

**Regional Coordination Group on SDG4 in West and Central Africa**  
**Gender Equality and Inclusive Education Task Team**



**PROMOTING GIRLS' RIGHT  
TO LEARN IN WEST AND  
CENTRAL AFRICA**

**Education  
2030** 

# INTRODUCTION

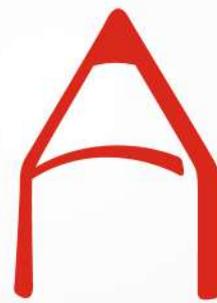
Due to global commitments to eliminate gender disparities in education over the past few decades, more girls than ever now have access to education at all levels. However, in West and Central Africa gender inequality in education remains the highest in the world. **28 million girls** (of primary and secondary school age) **have no access to education** (UIS 2016). Either they have never been enrolled, or they dropped out prematurely. In Mauritania and Niger, almost half of girls enrolled in primary school don't make the transition into secondary school (UIS 2016). On average for every 100 boys entering secondary school in the region, only 76 girls are enrolled (UNICEF 2015b). Girls attending school perform poorly due to low education quality, gender biased teaching methods, and lack of home support. In francophone West and Central Africa, only 2.8% of girls from the poorest 40 percent complete primary school with sufficient competency in mathematics and reading (PASEC 2014). Factors contributing to low participation, performance and completion rates for girls are, among others, **unequal gender norms, school-related gender based violence, early pregnancy, child marriage, and poverty.**

Sustainable Development Goal 4, the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16-25) all attach great importance to the achievement of gender equality in education. They acknowledge that educating girls means addressing their fundamental right to develop their full potential and become active, fully recognised citizens. Additionally, girls' education is one of the most rewarding investments in a country's social and economic development, impacting on a range of issues such as health, employment, social transformations and political stability. This is why coordinated measures have to be taken to guarantee that girls in West and Central Africa can access quality education to the same extent as their peers in the rest of the world.

**28 million** girls out of school

**70%** of girls enter primary school

**36%** finish lower secondary school



Going to school leads to a better life for myself and my family. If I can get an education and get a job, it will lead to a better future where I can help other people.

-Albright, 12



# IMPACT OF GIRLS' EDUCATION

## DIRECT

A 1% increase in women reaching secondary education can increase **economic growth** by 0.3%.

Having a secondary education for girls is correlated to an additional **growth of their future wages** by 15-25%.

## INDIRECT

**Educating girls...**

**...makes them less vulnerable to health problems**

A girl who completes basic education is three times less likely to contract HIV.

Educated women are 8 times more likely to deliver in a health facility in Nigeria and nearly 7 times less likely to miss prenatal care in Mali.

**...protects them from child marriage**

In sub-Saharan Africa, 66% of girls with no education become child brides, versus 13% of those with secondary or higher education.

**...slows down population growth**

Educated mothers have on average three children less than uneducated mothers in Côte d'Ivoire and Niger.

## INTERGENERATIONAL

**Educating girls...**

**...empowers them to protect their future daughters**

In Burkina Faso, girls are 7 times less likely to suffer from female genital mutilation when their mothers are educated.

**...improves child health**

Children born to educated mothers are 4 times less likely to suffer from severe stunting in Burkina Faso. In Côte d'Ivoire and Mali the risk of not receiving any vaccines is 6 times fewer for children born to educated women.

**...reduces child mortality**

In Burkina Faso and Nigeria, children born to educated mothers are 4 times more likely to survive past age 4.

**...improves their future children's education**

Educated women are known to have better educated children and to particularly encourage their daughters' schooling.

# BARRIERS TO GIRLS' EDUCATION

## 1. SOCIAL BARRIERS

**Unequal gender norms** put a big constraint on girls' chances to learn. Because women are traditionally valued through their fertility, and agricultural and domestic activities, and because girls are mostly destined to serve other families after marriage, investing in their formal education is not seen as beneficial. In the Ashanti area of Ghana, 50% of parents would keep their sons in school rather than their daughters if forced to make a choice, compared to only 10% who would prioritise their daughters (Plan WARO 2012). Some parents even avoid sending their girls to school, considering it an obstacle to their training as future mothers and housekeepers, and a jeopardy to their chances of marrying (Plan WARO 2012). Girls with disabilities face double discrimination, based on societies' negative attitudes towards both gender and disability. As a result, girls with disabilities are often not allowed to attend school or, if they do, they often face discrimination and violence, including sexual violence (Handicap International 2015a, Sightsavers 2017).

