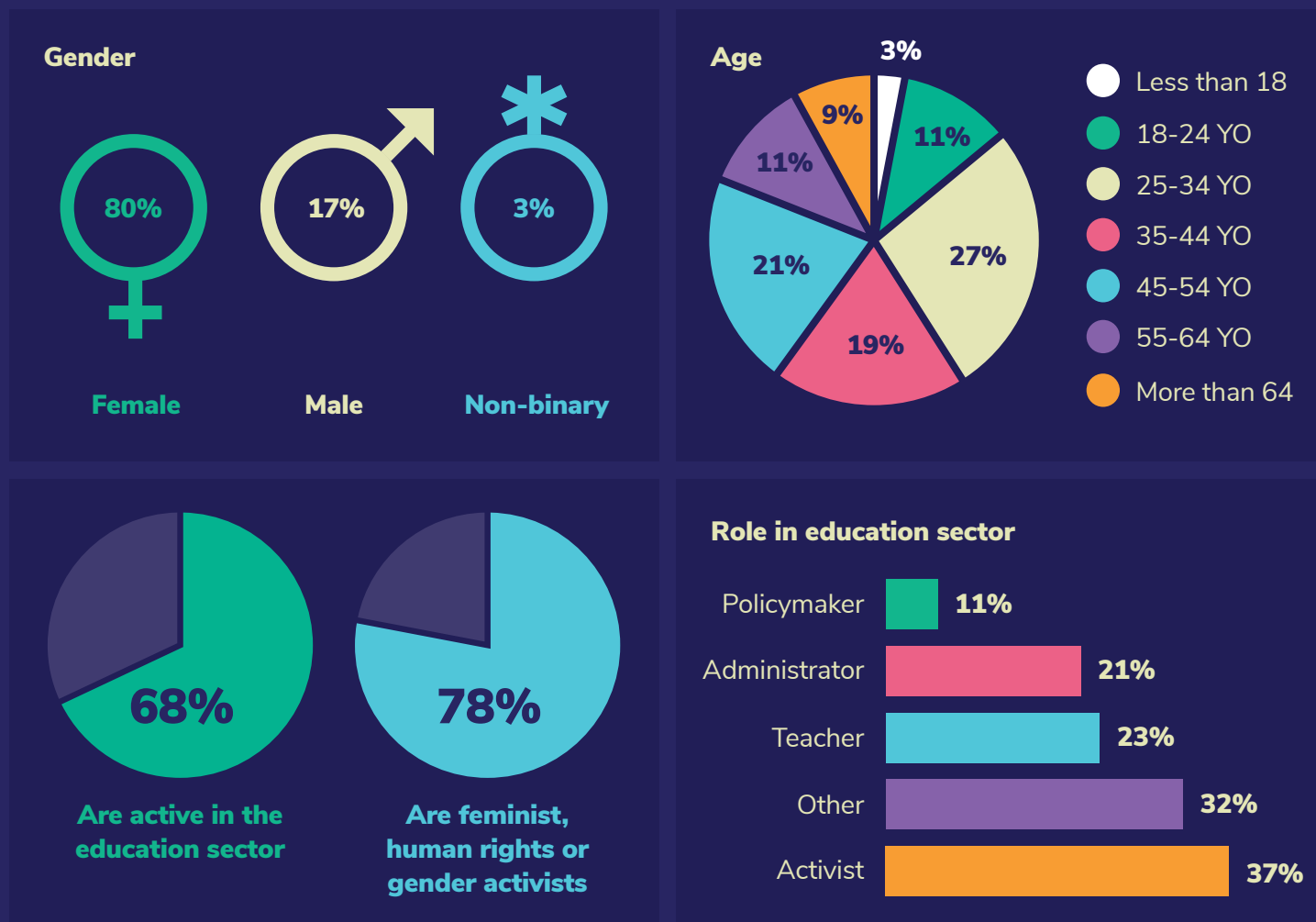
In this section we will present in detail the survey findings and methodology used in the consultations.

### Sample Composition and Methodology:

With a sample size of 80 respondents from over 12 SWANA countries, the survey aimed to support the consultation findings with quantitative analysis, in order to identify pertinent regional challenges, and assess the most effective ways to resolve them. The fieldwork period took place over 1 month (15 July 2024 - 15 August 2024), and the survey was available to take in Arabic and English. A French version was later created, but received no responses.

