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Advancing Girls' Education in Africa:
Addressing Gender-Related Barriers

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Introduction

Sub-Saharan Africa faces a significant education crisis. A staggering two out of five children in the region lack access to schooling, making it one of the regions globally where the number of out-of-school children is rising.¹ Furthermore, girls are disproportionately affected. The female out-of-school rate is a concerning 4.2 percentage points higher than the male rate across sub-Saharan Africa.² This disparity is even more pronounced in some countries, including Guinea and Togo.³ Despite its global recognition as a fundamental human right in international and regional human rights treaties, access to quality education remains elusive for many children in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly girls and young women.⁴

In recognising education as a driver for sustainable development, the African Union (AU) has designated 2024 as the Year of Education, issuing a call to action for accelerated progress towards achieving goal 4 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).⁵ This initiative aligns with the broader vision of 'Education for All' outlined in [Agenda 2063](#)⁶ and the [Continental Strategy for Education in Africa](#).⁷

According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) data, several African countries, including Kenya has achieved an impressive milestone in education: more girls are enrolled in primary school than boys.⁸ However, the global picture remains concerning. An estimated 129 million girls worldwide are out of school, with the most affected age group (32 million) being children below the age of 18. This highlights the significant gender disparity regarding access to education for girls, particularly in conflict zones, where they are more than twice as likely to be out of school compared to girls in peaceful regions.

This research brief aims to identify and discuss specific challenges that hinder girls' access to education in Africa and provide recommendations to be considered by relevant organs of the African Union (AU).

International and regional normative standards on the right to education for girls

The right to education for girls is firmly established in international and regional legal frameworks. The Universal

¹ Global Education Monitoring Report Team and UNESCO Institute of Statistics "[New estimation confirms out-of-school population is growing in sub-Saharan Africa](#)" (2022).

² As above.

³ See UNESCO '[Global education monitoring report 2020: gender report, A new generation: 25 years of efforts for gender equality in education](#)' (2020).

⁴ See UNESCO Institute of Statistics Global Monitoring Report Team '[Meeting commitments: are countries on track to achieve SDG 4?](#)' (2019).

⁵ General Assembly Resolution '[Transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for sustainable development](#)', A/RES/70/1.2015.

⁶ African Union '[Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want](#)' (2015).

⁷ African Union '[Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016-2025](#)' (2016).

⁸ UNFPA '[World Population Dashboard Kenya](#)' (2022).

Declaration of Human Rights (1948) laid the groundwork by recognising education as a fundamental right for all.

The 1960 Convention against Discrimination in Education (CADE), as the first international human rights treaty on education, serves as a cornerstone, explicitly prohibiting discrimination in education based on sex.⁹ The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW),¹⁰ particularly Article 10, and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC),¹¹ specifically Articles 28 and 29 focus on education.

Additionally, the Beijing Platform for Action provided a blueprint for achieving this goal by outlining detailed educational objectives.¹² The Education 2030 Agenda is a global framework for improving education. It includes SDG4 on education, the Incheon Declaration, and the Framework for Action. The Incheon Declaration is a shared commitment by countries and education stakeholders to achieve SDG4.¹³ The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR Committee) also emphasises the elimination of discrimination against women and girls in education through its General Comment 20.¹⁴

At the regional level, [article 17\(1\)](#) of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (African Charter) enshrines the right to education for all individuals.¹⁵ The [African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child](#) (African Children's Charter) also expands on this right, particularly concerning girls' access and inclusion.¹⁶ It guarantees their right to education, even after childbirth, and promotes education for disadvantaged and female children. Specifically, [article 11\(6\)](#) guarantees the right of girls who fall pregnant in school to return and continue with their education when they are ready.

This principle is further emphasised in the Protocol to the [African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa \(Maputo Protocol\)](#), which specifically highlights gender equality in education for women and girls.¹⁷

This confluence of international and regional efforts demonstrates a strong commitment to ensuring girls' access to

⁹ UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) '[Convention Against Discrimination in Education](#)', 1960.

¹⁰ UN General Assembly '[Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women](#)', 1979.

¹¹ UN General Assembly '[Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)', 1989.

¹² United Nations Specialised Conferences '[Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women](#)' (1995).

¹³ UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) '[UNESCO 'Education 2030'](#)'. See also '[Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action Towards inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all](#)'.

¹⁴ UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights '[General comment No. 20: Non-discrimination in economic, social and cultural rights \(art. 2, para. 2, of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights\)](#)', E/C.12/GC/20, 2 July 2009.

¹⁵ [African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights](#).

¹⁶ [African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child](#).

¹⁷ [Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women in Africa](#).

education in Africa.

Barriers to gender equitable access to education

Despite significant efforts globally to ensure equal access to education, girls and young women face difficulties accessing quality education, especially in African countries. Some of these challenges include high rates of poverty and economic disparities, cultural norms, and discriminatory attitudes, including female genital mutilation and child marriages. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, in its General Recommendation 36 on the right of girls and women to education, have noted that girls' access to education is 'exacerbated by poverty and economic crises, gender stereotyping in curricula, textbooks and teaching processes, violence against girls and women in and out of school and structural and ideological restrictions to their engagement in male-dominated academic and vocational fields'.¹⁸

All these challenges contribute to the inability of girls and young women accessing education equally compared to their male counterparts.