### Child Marriage

The link between child marriage and girls' education is multidirectional. Child marriage can either be the cause or the consequence of school dropout. On the one hand, pushing girls into marriage often means withdrawing them from school. This can happen months or years before the actual marriage date, because the girl will start to earn money for her marriage trousseau. Even if a girl does not leave school immediately after being married, the duties of married life and associated childbearing severely limit a girl's possibility to complete her education. On the other hand, parents may decide to marry their daughter because they have lost confidence in her academic chances. Poor learning outcomes, low economic relevance and perceived risks lead parents and/or girls to believe that marriage is a better alternative.



### Empowering girls through TUSEME clubs

In West and Central Africa, girls' participation and performance in the classroom are often undermined by norms confining women to a limited role in public life. The Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) implemented TUSEME Youth Empowerment Clubs in schools in all its interventions in West and Central Africa, in order to train students and especially girls to identify and understand negative attitudes and prejudices that affect them and take action to solve them. Through drama, song and creative arts, girls gain self-confidence, learn how to speak out and are equipped with negotiation, decision-making and leadership skills. TUSEME has served as a catalyst for meaningful transformation of gender relations among girls and boys and with female and male teachers. Girls' academic engagement has been improved as well as their involvement in school committees and leadership roles. Hawa, a school girl from Mali, said after joining TUSEME: "Today, I am a woman who knows what she wants and where she is heading."

<http://fawe.org/activities/interventions/index.php>

In Sub-Saharan Africa, child marriage is a strong determinant of girls' low education attainment. The literacy rate among women who married as children is 29%, as compared to 53.7% among women who married after 18 (Nguyen and Wodon 2014). In Chad, 28% of girls aged 15-24 who left school prematurely did so because they were married (Lloyd and Mensch 2006). The elimination of child marriage and early pregnancies in Nigeria could potentially reduce the gender gap in education by about half (Nguyen and Wodon 2012).

# BARRIERS TO GIRLS' EDUCATION

## Fighting child marriage through adult literacy classes

With 76% of girls being married before the age of 18, Niger has one of the highest child marriage rates in the world. Save the Children is working with parents to keep their daughters in school, instead of marrying them, through adult literacy classes. A series of basic reading, writing and maths classes, combined with sensitisation sessions, is helping parents to realise the importance of education and is changing attitudes towards harmful traditional practices. The vast majority of parents engaged in the programme let go of their initial plan of cutting off their daughters' education after primary school, and allowed them to go on to secondary school.

<https://niger.savethechildren.net>

## Early pregnancy

West and Central Africa has the highest adolescent birth rates in the world, at close to 200 births per 1,000 girls (UNICEF 2015a). 28% of women aged 20 to 24 had a live birth by their 18th birthday; with 51% Niger has the highest percentage worldwide (UNFPA 2013). Like child marriage, early pregnancy can be both a cause and consequence of school dropout. In many countries of the region, pregnant girls are forced to leave school and they are discouraged to return after delivery by authorities, parents, peers or teachers (Plan WARO 2012). On the other hand, pregnancy may occur because of premature school dropout, and thus lack of sexuality education and future opportunities.

In West and Central Africa, girls with no education are generally around two times more likely to give birth by the age of 18 than their counterparts with greater educational attainment (UNICEF 2015a). In general young girls and boys in the region seriously lack access to sexual and reproductive health information and services (UNESCO 2016b).