The survey was composed of 27 questions (including profiling questions), varying from open ended responses, to ranking style questions.

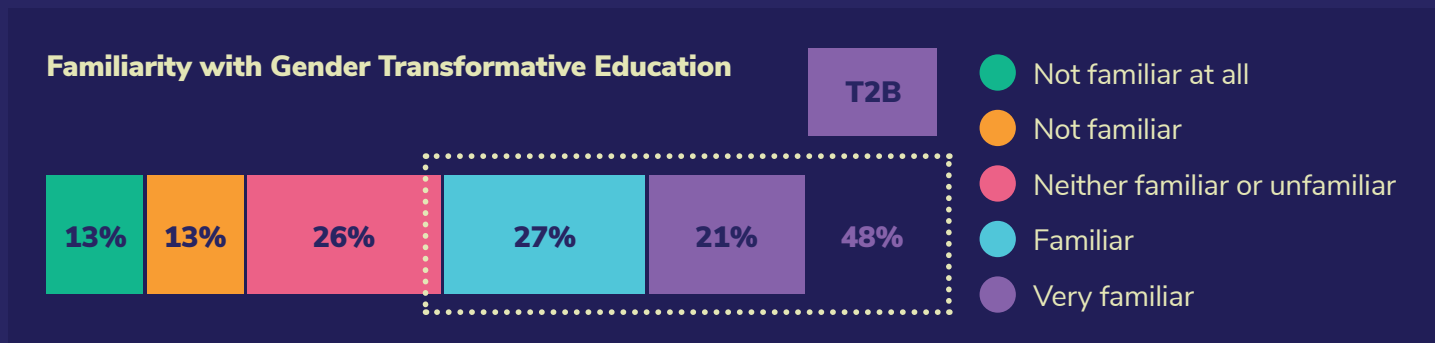
### Sample Composition:



