



# POLICY PAPER

## Addressing Gender Stereotypes and Educational Inequality in Lebanon's Secondary Education System

This policy paper was developed by Madanyat for Equality under the IGNITE programme – Inspiring Girls and Grassroots Networks for Inclusive and Transformative Education, and implemented by the René Moawad Foundation in partnership with the International Rescue Committee and funded by Agence Française de Développement, within which Madanyat conducted the research titled ***Gender stereotypes and educational inequality in Lebanon's public and private schools.***



### Executive summary

Despite Lebanon's historically high literacy rates and girls' strong academic performance, gender stereotypes and structural barriers continue to undermine equitable educational outcomes, particularly for adolescent girls in marginalized regions. Evidence from Metn, Akkar, and the Bekaa shows that while girls demonstrate high aspirations and sustained engagement in secondary education, their experiences are shaped by subtle classroom biases, uneven access to resources, financial pressures, and persistent social norms that limit participation, subject choice, and post-secondary pathways.

This policy paper draws on a mixed-methods study that combines surveys of 228 female students, focus group discussions with female students, parents, and teachers, and key informant interviews with education officials and experts. The findings reveal a system where formal access to education coexists with everyday inequalities in learning environments, guidance, infrastructure, and mobility. Girls' motivation and family support remain high, yet economic hardship, transportation costs, curriculum rigidity, and gendered expectations continue to shape outcomes, particularly outside urban centers.

The paper argues that advancing gender equality in education requires moving beyond fragmented initiatives toward systemic, regionally tailored reforms. It proposes a set of prioritized policy actions focused on teacher development, curriculum and assessment reform, school safety and counseling, infrastructure and transport, and strengthened governance and coordination. Implemented in an integrated and sustained manner, these measures can transform girls' educational participation into lasting gains in equity, expanded life opportunities, and meaningful long-term socio-economic inclusion.

# 1. Context and problem statement

---

Lebanon's education system is operating under prolonged strain due to economic collapse, political instability, repeated disruptions to schooling, and widening regional inequalities. These pressures have exposed and intensified pre-existing gender disparities within schools, households, and communities. While girls generally maintain higher completion rates and academic achievement than boys, these advantages do not translate into equal opportunities in higher education, employment, or public life.

The study shows that gender inequality in education is no longer primarily driven by overt exclusion. Instead, it is produced through a combination of subtle classroom practices, outdated curricula, uneven access to infrastructure, and socio-economic constraints that disproportionately affect girls in rural and underserved regions. Transportation costs, distance to universities, limited extracurricular opportunities, and inconsistent guidance services collectively constrain girls' capacity not only to access education but to fully benefit from and shape their educational trajectories.

At the same time, gender stereotypes continue to shape expectations. Girls are often perceived as needing protection or leniency, reinforcing assumptions about fragility rather than capability. Leadership, sports, and certain STEM fields remain implicitly coded as male-dominated spaces, particularly in Akkar and the Bekaa. These dynamics, while often informal, influence participation, confidence, and long-term aspirations.

Without systemic intervention, Lebanon risks reproducing a cycle in which girls succeed academically yet remain structurally constrained in translating education into economic independence, leadership, and civic participation.

## 2. Key findings with policy relevance

---

### 2.1 School environment and classroom dynamics

Most girls report feeling physically safe at school, yet qualitative evidence highlights emotional and psychological insecurity linked to bullying, mockery, and unequal participation in discussions. Teachers often apply different standards of discipline and encouragement to girls and boys, sometimes out of care rather than discrimination, but with the effect of reinforcing unequal expectations. These dynamics are more pronounced in sports, leadership activities, and open classroom debates.

### 2.2 Access, retention, and structural barriers

Girls' commitment to education is high across all regions, with nearly all surveyed students aspiring to continue their higher education. Dropout considerations are driven overwhelmingly by financial strain rather than lack of motivation. Transportation costs, distance to schools and universities, and limited local options are decisive barriers, particularly in Akkar and the Bekaa. Early marriage appears less frequently in self-reported data but remains a risk factor in pockets of vulnerability, especially under economic stress.

### 2.3 Gender norms and societal expectations

More than half of respondents recognize that society expects different behavior and life choices from girls and boys. Although direct interference in educational choices is declining, indirect pressures persist, particularly regarding household responsibilities and "appropriate" fields of study. These norms are reinforced by textbook content and limited exposure to female role models in non-traditional careers. In addition, the limited availability of local higher education and training opportunities in rural areas forces many girls to either narrow their aspirations or undertake long-distance travel and overnight stays that families may resist.





