

# The Challenges and Implications of a Global Decline in the Educational Attainment and Retention of Boys

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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world innovation summit for education  
مؤتمر القمة العالمي للابتكار في التعليم

An Initiative of Qatar Foundation

SHEIKH SAUD BIN SAQR AL QASIMI  
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مؤسسة الشيخ سعود بن صقر القاسمي  
لبحوث السياسة العامة

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## Executive Summary

Over the past two decades, policymakers, international organizations, and scholars focusing on gender and education have largely concentrated their efforts on issues relating to girls (The World Bank, 2013; King & Winthrop, 2015). However, results from recent international assessments, coupled with data on higher education enrolment rates, have led to a new concern about the performance and retention of males - particularly, those from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD, 2015a]; Fryer & Levitt, 2010). In the Middle East and the Caribbean, girls have been outperforming boys for many years, but this phenomenon has received little attention at the global level (Ridge, 2014; United Nations Girls' Education Initiative, 2011). However, as nations across Europe and other parts of the world also begin to face a decline in the relative achievement and retention of males, there has been an increase in attention paid to the academic outcomes of boys, both domestically and globally.

In many countries, males, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, are now more likely to have less education than females. In 2000, more males had tertiary qualifications than females in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. However, by 2012, this had shifted with 34 percent of females holding a tertiary degree compared to only 30 percent of males (OECD, 2015a). In terms of achievement, males score significantly lower than females across a range of national and international assessments (Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Hooper, 2016; OECD, 2015a). The 2015 round of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) showed boys scoring on average 27 points lower than girls in reading, with the largest gap witnessed in Jordan at 72 points (OECD, 2016a). A similar pattern also emerged in the Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study (PIRLS) in 2011, in which girls had, on average, a 16-point advantage compared to boys globally (Mullis, Michael, Foy, & Drucker, 2011).

In order to unpack this growing trend, this report uses existing literature, international assessment data, interviews, and case studies from across the globe to examine the relative persistence and performance of males in education. The report explores the different ways in which male underachievement emerges, and analyzes the critical implications of male underachievement for the labor market and society. It then looks in more depth at six countries: Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Trinidad and Tobago, the Dominican Republic, the United States, and the United Kingdom in order to understand some of the unique challenges facing males in different regions, and to identify some promising initiatives to support males going forward. We find that in all settings, poverty intersects with gender to play a significant role in predicting achievement and additionally, that race and geography are important considerations when trying to explain male attainment.

In order to best address this issue, the report emphasizes the need for future research which:

1. Quantifies the costs of male underachievement and the benefits of their receiving meaningful education.
2. Identifies specific populations of boys that are most at risk. This would enable education authorities to consider and adopt programs that address the different needs of at-risk boys rather than employing a one-size-fits-all approach. Policymakers need to ensure that the right populations of boys receive the interventions that they need, respectively.

In addition to calling for more and better research focused on male underachievement in education, we conclude by offering a number of policy recommendations to support boys. These policy recommendations focus on four levels: the home, school/district, national, and international. Some of the recommendations include:

### **Home**

1. Programs for parents to provide awareness of, and strategies to, address the negative impact of excessive online gaming
2. Father son/daughter reading programs

### **School/District**

1. Robust data management systems
2. A range of supplementary intervention programs targeting at-risk boys
3. Training for teachers on boy-friendly pedagogies

### **National**

1. Research funds targeted at exploring issues of male disadvantage
2. National programs promoting father involvement in education
3. Initiatives to increase the numbers of males entering and completing teacher training programs

## International

1. A stream focused on at-risk boys in the Global Partnership for Education (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2015a; Fryer & Levitt, 2010)
2. An online portal that acts as hub for any resources relating to educating boys and men
3. A global award for innovative programs that support at-risk boys and their families

Ultimately, this report highlights the need for additional research on male underachievement and for more programs specifically focused on supporting boys, particularly those at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum. We stress that boys, as much as girls, need to be engaged in education, not only for their own future, but also for their families and for society as a whole.



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