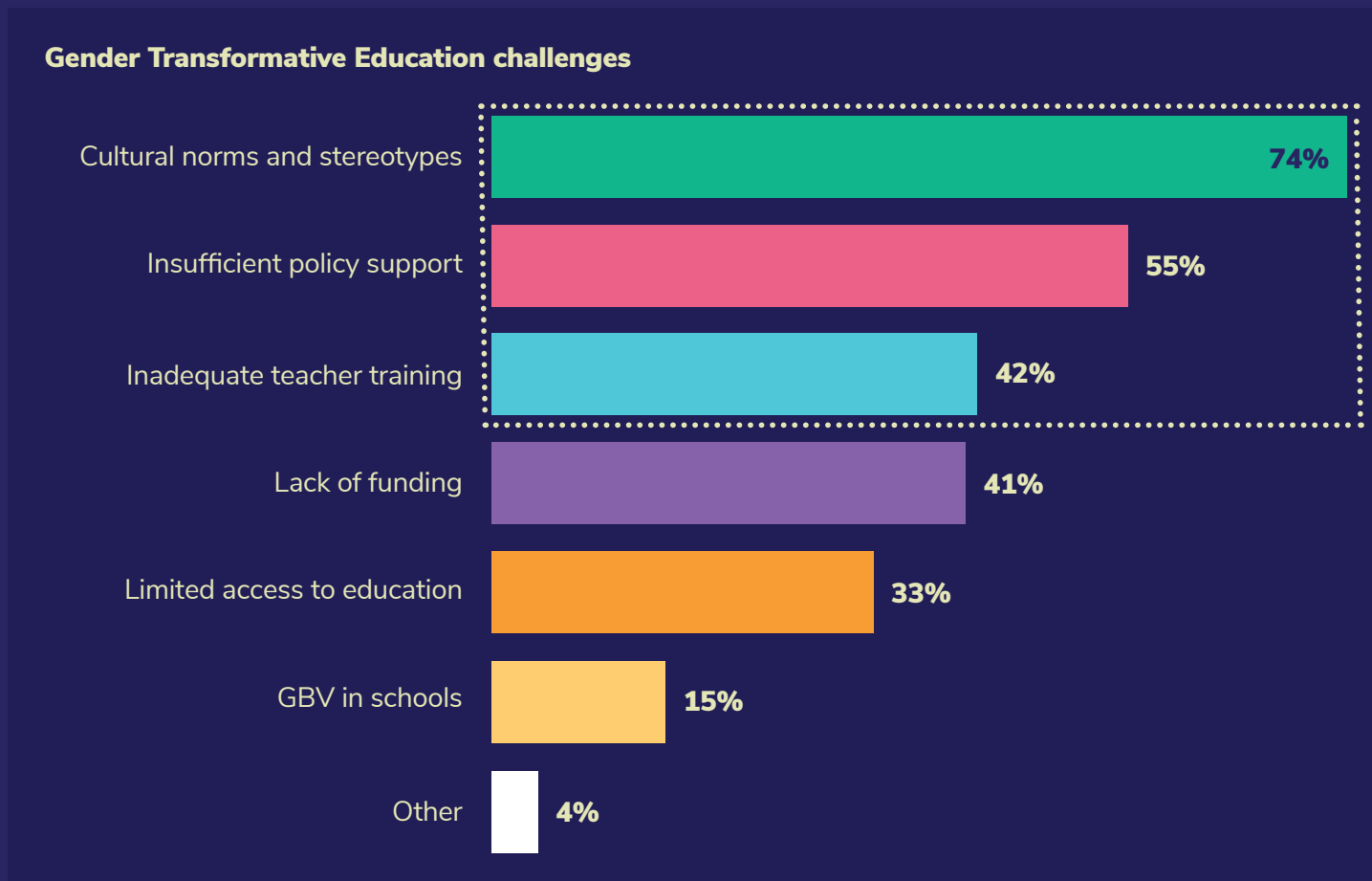


**Main findings:**

Less than half of respondents considered scoring in the Top 2 Box regarding familiarity to the term 'GTE' - this suggests more efforts on explaining and redefining the term through awareness campaigns can be made in order to achieve higher results.

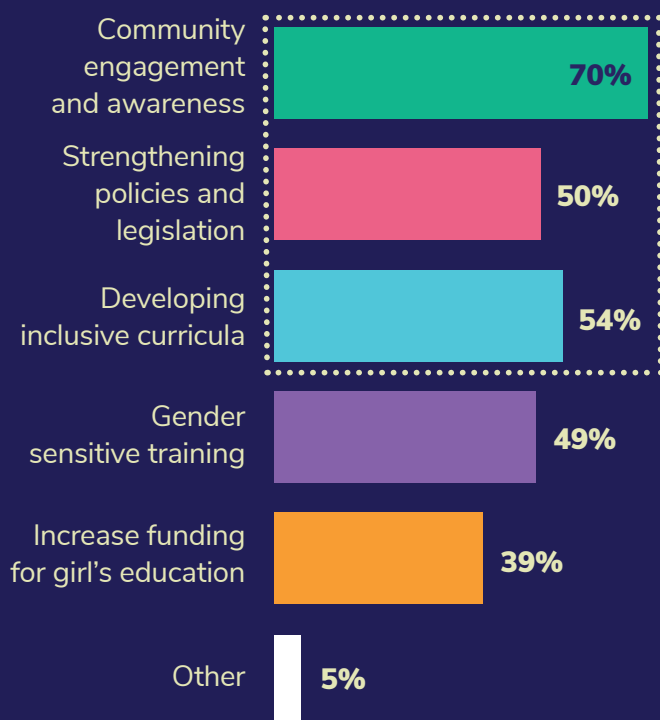


When prompted on the most pertinent GTE challenges in the MENA/SWANA region, three quarters of respondents ranked 'Cultural norms and stereotypes' as one of the Top 3 most significant challenges. This was followed by insufficient policy support, and inadequate teacher training.

