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# LOCAL APPROACHES TO WOMEN'S ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

A Co-created Learning Document to Localize the Primer on Expanding Women's Access to Higher Education

## **BACKGROUND**

In March of 2023, members of the USAID Higher Education Learning Network (HELN) participated in a global online event to discuss and analyze the October 2022 [Primer on Expanding Women's Access to Higher Education](#) from a local perspective. Participants shared some of the challenges that inhibit or support women's access to higher education to help localize evidence and elevate promising practices to a global audience. This document is drawn directly from those member-provided insights into specific regional factors that shape women's access to higher education and offers resources to further support equitable access.

## **WOMEN'S ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN**

While women have achieved parity in accessing higher education in Latin America and the Caribbean, low-income, Indigenous, and migrant women continue to have little access to higher education. HELN members identified the following factors that affect women's access to higher education in Latin America and the Caribbean.

## INHIBITING FACTORS

- Cultural norms that create stigmas for women to enter traditionally masculine education and career tracks, including STEM fields.
- Limited investment in higher education infrastructure, particularly in rural areas.
- Limited economic resources to support tuition and fees; increased privatization that increases costs.

## SUPPORTIVE FACTORS

- Universal secondary education for girls.
- Career guidance and mentoring.
- Relatable female role models.
- Financial resources, particularly scholarships.
- Distance education programs.

**Program highlight:** USAID’s Advance Program—implemented in Guatemala, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, and Jamaica—increased women’s access within two- and three-year technical tertiary programs by strengthening institutional capacity in select academic programs and providing advising services to support enrollment and graduation. ([advanceprogram.org](http://advanceprogram.org))

## WOMEN'S ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN AFRICA

Although higher education access for women in sub-Saharan Africa has nearly doubled since 2000, and there is increasing access to primary and secondary education, only 7.19 percent of women in Africa enroll in higher education today. HELN members identified the following factors that affect African women’s access to higher education.

## INHIBITING FACTORS

- Cultural norms, such as early marriage and childbirth for young women.
- Low quality of primary and secondary education.
- High levels of poverty and limited financial resources to pay tuition and fees.
- Preference for educating only sons among poor, rural families.

## SUPPORTIVE FACTORS

- Universal secondary education for girls.
- Career guidance and mentoring.
- Community-based outreach to support women’s empowerment.
- Relatable female role models.
- Financial resources, particularly scholarships.
- Distance education programs.

**Program highlight:** USAID’s Strengthening Higher Education Access in Malawi Activity (SHEAMA) works to increase access to higher education among the most vulnerable student populations, including rural, adolescent girls and young women through scholarships, student support such as childcare, and newly created distance education programs. ([sheama.education.asu.edu](http://sheama.education.asu.edu))

## INTERSECTIONALITY AND WOMEN'S ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

HELN members also highlighted the importance of an intersectional approach to understanding barriers to women's access to higher education and the overlapping social identities and social systems that require inclusive policies, targeted support, and systemic change to promote equitable access to higher education. Members noted the following challenges:

- Women from marginalized racial or ethnic groups often face discrimination, racial stereotypes, and limited representation among higher education institution faculty and staff.
- Indigenous women often confront language barriers, cultural biases, and limited educational infrastructure within their communities and may face challenges accessing higher education institutions that understand and respect their cultural values and incorporate their perspectives.
- Women who are migrants, are refugees, or have undocumented status may encounter legal restrictions, limited financial support, and linguistic or cultural challenges.
- Women with disabilities confront physical challenges, including lack of accessible infrastructure at higher education as well as lack of access to primary and secondary education.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Lombardo, Bridget, and Nina Kaur. 2022. "Primer on Expanding Women's Access to Higher Education." United States Agency for International Development. [www.edulinks.org/sites/default/files/media/file/USAIDPrimer\\_WomensAccessToHigherEd\\_Nov22.pdf](http://www.edulinks.org/sites/default/files/media/file/USAIDPrimer_WomensAccessToHigherEd_Nov22.pdf).

Mulwa, Martin. 2021. "The Gender Gap in Universities and Colleges in Sub-Saharan Africa." ESSA. April 13, 2021. <https://essa-africa.org/node/1421>.

UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean. 2020. *Towards Universal Access to Higher Education: International Trends*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000375686.locale=en>.

The [HELN](#) is a global network that brings together donors, practitioners, government officials, academics, researchers, students, NGOs, and other stakeholders to uncover and improve the ways higher education is uniquely positioned to support sustainable development across sectors. [Become a Member of the HELN](#).