## Multi-sectoral government action

Thanks to the joint efforts of a coalition led by UNESCO, UNAIDS, UNFPA, UNICEF and the Regional Economic Communities, the Ministries of Education and the Ministries of Health from 21 countries in East and Southern Africa committed to collaborate in strengthening young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights. The countries decided, among other things, to fully integrate comprehensive sexuality education in national curricula, to train teachers and health and social workers on the issue, and to ensure larger provision of sexual and reproductive health services for adolescents and young people. The Commitment includes an accountability framework that binds the countries to deliver on specific targets. Mirroring this example, UNESCO, UNAIDS, UNFPA, UN Women, UNICEF and civil society partners launched a Call for Action in 2015, aiming to instigate a similar process in West and Central Africa.

[www.youngpeopletoday.net](http://www.youngpeopletoday.net)

## 2. FINANCIAL BARRIERS

When asked why their children aren't going to school, parents in West and Central Africa give the high cost of schooling as main explanation (UNICEF 2014). Even when tuition-free education is effective, the indirect costs (school materials, transportation, uniforms, food) and opportunity costs (the loss of a person's contribution to the household chores or income) related to schooling often discourage parents from enrolling their children.

In West and Central Africa, the annual cost to a family of enrolling a child in public primary education varies between USD 7 in Niger and USD 70 in Côte d'Ivoire, and for lower secondary school between USD 24 in Niger and USD 300 in Cameroon (Pôle de Dakar 2012). These educational expenditures can absorb up to almost 10% of

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households' income (Pôle de Dakar 2012). Parents in the region bear a very large proportion of education financing, nearly equivalent to half of public investment. In Sierra Leone and Cameroon, households even spend more than governments on education, disbursing respectively

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141% and 124% of public investment in the sector (Pôle de Dakar 2012). In a region which is one of the poorest worldwide this represents an insurmountable barrier for many families, especially for the poorest. Girls are the most affected, because unequal gender norms lead parents to favour boys' schooling over girls' and because of the higher opportunity cost for girls in some areas, given their role in taking up domestic tasks or bringing in dowry through marriage.

## Financial support for the most vulnerable girls in Sierra Leone

The rural districts of Kailahan, Kenema, Kono, Moyamba and Port Loko have some of the worse gender parity indices in junior secondary school enrolment in Sierra Leone (between 0.57 and 0.75). One of the main reasons keeping girls from transitioning into secondary school is lack of financial resources. In order to respond to this challenge, Plan International, together with IRC, FAWE, Open University and Handicap International, is paying school fees and providing essential school materials to the most vulnerable girls, especially those with disabilities. This financial and material support, together with other activities such as study groups and teacher training, increases access and retention for girls in school, and improves their learning outcomes. Rebecca, one of the beneficiaries, states: "The project has created a big difference in my life. I don't have to worry for school uniform, shoes, books, pens or fees. So now, study hard and pass my exams is the only thing I have to do."

degrading and corporal punishment, girls are unequally affected by psychological violence and by sexual violence, abuse and exploitation by classmates or school staff (UNICEF et al. 2010). In the Democratic Republic of Congo 46% of school girls confirmed being victims of sexual harassment, abuse and violence from their teachers or other school personnel (UNICEF et al. 2010). And for almost 68% of school girls in Mali, teachers have been the main perpetrators of sexual harassment (Save the Children et al. 2010). Girls with disabilities experience higher rates of gender based violence and face specific barriers in assessing, escaping and reporting it (Handicap International 2015b).

School-related gender based violence (SRGBV) has a serious impact on both girls' access to and retention in school, as well as their academic performance. SRGBV creates a stressful and intimidating learning environment for girls, leading to poor performance because of low self-esteem, reduced concentration, and anxiety.



## 3. SCHOOL-RELATED BARRIERS

### School-related Gender Based Violence

In West and Central Africa 67% of dropout among girls occurs because of violence (UNESCO 2007). Violence in, around or on the way to school is widespread in the region. When engendered, it exacerbates existing socio-cultural discrimination against girls and undermines their chances of having a quality education. Whereas boys suffer mainly from

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Moreover, parents withdraw their daughters from school, or decide not to enrol them at all, when they realize schools themselves and/or the journey to school aren't safe (UNICEF et al. 2010). In this perspective, distance to school is a determining factor in parents' decision to let their daughters go to school, hence the need to either reduce distance to school or support transportation.