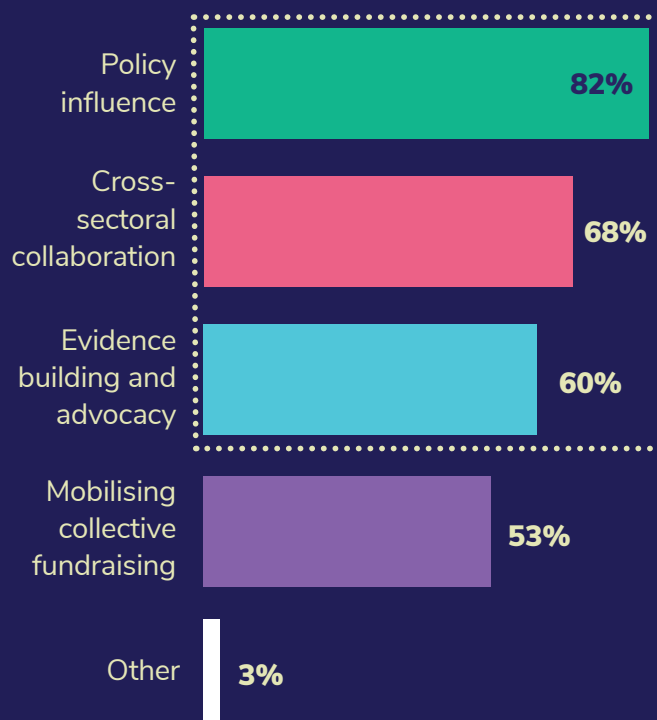


When asked about the top actions needed to promote GTE, community engagement took the lead, followed by strengthening policies and legislation. Effectively, policy influence ranked first in terms of regional commitments needed to advance GTE, followed by cross-sectoral collaboration ranking second.

### Action to promote Gender Transformative Education (top 3)



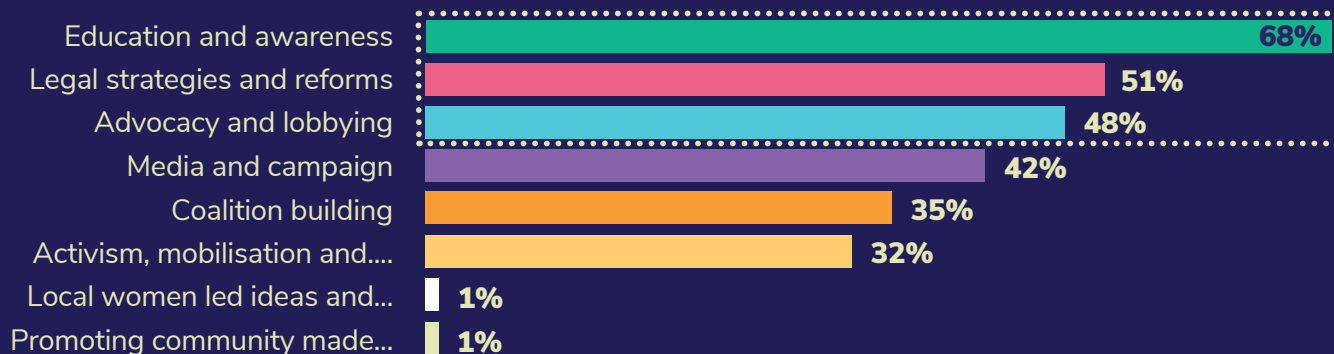
### Commitments to promote Gender Transformative Education (top 3)



Finally, results show that almost 70% of respondents consider the most useful strategy to unite against Anti-Rights movements is through education and awareness, followed by legal strategies and reforms, and advocacy and lobbying. These results suggest that awareness and building community resilience are among the key actions to invest in, in order to break gender education stereotypes in the SWANA region. Meanwhile, policy influence remains a real barrier to overcome legal and institutional burdens.

In the next section, we will provide additional supporting evidence based on literature, on the current state of GTE in the SWANA region.

### Strategies to unite against anti-rights movements (top 3)



## SWANA LITERATURE/SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

While progress has been made in reducing the gender equality gap, especially in the education sector, many challenges persist for girls and young women. Out of 9.3 million children between the ages of 15 and 17, about one-third are out of school, with girls accounting for over half of this number.<sup>2</sup>

### The barrier of conflict to advancing Gender Transformative Education:

Despite the regional efforts to advance equal education, recurring conflict and political instability makes girls more likely to drop out of school compared to their male peers. That being said, in cases of conflict, achieving gender equality becomes increasingly complicated, especially in the SWANA region. As a Syrian Gender Activist mentioned in her interview 'We must take into account the problems or discrimination that exist in (conflict-driven) society, which target only women and girls.' Effectively, girls in conflict zones are 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than boys<sup>3</sup>. As conflict drives more families towards destitution, children are increasingly exploited, forced to leave school and take up jobs often in poor conditions and for minimal wages. Girls as young as 13 are being pushed towards marriage to relieve economic strains on their families.<sup>4</sup>

