

Wealth Inequality and Educational Outcomes: A Cross-National Comparative Analysis of Enrolment, Completion, and Gender Parity (2015–2024)

Research Overview

This comparative cross-national study synthesises a decade of evidence on how wealth inequality shapes educational outcomes across twelve countries spanning all World Bank income groups (2015–2024), drawing on harmonised UNESCO, OECD, World Bank, and Worldwide Governance Indicators data to link the Gini index with secondary completion, tertiary enrolment, and gender parity.

Purpose of Study

Educational inequality is a defining global challenge of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) era, yet a decade into the SDG 4 agenda the relationship between wealth distribution and educational outcomes remains poorly understood at a worldwide scale. Existing scholarship has examined these dynamics largely through single-country or single-region studies, leaving cross-national patterns fragmented and policy guidance partial. The present study addresses this gap by synthesising the SDG decade through a unified comparative lens that places high-, middle-, and low-income systems within a single analytical frame. Three questions guide the inquiry: how have inequality trajectories evolved across diverse national contexts and how do they relate to participation and completion; to what extent is wealth inequality associated with secondary completion, tertiary enrolment, and gender parity in pooled cross-national data; and which structural factors mediate these associations. The study is theoretically anchored in human capital theory, the capability approach, and intersectional analysis, providing a multidimensional framework for explaining why educational expansion alone does not deliver equity. Its worldwide significance lies in producing comparative evidence that transcends national silos and offers transferable insights for governments and international agencies pursuing SDG 4 by 2030.

Research Methods

A longitudinal, comparative, mixed-methods design covering 2015–2024 was applied to a twelve-country panel selected through coverage-driven sampling requiring at least 70 percent annual data completeness: Spain, Uruguay, and Costa Rica (high-income); Thailand,

Indonesia, and Georgia (upper-middle-income); Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan, and Bangladesh (lower-middle-income); and Burkina Faso, Rwanda, and Burundi (low-income). Harmonised data from UNESCO, OECD, the World Bank, and the Worldwide Governance Indicators captured wealth inequality, educational outcomes, gender equity, governance quality, and macroeconomic controls. Three integrated analytical stages were applied: descriptive trend analysis using absolute change and compound annual growth rates; cross-national correlation analysis using Pearson and Spearman coefficients; and fixed-effects panel regression isolating within-country dynamics while controlling for governance and time-invariant heterogeneity.

Results and Discussion

Wealth inequality is strongly and systematically associated with educational outcomes worldwide. The Gini index correlates negatively with tertiary enrolment ($r \approx -0.81$) and with secondary completion ($r \approx -0.39$), and fixed-effects regression confirms these directions while identifying governance quality as a significant moderator: countries scoring higher on government effectiveness and voice accountability convert inequality reductions into educational gains more efficiently. A typological synthesis identifies four distinct cross-national clusters: *equity expanders* (Indonesia, Costa Rica, Uzbekistan, Georgia), where redistribution and educational expansion advance together; *access expanders* (Thailand, Spain, Uruguay), where tertiary participation grows but inequality remains static; *inequality reducers* (Kyrgyz Republic), where redistribution occurs without major access gains; and *data-limited stagnators* (Rwanda, Burundi, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso). The clustering of equity expanders among middle-income economies points to a developmental *equity window*, a stage in which fiscal capacity, demographic momentum, and inclusive policy converge to deliver simultaneous gains in redistribution and educational equity. High-income systems display saturation effects with persistent gender imbalances; low-income systems remain constrained by structural barriers and reporting gaps. The findings carry significance across three domains. For theory, they demonstrate that human capital and capability frameworks must be integrated with governance and intersectional analysis to explain divergent national trajectories. For policy, they argue that achieving SDG 4 worldwide requires aligning redistributive measures with educational investment, embedding governance quality as a central lever, and strengthening reporting infrastructure in under-monitored systems. For methodology, the study contributes a replicable harmonisation and analytical framework that other researchers can adapt for additional countries and indicators, with planned extensions

using causal inference and machine-learning techniques to deepen the evidence base for global education policy. Achieving inclusive and equitable quality education by 2030 will require not only continued investment but a structural redefinition of educational success, moving systems from reproducing inequality to empowering every learner.

Keywords

wealth inequality; educational outcomes; SDG 4; cross-national comparative analysis; governance