## Gender biased teaching methods & didactic materials

Gender biased teaching methods and learning materials pose a serious obstacle to girls' learning. In West and Central Africa teachers tend to have lower expectations for girls, especially in sciences and math. This leads to poorer learning outcomes for girls. In francophone West and Central Africa, girls perform significantly less than boys in mathematics starting in the first years of primary school (PASEC 2014). These poor learning outcomes in turn fuel gender stereotypes and lead parents to question the relevance of educating their daughters. Female teachers can play a vital role in reversing this dynamic. In spite of the very low number of female teachers across the region - in Liberia only 13% of teachers are women (UNESCO 2017a) – having a female teacher is known to increase girls' learning performance without disadvantaging boys (Lee et al. 2017). Female teachers are references of success to both girls and parents.

### Addressing SRGBV in Liberia

In Liberia UNICEF, the Ministry of Education and local NGOs are promoting girls' access, retention and completion of education through the Gender Equitable Education Programme (GEEP). GEEP is a holistic programme, with a cross-sectoral strategy that incorporates protection against SRGBV in and around schools to reinforce girls' successes in a safer and more protective school environment. It entails, among other activities, a teachers' code of conduct and comprehensive sexual and gender based violence referral pathway system integrated into teacher training; girls' clubs, and life skills training, including Sexual Reproductive Health (SRH) and SRGBV referrals; and empowerment activities. Oretha, one of the Community Education Monitors of the programme, specifically highlights one of her major achievements as having successfully reintegrated an adolescent young mum of age 14, who had dropped out of school due to pregnancy and who was afraid to return to school because of stigmatisation and discrimination.

### Poor WASH facilities

A lack of menstrual hygiene education, sanitary pads, private changing areas and sanitary facilities can affect a girl's well-being, health, school attendance and learning achievements. Some studies estimate that 10% of school age girls in Africa don't attend school during their menstrual periods because of these issues (WHO and UNICEF 2013). This means a loss of 10 to 20% of the school year and finally a higher risk of drop out. The lack of appropriate WASH facilities is particularly high in West and Central Africa, where many schools don't have any toilets or access to safe water at all. In Congo, 85% of schools do not have toilets and only one out of 10 schools have single sex toilets (UNESCO 2017b). In Niger only 14% of primary schools have access to water (UNESCO 2016a). To remedy the lack of water, girls are often assigned to water fetching. The time spent on this chore, as well as the fatigue and lack of concentration that result from it impacts their academic results. In Ghana a 15 minute reduction in water collection time increased girls' school attendance by up to 12% (WHO and UNICEF 2017).

# BARRIERS TO GIRLS' EDUCATION

## Reusable sanitary pads in Mali

In Mali many school girls risk reduced concentration and/or participation in class because they don't have access to appropriate knowledge, support and facilities to manage their periods. Save the Children is providing school girls with locally produced, reusable sanitary pads that have been selected in collaboration with the girls. At the same time training sessions on menstrual hygiene management and puberty education are offered to both girls, boys, parents and school staff, and WASH facilities are enhanced. In each school one female teacher is chosen as menstrual hygiene management focal point, following up and accompanying adolescent girl students. The intervention has created an enabling environment for the girls, breaking the taboo and making them feel comfortable in class. Aisha, one of the beneficiaries, says, "With these sanitary pads I can now follow the courses peacefully without fearing that my clothes will be stained".

<https://mali.savethechildren.net>



## 4. CONFLICT AND CRISIS

The numerous crises and armed conflicts in West and Central Africa affect education both directly and indirectly, often with a specific impact on girls. Increased violence and insecurity prevents access to school, leads to dropout and decreased performance. In some armed conflicts schools are deliberately chosen as targets, affecting both teachers and students. Between 2009 and 2015, attacks in North-eastern Nigeria destroyed more than 910 schools and forced at least 1,500 schools to close (HRW 2016). Girls suffer particular consequences from conflict, such as sexual violence and abduction, which severely impact their chances to learn. Sometimes armed groups specifically target school girls, as evidenced by the abduction of 276 schoolgirls by Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria in 2014.

