

Policy Brief:

Girl's Education: What Works?

Introduction

This policy brief provides recommendations for policy and practice interventions to close the gender gap in educational achievement in Rwanda. The recommendations are based on research carried out into girl's educational performance in 2007. Despite significant progress having been made in narrowing the gap between boys and girls performance in education boys continue to outperform girls in school examinations at all levels, boys are overrepresented in upper secondary schools and higher education and the proportion of girls taking science and engineering or technical vocational courses remains low.

It is now generally accepted that the gender gap in education is due to the differential experiences of boys and girls in the home, the school and the wider community and socially constructed expectations. There is no reason why girls' educational achievement should not equal that of boys.

Policy Context

Rwanda as part of its broader commitment to gender equity has put in place policies and strategies to reduce the gender gap in educational achievement. At the international level Rwanda has ratified the *Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women*, the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, the *Millennium Development Goals* and *Education for All* as well as the gender guidelines of the African Union. At the national level, Rwanda has established a series of key policies and programs that focus on the promotion of girls' and women's education. These include the *Rwandan Constitution*, which enshrines gender equity as a fundamental right, *Vision 2020*, the *Economic Development Poverty Reduction Strategy 2008-2015*, and the 2008 *Girls' Education Policy* (GEP). The GEP states as its *overall objective* as "to guide and promote sustainable action aimed at the progressive elimination of gender disparities in education and training as well as in management structures." Three key areas of emphasis within the policy include access, quality/achievement and retention/ completion at all levels of education.

Methodology

The recommendations below for reducing the gender gap in educational achievement are based on an analysis of relevant literature, a review of policy and other documents and findings from research undertaken by the author. The research undertaken included:

- An analysis of data from the National Examinations Council ;
- A secondary analysis of the Enquête Intégrale sur les Conditions de Vie des ménages (EICV2) surveys carried out in 2005/06 ;
- Focus groups conducted with parents, pupils and teachers from the best and worst performing schools and best and worst performing districts in terms of gender gap in the primary, O' level and A' level; national examinations
- Classroom observations.

Key Findings

The research concludes with the main issues that are keeping girls from performing in school and recommendations on improving girls' performance and encouraging more to take mathematics, science and technology at all levels. It further demonstrates that girls from poor homes are especially disadvantaged.

1. *Situational Analysis*

- The main finding is that despite significant progress a gender gap in educational achievement remains and that the gender gap is greatest for girls from poor homes with the most disadvantaged girls being those from poor homes and large families going to schools located in poor districts.
- Differences in the progression and dropout rates for both girls and boys are not significant at primary level. In 2008 the National Net Enrolment Rate at primary level stood at 94.2 percent (boys at 93.3% and girls at 95.1%) attributable at least in part to the introduction of free primary education

- Girls performance in the primary school leaving examination is, on average , significantly poorer than that of boys;
- At Secondary level girls make up 48 percent of pupils; but their poorer performance may be partly due to their being more likely to be in poor quality schools than boys, a consequence of their poorer performance than boys in the primary school leaving examination;
- At tertiary level only about 30 percent of girls achieve the grades to win government places in higher education institutions and the proportion of girls taking science and engineering programmes in higher educating is less than 15 percent
- At primary level, the gender gap is higher in poorer districts than more affluent ones and is significantly smaller in private schools compared to government funded ones. This is especially the case in private schools located in more affluent districts The gender gap is greatest for girls from large families and poor homes. Girls from poor homes and especially those from large poor families are the ones who do least well in the education system. They perform less well not only compared to girls from more affluent backgrounds but also to boys from similar backgrounds.
- The gender gap is grater for science, mathematics and technology than for the humanities and social sciences. Girls are underrepresented in those taking courses in technical schools, A' level science combinations and on mathematics, science, computing, medical and engineering degree programmes.

2. Explanations

- The opportunity costs of schooling are higher for girls than for boys because of their multiple roles as household workers, caregivers for the ill and assistants to mothers. Consequently resulting in frequent absenteeism from school, drop out and late enrolment.

- The change from all day hours to half day hours in primary schools has impacted on girls more as they now have less time to focus on their studies. Once they get home they are drawn into household duties
- Traditional attitudes towards future occupational and social roles i.e. girls are seen as future wives and mothers and this affects the value given to educating them “*umukobwa ni umwana w’abandi*” translated as “*the girl child belongs elsewhere*” . “*Opportunities are therefore given to boys who will stay in the family and be useful*”.
- Cultural attitudes towards gender interaction which make it difficult for girls and male teachers to interact in the classroom. This is especially a problem in secondary schools where the majority of the teachers are male;
- Socialisation patterns that assume girls are shy and should be submissive while boys are aggressive, hardworking, adventurous and out-going. This leads to girls’ disadvantage when they have to learn and share learning facilities and equipment with boys. Girls tend not to ask questions in class or answer questions and where they express themselves they may be subjected to mockery. The literature suggests that teachers favour boys in the classroom and are less likely to ask girls questions or ask them to contribute.
- An assumption that girls are less able than boys and an expectation that they will do less well in school than boys and especially that they will do less well in mathematics and science;
- An assumption that mathematics and science are difficult subjects and this is why boys’ are good at them with no corresponding questioning of why girls’ are better at social sciences and humanities than boys.
- Girls generally lack confidence in their abilities, they view boys as more able than they are especially at science and mathematics and are unwilling to put themselves forward in class.

- Poor school facilities especially sanitation has a greater negative impact on girls' attendance than poor and may, in part, account for the higher drop rate of girls from secondary schools as well as older girls from primary schools.
- The literature review supports the key findings outlined above. It also suggests that one additional factor that deters girls from attending school/causes parents to withdraw their daughters is sexual harassment by male teachers and male pupils.
- The literature makes a number of references to things that work in terms of retaining girls in school, improving their performance and encouraging more to take science and mathematics. These have been taken into account in making the recommendations below.

Policy Recommendations

- Creating incentives for households to send girls to school e.g. by providing a curriculum relevant to their future roles, ensuring a safer school environment and adequate sanitation facilities and hours that enable daughters to carry out their home duties;
- Strengthening school-parent relations, to convince parents of the importance and relevance of education for girls;
- Providing in-service training for teachers on the problems girls face and gender fair classroom management and to overcome their gendered expectations of pupils abilities;
- Provide Female Teachers for Girls as role models and counsellors;
- Streaming by gender and where possible providing single sex schools especially at the secondary school level. The literature review provided overwhelming evidence that girls performance is significantly improved if they are taught in girl only classes or schools;

- Provision of boarding facilities especially for girls at secondary level to increase retention completion, improve performance, and enhance security should be considered. However, this may be unpopular with parents and may disadvantage girls from poorer homes unless scholarships are provided;
- Counselling for girls to increase their confidence ;
- Positive discrimination doesn't work as girls will go on to fail. However, remedial programmes and counselling at all stages of education to enable girls to overcome previous educational disadvantage and achieve their potential, especially in mathematics and sciences;
- School curriculum and text books to be subject to a gender impact assessment ;
- Provision of opportunities for girls and women to return to education including re-entry for girls who withdraw because of pregnancy.