Open-ended intergovernmental working group on an optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child

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Barriers to Free Public Pre-Primary Education: A Continent-Wise Overview

Africa

- Legal and Policy Barriers: In addition to the fact that very few African countries have laws placing pre-primary education as compulsory or free; of the 14% of all countries that did provide pre-primary education free of charge; funding levels are also extremely low; for example, West and Central province had only allocated 2.5% of its total education budgets to pre-primary education.
- Practical Barriers: Not enough classrooms, trained teachers, and learning materials; in addition to the fact many children live a significant distance from the school, families may not be able to afford the additional cost of education (uniform, transport).
- Impact on Marginalized Groups: Children in rural areas, from low-income families, or with disabilities are much less likely to attend. More than half of the poorest children never go to pre-primary school, which leads to worse performance and higher dropout rates later in school.

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Asia (East, South, and Southeast Asia)

- Legal and Policy Barriers: Only 19% of countries in the East Asia and Pacific region offer free access to pre-primary education, with even fewer in South Asia. Many countries lack strong laws or policies to ensure access.

[1] 1. “Children in Danger of Being Left behind as Too Few Countries Offer Free Pre-Primary Education,” Theirworld, October 11, 2022, https://theirworld.org/news/too-few-countries-offer-free-pre-primary-education/.

- Practical Barriers: Approximately 16 million children across the East Asia and Pacific Region are not enrolled in pre-primary education. Barriers include underfunding, insufficient numbers of schools, and hidden costs. Urban areas tend to have more private schools, which can continue to be barriers for rural and poorer families.
- Impact on Marginalized Groups: Children from low-income families, children from rural areas, and children from minority groups including refugees, are also far less likely to participate. Other common challenges include language barriers and lack of support for children with disabilities.

Europe and North America

- Legal and Policy Barriers: In the majority of these countries, legal barriers do not exist. Free and compulsory pre-primary legislation is very strong in many of these countries. Approximately 70% of European and Central Asian countries allow free pre-primary education for at least a year.
- Practical Barriers: Practical barriers are mainly related to quality or teacher availability when opening access fast.
- Impact on Marginalized Groups: In general, very high access exists; however, students from immigrant families, minorities or disabilities may have access issues still due to language or cultural differences or no specialized support.[2]

Latin America and the Caribbean

- Legal and Policy Barriers: This area is generally one of the best for legal guarantees-75% of countries provide free pre-primary education and many have made it compulsory.
- Practical Barriers: These include inequitable quality, lack of resourcing in poor or rural areas and lack of training for teachers.
- Impact on Marginalized Groups: Accessing quality pre-primary education may be difficult for groups of indigenous children, rural children, and children from low socioeconomic families, particularly in remote regions.

Middle East and North Africa

[2] 1. Right to pre-primary education a global study, accessed May 17, 2025, https://www.right-to-education.org/sites/right-to-education.org/files/resource-attachments/UNESCO_right%20to%20pre-primary%20education_Global%20study_2021_en.pdf.

- Policy and legal barriers: Less than 25% of countries have free pre-primary education, and legal protections are often weak.
- Practical barriers: There are not enough schools, and not all children have access to existing schools. Social norms may discourage girls or children with disabilities from attending.
- [3]Impact for marginalized groups: Refugee children, girls, and children with disabilities will be excluded because of practical and cultural barriers.

[4]

Barriers to Free Public Secondary Education

1. Systemic Issues

- High dropout rates: 100% of teachers have noted child labor as a common reason for absenteeism and students are missing school to work on farms or as domestic workers or street vendors. In India, boys often dropout following secondary exams due to pressures of supporting the family.[5]
- Child labor: 55% of working children or youth experience physical or emotional exhaustion which limits their academic ability. Low income females recorded 3× loss rates instead of the males because of being required to do domestic work or assume domestic roles.
- Gender Gap: Although in India girls are enrolled higher than boys in higher education level (28.5% vs. 28.3% GER) the participation in STEM fields is the opposite (42.5%). In the Middle East and North Africa girls are disproportionately kept out of secondary schools because of social norms. [6]

2. Impact on Vulnerable Groups

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[3] 1. Jo Becker, "'lay a Strong Foundation for All Children,'" Human Rights Watch, June 12, 2024, https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/06/12/lay-strong-foundation-all-children/fees-discriminatory-barrier-pre-primary.

[4] "Children in Danger of Being Left behind as Too Few Countries Offer Free Pre-Primary Education." Theirworld, October 11, 2022. https://theirworld.org/news/too-few-countries-offer-free-pre-primary-education/.