In DRC's South-Kivu province, 4,500 women and girls were sexually violated in the first half of 2007, causing girls to perform less well in school or to drop out (Amnesty International 2008). Apart from the direct consequences of conflict and crisis, existing barriers to girls' education are exacerbated. There is an increase in child marriage, often used as a coping strategy to face income shocks or to protect girls from atrocities. Similarly, conflict-related sexual violence against girls often results in early pregnancy, further reducing girls' chances of completing their education. Violence is often transferred to school, increasing the risk of SRGBV (UNICEF et al. 2010). And finally, conflict and crisis, through psychological and physical trauma, continue impacting girls' learning outcomes well after the crisis has ended (Ani and Osakwe 2014).



# RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to lift the barriers and to ensure that every last girl in West and Central Africa accesses and completes education in a safe and supportive environment, we recommend that all stakeholders involved – governments and ministries, donors, civil society, private sector, schools, teachers, communities and children – work together to:

## A. Provide girl friendly, safe and protective learning environments:

- Enhance safety by putting in place **preventive and protective measures** such as codes of conduct, protection committees and children's clubs; dedicated safe spaces for girls in schools; training and supporting school management committees; and ensuring effective sanctions, by supporting relevant actors (local governments, police, Ministry of Education) to establish and enforce effective legal and regulatory controls.

- Increase the number of **secondary schools** close to communities in order to reduce safety risks.

- Guarantee universal accessibility with safe and gender segregated latrines, access to hand-washing with soap and access to safe drinking water in every school (**WASH**); provide access to sanitary pads and menstrual hygiene information to girls and boys.

- Provide interventions to reinforce girls' success and **empowerment** both in and outside of school, through girls' clubs, girls' leadership initiatives, mentoring, peer tutoring and after school tutorials.

- Provide safe temporary learning spaces and accelerated education for girls and boys affected by **crisis**, and guarantee that no refugee or migrant child is out of school for more than 30 days.



## B. Increase community support for quality girls' education:

- Raise awareness on the importance of educating girls and transforming harmful practices, engaging mothers and fathers, boys and community and religious leaders.

- Develop scalable and sustainable initiatives to reach the **most vulnerable girls**, including girls with disabilities, young mothers, pregnant and early married adolescents, girls from the poorest households and girls on the move.

- End **child marriage**: set the legal age of marriage at 18; invest in awareness raising campaigns.

- Provide **scholarships** to disadvantaged girls and/or cash transfers to vulnerable families.

- Support the acquisition of **birth & school certificates**.

- Engage school committees and parent-teacher associations in **curriculum development** and review.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## C. Promote gender sensitive teaching & curricula:

- Include **gender and disability responsive pedagogy** so as to foster gender and disability sensitive learning environments through change of teachers' attitudes and class practices throughout the system (teachers' pre and in-service training, pedagogical advisors' and inspectors' training).

- Include gender sensitivity as a **criteria for teacher recruitment**.

- Develop and ensure use of gender and disability sensitive **curricula and learning materials** in order to promote gender equality and reduce gender and disability stereotypes.

- Include **Comprehensive Sexuality Education**, including puberty education, in curricula and train facilitators on how to deliver to boys and girls.

- Invest in the recruitment, development, motivation and retention of **female teachers**.

## D. Ensure policy & planning that allow for effective gender promotion:

- Conduct a gender review of **education sector plans, policies and strategies** and ensure any future sector development is gender and disability sensitive.

- Develop an **education financing** system that promotes gender equity; promote gender sensitive budgeting.

- **Coordinate** between education department and health, protection, nutrition and social security departments.

- Set up **gender sensitive planning, budgeting, monitoring training** for school and education administration staff.

- Put in place **monitoring and evaluation** systems that allow close follow-up of progress in gender equity in education, using adequate indicators and regular data collection, with disaggregated data for gender, disability and socio-economic status, through EMIS.



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