Socio-cultural norms and practices

Many parts of Africa are still influenced by deeply entrenched patriarchal social structures and cultural practices that discriminate against girls and women. Early and forced marriages, female genital mutilation, and the perception that educating girls is less important than educating boys continue to limit girls' access to education.¹⁹ These socio-cultural norms often lead to girls being withdrawn from school, particularly in rural and marginalized communities.

The girl child is often relegated to a subordinate position in society, facing systemic disadvantages in economic, social, and political spheres, which significantly impacts their educational opportunities. For instance, Nigeria exemplifies the complex interplay between social and religious beliefs and educational access for girls.²⁰ A 2017 UNICEF Report highlights these factors as significant contributors to regional educational inequalities within the country.²¹ The gender gap widens significantly after primary school, impacting enrolment, retention, and adult literacy rates.

Poverty and Economic Barriers

Poverty poses a significant challenge to girls' education in Africa. It remains a significant driver of education

¹⁸ [OHCHR \(2017\) CEDAW/C/GC/36](#) para 4.

¹⁹ United Nations Economic Commission for Africa ['2019 Africa Sustainable Development Report,' 2019.](#)

²⁰ See for example, F. A., Azeez et al ['Exclusion of the female child from primary education: exploring the perceptions and experiences of female learners in northern Nigeria' \(2024\) 3\(13\) Education 1–20.](#)

²¹ UNICEF ['Annual Results Report 2017: Education' \(2018\).](#)



inequalities, particularly for girls.²² Many families in Africa cannot afford the direct and indirect costs associated with schooling, such as tuition and fees, school supplies, transportation, and the opportunity cost of girls' labour at home or in income-generating activities. This disproportionately affects girls who are more likely to be pulled out of school to support their families. The associated costs of education, from uniforms and books to transportation fees, can be a heavy burden for many families. This financial strain can force them to prioritize educating some children over others, and in some parts of Africa, traditional gender roles may lead families to invest in boys' education than girls. This combination of economic hardship and cultural bias creates a double disadvantage for girls, hindering their access to educational opportunities.

School related gender-based violence

School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV) is a pervasive issue affecting students, rooted in unequal power dynamics and harmful gender stereotypes.²³ It encompasses acts or threats of physical, sexual, or psychological harm that occur within and around schools. Students exposed to school violence often face challenges including lower academic achievement, decreased school attendance, and higher dropout rates.²⁴

The safety and security of girls in and around schools is a major concern in many African countries.²⁵ For example, research studies on Senegal indicate that nearly 12% of Senegalese adolescents report experiencing sexual harassment from teachers, while almost 20% report harassment from classmates.²⁶ A recent study covering Southern and Eastern African Countries found that sexual harassment perpetrated by teachers in primary schools significantly increases learners' absenteeism.²⁷ Similar conclusions were also drawn in a study focused on secondary schools in Nigeria²⁸ and in Sudan.²⁹

Incidents of gender-based violence, sexual harassment, and attacks on schools can deter parents from sending their daughters to school, particularly in conflict-affected or insecure areas. Poor infrastructure, such as the lack of separate and safe sanitation facilities for girls, also contributes to this problem.

Harmful practices

There is a significant negative link between harmful practices such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), early marriage, and teenage pregnancy, with girls' access to quality education.³⁰ Globally, over 200 million girls and women have been subjected to FGM, and 70 million girls aged 0–14 years face the risk of undergoing the same trauma

²² African Union, "[Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want](#)", 2015.

²³ UNESCO and UN Women '[Global guidance on addressing school-related gender-based violence](#)' (2016). See also E Durojaye, S Nabaneh and T Adebajo 'Sexual harassment, human rights and feminism' in E Durojaye, S Nabaneh and T Adebajo (eds) *Sexual Harassment, Law and Human Rights in Africa* (2023).

²⁴ World Bank [Safe to Learn, and End Violence Against Children 'Ending violence in schools: An investment case'](#) (2021).

²⁵ African Union '[Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016-2025](#)' (2016).

²⁶ G Smarrelli et al. 'Violence in Schools: Prevalence, impact, and interventions' CGD Brief (2024).

²⁷ S Lee and R Rudolf 'The relationship between school related Gender-Based Violence and absenteeism: Evidence from 14 Southern and Eastern African Countries' (2022) 42(4) *South African Journal of Education*.

²⁸ A Onoyase 'School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) and its consequences on secondary school students: Implications for counselling' (2019) 8(2) *Journal of Education and Training Studies* 29-37.

²⁹ A.Y. Badri 'School-gender-based violence in Africa: Prevalence and consequences' (2014) 2(2) *Global Journal of Arts Humanities and Social Sciences* 1-20.