[5] 1. Jo Becker, "'lay a Strong Foundation for All Children,'" Human Rights Watch, June 12, 2024, https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/06/12/lay-strong-foundation-all-children/fees-discriminatory-barrier-pre-primary.

[6] https://supriyassule.in/media/acfupload/302_of_2016_Secondary_Education.pdf

Group	Challenges
Rural youth	35% face transportation barriers; 40% drop out to support family incomes.
Ethnic minorities	Language barriers and xenophobic enrollment practices reduce access.
Low-income families	70% cite unaffordable hidden costs (uniforms, exams) despite free tuition.

Financial Mechanisms for Free Education

1. Funding Models Innovations

- Public-private partnerships (PPP): India's RMSA program is working with the private sector to construct schools in underserved areas. The UK has a Private Finance Initiative model that funds school infrastructure through a 30-year private funding agreement.[7]
- Tax reforms: Levying taxes for education on luxury items (for example, Ghana has a 1.5% VAT for education).[8]
- International aid: Places like China and Korea are emerging donors that are funding vocational training programs in Africa and Asia.

2. Successful Case Studies

[7] 1. "Government Initiatives in Promoting Secondary Education in India • Teachers Institute," Teachers Institute, March 25, 2025, https://teachers.institute/contemporary-india-education/government-initiatives-secondary-education-india/#google_vignette.

[8] 1. Innovative Financing for Education, accessed May 17, 2025, https://r4d.org/wp-content/uploads/Innovative-Financing-for-Education-Burnett-Bermingham.pdf.

Brazil's *Bolsa Família*: Conditional cash transfers increased secondary enrollment by 12% in low-income households. Kenya's free day secondary education: Reduced dropout rates by 20% through state-funded tuition and meals.

Government Actions to Remove Barriers

1. National Policies

India's initiatives:

- Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA): Built 11,000+ schools in rural areas. National Scheme of Incentive to Girls (NSIGSE): Provides ₹3,000 ($36) for girls completing secondary education. Free and Compulsory Secondary Education Bill (2016): Guarantees free textbooks, meals, and hostel facilities.
- Teacher training: LEAD Academy in India upskills teachers in digital pedagogy and classroom management.[9]

2. International Cooperation

UNESCO partnerships: Supported RMSA's infrastructure development in India. World Bank programs: Funded Ethiopia's secondary education expansion, reducing rural dropout rates by 15%.

General Recommendations

1. Enforcement mechanisms: Criminalize child labor and penalize schools charging illegal fees.
2. Monitoring frameworks: Track gender parity in STEM enrollment and rural access annually.
3. Community engagement: Train local leaders to advocate for education in marginalized regions.

Conclusion

[9] 1. "Top Rated Teacher Training Course Online: Teacher Training Program: Lead," LEAD School, February 5, 2025, https://leadschool.in/school-owner/solutions/teacher-training-courses/

Achieving free and equitable secondary education for all children can best be achieved through a sophisticated process that is much broader than merely enacting laws. The first step is to build robust legal mechanisms to make child labour illegal and make it illegal for schools to charge illegal fees with proper enforcement mechanisms in place to hold schools accountable. The next important aspect is to build robust monitoring systems for enrolling, retaining, and reporting gender equity and taking into account accountability in STEM, and to connect the community with a robust monitoring system is to take the feedback and be an advocate in supporting it. Addressing socio-economic barriers is also critically important. Providing children with financial resources like scholarships, free school supplies, meals, and transportation helps families keep their kids in school. Ensuring adequate measures are in place for marginalized groups is also essential by devoting resources for rural infrastructure, relevant education, and access for children with disabilities. Gender equality is also critically important and ensuring girls can pursue their dreams without fear and limitations requires safe school environments and mentoring support. Partnering with government agencies, international agencies, and private sector agencies is necessary to mobilizing resources and expertise for change that is sustainable. Collectively, these measures will provide space for nurturing children and provide opportunities for every child to thrive and realize their potential for the future and others.

Citations and sources of information

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3. "Children in Danger of Being Left behind as Too Few Countries Offer Free Pre-Primary Education." Theirworld, October 11, 2022. https://theirworld.org/news/too-few-countries-offer-free-pre-primary-education/.
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6. Impact of child labour on the academic ... Accessed May 17, 2025. https://www.int-jecse.net/article/IMPACT+OF+CHILD+LABOUR+ON+THE+ACADEMIC+ACHIEVEMENT+OF+SECONDARY+SCHOOL+STUDENTS_4819/?download=true&format=pdf.
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10. "Top Rated Teacher Training Course Online: Teacher Training Program: Lead." LEAD School, February 5, 2025. https://leadschool.in/school-owner/solutions/teacher-training-courses/.