

GENDER AND LEARNING IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH: Evidence from the PAL Network

FOCUS ON GENDER GAPS IN FOUNDATIONAL LEARNING

ICAN-ICAR 2025 assessed over 89,000 children across 11 countries using household-based assessments - reaching children at home, including those never enrolled or frequently absent.



PAL NETWORK
People's Action for Learning

READING AND MATH SHOW DIFFERENT GAP PATTERNS

Share of in-school children (ages 5-16) reaching MPL, by gender
Gap = Girls - Boys (percentage points)



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Gender differences in foundational learning are not universal.
- Girls lead in reading in 10 of 11 countries, significantly in six.
- Significant math gaps favour boys in Nepal, Pakistan, and Nicaragua, and girls in Tanzania, Kenya, and Senegal.
- No significant math difference is found in five countries.

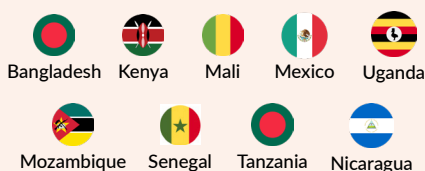
MPL = Minimum Proficiency Level

(equivalent to Grade 2 competencies).

ACCESS AND AGE ALIGNMENT DO NOT EXPLAIN THE MATH GAPS

ASSUMPTION: Boys are enrolled at higher rates than girls.

DEBUNKED: In 9 of 11 countries, girls are enrolled at equal or higher rates than boys. In the other 2 countries, boys lead but the difference is not significant.



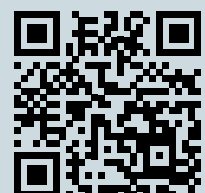
ASSUMPTION: Girls are more likely to be under- or over-age for their grade.

DEBUNKED: In 6 of 11 countries, girls are more likely to be in the expected grade for their age. In the other 5 countries, differences are not significant.



ICAN-ICAR 2025 Data Dashboard

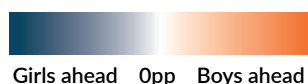
Explore results for all 11 countries in our interactive dashboard. Filter by country, enrolment status, age, and more.



MATH GAPS EMERGE IN THE EARLY YEARS

Gender gap in math by grade group and country
Sign convention: Boys - Girls (percentage points)

	Pre-Primary	Early Grades (1-2)	Grades 3-5	Grades 6+
Bangladesh	0pp	+5pp**	+3pp	+5pp*
Kenya	+2pp	0pp	-4pp	0pp
Mali	-1pp	0pp	+2pp	-1pp
Mexico	0pp	+2pp	+3pp	0pp
Mozambique	-1pp	+1pp	+3pp	+3pp
Nepal	+1pp	+10pp***	+8pp***	+8pp***
Nicaragua	+1pp	+11pp	+7pp*	+5pp*
Pakistan	+7pp*	+1pp	0pp	0pp
Senegal	+2pp	0pp	+3pp	+1pp
Tanzania	0pp	0pp	-1pp	0pp
Uganda	0pp	+1pp	+4pp	-2pp



BOYS' ODDS OF REACHING
MATH MPL RELATIVE TO
GIRLS

1.73 x**
Pre-primary

1.21 x**
Grades 1-2

1.09 x
Grades 3-5

1.10 x
Grades 6+

** = statistically significant

***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05

KEY TAKEAWAYS

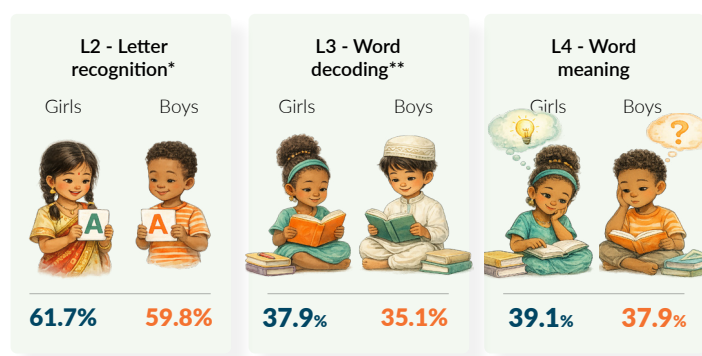
- Boys' pooled advantage is significant in Pre-primary and Grades 1-2. From Grade 3 onward, pooled gender differences are not statistically significant.
- Where math gaps exist (Nepal, Pakistan and Nicaragua), they emerge most strongly in early years.

GENDER GAPS EMERGE AT DIFFERENT SKILL LEVELS

Selected foundational sub-skills, pooled across Pre-primary and Grades 1-2
Reading: L2-L4 | Math: M1-M3 | Sign convention: Boys - Girls

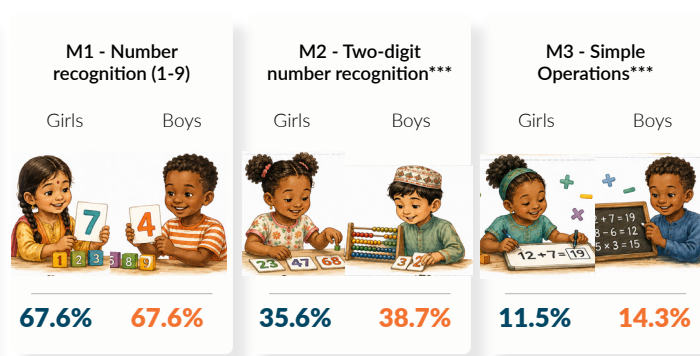
READING

Girls lead in letter recognition and word decoding



MATH

Boys lead in two-digit numbers and operations



Increasing skill complexity

***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05

Increasing skill complexity

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Math parity ends as numbers get larger: boys math advantage emerges in two-digit number recognition and operations.
- Targeted early math instruction that focus specifically on two-digit number work and early operations for girls in pre-primary and Grades 1-2 can go long way.
- In reading, girls lead in letter recognition and word decoding (L2 and L3, both significant), with parity on the harder comprehension items.
- The difference in performance between boys and girls is not significant for "Word Meaning" and "Short and Long Passage Comprehension."

This is the third in a series of spotlight briefs showcasing evidence generated by the 2025 ICAN-ICAR common assessments of children's foundational learning in the Global South.

Download the Report