A similar observation can be made for girls in rural areas, who are more vulnerable than girls living in cities, when it comes to access to education. For example, in 2019, the net enrolment rate of girls

living in rural areas in Morocco was 39.7% versus 53.9% in rural areas.<sup>5</sup>

The prevalence of child marriages is also a significant threat in the region, with over 40 million child brides, and the highest percentages in Sudan and Yemen. Around 700,000 girls are forced into marriage every year, and this harmful practice increases during armed conflicts when girls are kept out of school and often end up getting married, while boys engage in forced labor.<sup>6</sup>

### Social and family factors:

Furthermore, a mother's education significantly influences children's schooling, especially in secondary education, which implies the role that gender stereotypes and family traditions can play an essential role to girls' education.<sup>7</sup> Inheritance laws, patriarchal norms requiring women to obtain permission from a male relative in certain countries, and families investing more in boys' education than in girls' due to the belief that girls will end up in marriage all contribute to this issue. Men are more likely to have direct access to employment and control over wealth, leaving women dependent on male family members.

Achieving gender-transformative education in SWANA is complex due to several challenges that children and youth face in the region. Additionally, homosexuality is criminalized in all countries of the region, and LGBTQIA+ individuals are denied their existence. The current dynamics within the region, where many migrants from East and South Asia come to the Gulf countries, are denied their

- 2 UNICEF MENA. (2019, August 29). Over one third of adolescents aged 15 to 17 are out of school across the Middle East and North Africa. UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/mena/press-releases/over-one-third-adolescents-aged-15-17-are-out-school-across-middle-east-and-north>
- 3 Save the Children. (2020). Gender discrimination causes inequality between girls and boys around the world. <https://www.savethechildren.org/us/charity-stories/how-gender-discrimination-impacts-boys-and-girls>
- 4 UNICEF x Save the Children (2015, July, 2). Small Hands Heavy Burden: How The Syria Conflict Is Driving More Children Into The Workforce, July 2015. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/small-hands-heavy-burden-how-syria-conflict-driving-more-children>
- 5 Saad Guerraoui, Arab Weekly News (2019, November 3). Rural Moroccan women's access to education and health care. <https://thearabweekly.com/report-raises-alarm-over-rural-moroccan-womens-access-education-and-health-care>
- 6 UNICEF MENA. (2022, February). Facts and figures: Child marriage in the Middle East and North Africa. UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/mena/reports/facts-and-figures-child-marriage-middle-east-and-north-africa>
- 7 UNICEF MENA. (2019, August 29). Over one third of adolescents aged 15 to 17 are out of school across the Middle East and North Africa. UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/mena/press-releases/over-one-third-adolescents-aged-15-17-are-out-school-across-middle-east-and-north>

human rights. Forced displacement due to conflicts and wars in the region also contributes to denying the right to education. However, some countries have made efforts to develop policies that protect the rights of girls and young women and advance gender equality. Primary school enrollment is high or universal in most SWANA countries, and gender gaps in secondary school enrollment have already disappeared in several countries. Women in SWANA countries are also more likely to enroll in universities than they were in the past.

In the final section of the annex we will be diving deeper into specific case studies from consultations, to further shed light on the points mentioned in the declaration.

### Further observations:

Protection of marginalized and vulnerable communities was one of the most recurring topics in our consultations, given that intersectionality plays an important role in gender equality in education. That being said, girls from marginalized groups have additional hurdles to overcome, in order to access education and receive the same opportunities.