## 2.4 Support systems and enabling factors

Family support is a strong protective factor, with most girls reporting active encouragement from parents. Teachers and school administration play a critical role when equipped with appropriate tools and training. However, access to gender equality initiatives, counselling, and mentorship remains uneven and largely dependent on external partnerships rather than institutionalized policy.

## 3. Policy gaps and implications

---

The evidence points to four critical gaps:

-  **From policy to practice:** Gender equality commitments exist but are weakly embedded in daily teaching, assessment, and school governance.
-  **Fragmented interventions:** Most initiatives remain short-term, donor-driven, and geographically uneven, limiting scale and sustainability.
-  **Infrastructure and mobility neglect:** Transportation and school facilities are treated as secondary issues, despite their central role in girls' attendance and retention.
-  **Insufficient data for decision-making:** Limited sex- and region-disaggregated data constrain effective planning, monitoring, and early intervention.

Addressing these gaps requires coordinated, system-wide action rather than isolated programs.

## 4. Policy recommendations

---

### 4.1 Institutionalize gender-responsive teacher development

Integrate gender equality as a core competency in pre-service teacher education and establish continuous in-service coaching models. Move beyond one-off training toward reflective practice, classroom observation, and peer learning, with particular attention to STEM participation, leadership, and classroom interaction.

### 4.2 Reform curriculum and assessment simultaneously

Systematically revise textbooks and learning materials to eliminate gender stereotypes and include diverse representations of women and men. Align assessment methods with participatory learning by valuing oral expression, teamwork, and applied knowledge, reducing reliance on rote memorization.

### 4.3 Strengthen school-based safety, counseling, and guidance

Ensure every school has trained focal points for protection and referral, alongside functional counseling services that address academic guidance, psychosocial needs, and post-secondary pathways. Reliable support systems are essential for sustaining girls' engagement under economic stress.

### 4.4 Address infrastructure and transportation as equity issues

Develop subsidized and safe transportation schemes in partnership with municipalities, particularly in rural areas. Invest in basic school infrastructure, sanitation, and shared laboratories to ensure girls can participate fully and with dignity in learning environments.



#### 4.5 Engage families and communities as partners

Institutionalize structured dialogue with parents on educational pathways, scholarships, and labor market opportunities. Community-based awareness initiatives should include boys, fathers, and local leaders to challenge persistent stereotypes and expand social acceptance of girls' ambitions.

#### 4.6 Improve governance, coordination, and data systems

Align donor-funded programs within a national framework with clear targets, timelines, and accountability mechanisms. Strengthen data collection systems to ensure regular sex- and region-disaggregated monitoring of attendance, performance, and retention.

#### 4.7 Tailor interventions by region

Adopt context-specific strategies that reflect regional disparities: in relatively well-resourced areas such as Metn, prioritize strengthening pedagogical quality and leadership pathways; in Akkar and the Bekaa, focus on expanding mobility, improving infrastructure, and ensuring equitable access to post-secondary opportunities.



### 5. Conclusion

---

Girls in Lebanon are not disengaged, passive, or lacking ambition. On the contrary, they are among the most resilient actors within a strained education system. The challenge is not convincing girls or families of the value of education, but removing the structural, institutional, and social barriers that prevent educational success from translating into real opportunity, including equal access to decision-making spaces, leadership roles, and public life.

Transforming gender equality in education requires making equity routine rather than exceptional. When classrooms are inclusive by design, schools are safe and supportive, pathways beyond secondary education are accessible, and practical barriers such as transport and cost are addressed, girls' aspirations become achievable trajectories. Equally important is ensuring that schools cultivate girls' participation in student governance, civic engagement, leadership initiatives, and political life, so that academic achievement translates into active citizenship and representation in Lebanon's public sphere.

With coordinated action, predictable investment, and attention to regional realities, Lebanon can convert girls' educational achievement not only into economic opportunity, but also into stronger participation in governance, leadership, and political decision-making, generating lasting social, democratic, and economic returns for the country as a whole.

### Disclaimer

---

This policy paper is supported by Agence Française de Développement. The ideas and opinions expressed herein are those of the authors (Madanyat for Equality) alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of Agence Française de Développement.