### Refugees & Displaced girls:

The first group we will be focusing on is refugees and displaced persons. In the ever growing context of conflict in the Middle East, displacement is becoming a serious barrier to achieving GTE. Our consultation with Syrian and Palestinian activists shed light on the different challenges children, particularly girls, in conflict face on a daily basis. From deserting school establishments, to building segregated 'school tents', studying is no longer safe for children in conflict. Even outside of conflict zones, new challenges arise for refugees and displaced children, who more often than not lack the proper paperwork and legitimacy to attend schools, let alone present official exams. Such is the case of

Palestinian students taking refuge in Egypt, only holding a tourist visa, thus being unable to attend school with that type of paperwork. These barriers heighten already existing inequalities in education, and make challenges even more difficult to overcome for young girls - putting them at increased risk of child marriage in the context of displacement. Given these exceptional situations, families may choose to withdraw girls from the little schooling they have, to 'secure' them a better future. In that sense, despite girls being very successful in schools prior to conflict and crisis, unexpected shifts can cause them to have to stop their education, in order to fulfill familial duties.

This also puts them at risk of becoming victims of sexual violence and potentially become stuck in the loop of survival sex in displaced areas, in which case, no focus is allocated to education, including SRHR measures.

The government of Jordan has already taken positive steps towards this topic by introducing the 'Strategy for Mainstreaming Gender Equality in Education', the core of the 10-Year Strategy for Inclusive Education (2020-2030).<sup>8</sup>

### Girls with disabilities:

Girls suffering from disabilities are also faced with different kinds of hurdles when trying to access education. Despite the obvious issue of establishment accommodation (elevators, support teams, infrastructure needs...), girls are particularly subjected to discrimination in the context of disability (mental or physical). In a consultation with a Lebanese NGO dedicated to preserving the rights of people with disabilities, gender biases were classified as one of the most threatening issues when it comes to access to education in the context of disability. 'In the case of some households where disability is hereditary, siblings of different genders could have the exact same physical disability, with male children

8 UNESCO (2023) - Leave No One Behind - Gender Equality in Transforming Education Summit National Commitments

going to school and presenting official exams, while female children are being homeschooled,” mentioned a Lebanese disability activist during an interview. That being said, the risk of early, forced, child marriage and unions automatically increases, with social norms putting pressure on the educational track of handicapped girls.

### **LGBTIQ+ members:**

Although none of our consultations mentioned challenges of LGBTIQ+ community, the current context of GTE, undoubtedly creates further complications to individuals who identify with the movement. Given the lack of inclusive educational content, absence of psychosocial support, children identifying with the LGBTIQ+ community have additional hurdles to overcome. Despite being exposed to verbal and physical violence as a repercussion to their chosen identification, young children lack the guidance to talk about their challenges and explore solutions to their problems, let alone have proper representation in schooling curricula.. With the discourse and backlash that comes with LGBTIQ+ matters in the SWANA region, deeper research needs to be conducted in order to extract meaningful insights and explore solutions on the integration of LGBTIQ+ challenges in GTE.

In the next section, we will be diving deeper into some suggestions and initiatives collected from the survey and consultations, and exploring their context as real yet untraditional solutions to combat gender inequalities in education.

### **The role of teachers in Gender Transformative Education:**

In the next section we will explore the need for teacher training in promoting GTE. In the context of the SWANA region, training is essential in order to empower teachers to identify gender stereotypes, and to combat any kind of discrimination in educational establishments. However, one cannot

ignore the living conditions of teachers in the SWANA regions, with unfair salary schemes, absence of childcare support, barriers to uniting in syndicates halting their progress. ‘If you have teachers who are not paid well, lack their basic needs, and are not satisfied with jobs, they will not be good role models for students and improve the quality of teaching and learning to make it more inclusive. ‘ mentioned an education specialist during an interview. That being said, gender sensitive teacher training cannot be treated in a vacuum, when other basic needs are not met, which may directly or indirectly affect the success and practice of said training. In that lens, the current situation of teachers in SWANA comes into play when assessing different strategies to induce gender sensitive training, especially in countries where different laws and governing bodies have such an important role towards education.

### **Online Learning as a tool to promote Gender Transformative Education:**

One of the most interesting avenues that many of our consultations found interesting to explore, is the use of online learning as a tool to advance GTE. Whether it is by offering courses online, for girls to follow if they are deprived from physically accessing schools, or disseminating gender sensitive training to communities through educational videos, the online world could potentially serve as a multidimensional solution to promote GTE. Furthermore, it could expose girls to different specialties and give them a platform to learn new skills, allowing them to explore learning in non-traditional subjects and non-traditional methods.