³⁰ J Karumbi 'Exploring the association between FGM/C and early/child marriage: A review of the evidence,' (2017) *Evidence to End FGMC Programme Consortium Report*.



annually.³¹ FGM can decrease girls' school performance and increase their absenteeism and drop-out rates.³² It can also result in adolescent pregnancy. For example, UNICEF data reveals a concerning rise in girls dropping out of secondary education in Malawi. The dropout rate jumped from 6.4% in 2020 to 9.5% in 2021.³³ This increase is linked to several factors, including high rates of child marriage (50%) and early pregnancy (29%). These issues create significant challenges for girls' education in Malawi.

Limited access to sexual and reproductive health information and services further compounds these problems. Research by UNESCO has shown a strong correlation between comprehensive sex education programs in schools and lower rates of teenage pregnancy.³⁴ These programs are also seen as beneficial for promoting gender equality and public health. In a landmark case, the Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States ruled that Sierra Leone should integrate CSE into its national curriculum.³⁵

Despite the potential benefits, comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is not yet a nationwide priority in majority of countries in Africa and is not consistently included in the school curriculum.³⁶ This lack of access to crucial information likely contributes to the high rates of child marriage, early pregnancy, and sexual abuse that are forcing girls out of education.

Menstrual health management (MHM)

A lack of safe and hygienic sanitation facilities (including water) presents significant challenges for girls, including impacting their ability to attend school during menstruation. Evidence shows that girls in Africa miss school during menstruation cycles.³⁷ UNICEF data indicates that adolescent girls and young women in certain African countries are disproportionately affected by menstrual-related school absences. For example, within the past year, 15% of girls in Burkina Faso, 20% in Ivory Coast, and 23% in Nigeria missed school due to their periods.³⁸ A study conducted in Uganda revealed that a staggering 90.5% of girls failed to meet the criteria for accessing adequate menstrual hygiene management resources.³⁹ In South Sudan, 57% of surveyed adolescent girls reported staying home during menstruation because of the lack of private changing rooms in school.⁴⁰

Generally, the provision of menstrual products and policies to guide those is quite limited.⁴¹ This complex interplay of

³¹ UNICEF '[Female genital mutilation/cutting: A global concern](#)' (2016).

³² See E. Shatha & J Metzler 'A scoping review of FGM in humanitarian settings: an overlooked phenomenon with lifelong consequences' (2022) 16(1) Conflict and health 1-12.

³³ UNICEF '[School-Age Children: Quality learning and protection](#)' (n.d).

³⁴ UNESCO 'Emerging evidence, lessons and practice in comprehensive sexuality education. A global review' (2015).

³⁵ [WAVES v. Sierra Leone ECW/CCJ/JUD/37/19](#). The 2019 judgment concerned a policy excluding pregnant girls from mainstream schools that the court found to be in breach of the Maputo Protocol of the African Charter of Human and Peoples rights.

³⁶ M Hakansson et al 'Unmet Needs for Comprehensive Sexuality Education: A Qualitative Study Among Secondary School Students in Western Kenya' (2023).

³⁷ UNESCO '[Puberty education & menstrual hygiene management](#)' (2014).

³⁸ UNICEF '[Factsheet: Menstrual health and hygiene management still out of reach for many](#)' (2022).

³⁹ J Hennegan et al 'Measuring the prevalence and impact of poor menstrual hygiene management: A quantitative survey of schoolgirls in rural Uganda' (2016) BMJ Open.

⁴⁰ S Tamiru et al 'Towards a sustainable solution for school menstrual hygiene management: cases of Ethiopia, Uganda, South-Sudan, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe' (2015) 34(1) Waterlines 92-102.

⁴¹ S Psaki et al. 'Policies and Interventions to Remove Gender-related Barriers to Girls' School Participation and Learning in Low- and Middle-income Countries: A Systematic Review of the Evidence' (2022) 18(1) Campbell Systematic Reviews 1-78. See also, UNICEF 'Guidance on menstrual health and hygiene' (2019).

factors significantly hinders girls' educational attainment and overall well-being.

Lack of inclusive policy and legal frameworks

Laws are crucial for building a framework of for equitable systemic change.⁴² While Article 12 of the Maputo Protocol does not explicitly require States to enact specific legislation, legislation remains a critical tool for fulfilling their obligations. It is a core function of a state to translate international and regional human rights commitments into concrete actions.

The first step often involves enshrining equality and prohibiting discrimination within the national legal framework. This typically happens through a robust constitution with a broad non-discrimination clause (as outlined in Article 2 of the Protocol). Stronger constitutions explicitly address the rights of specific marginalized groups, such as children.

While many African countries have generally made progress in developing policies and strategies to promote girls' education, the implementation and enforcement of these measures often remains a challenge.⁴³ A significant gap exists between policy aspiration and implementation due to insufficient budgetary allocations for many laws and policies. **Most African countries fall short of the 20% education budget target set by the SDG framework. UNICEF data shows only nine countries meet this benchmark, while 24 allocate less than 15% and six less than 10%.**⁴⁴ This resource constraint undermines the effectiveness of these initiatives and hinders progress towards their intended objectives.

Punitive pregnancy policies

Thirty-eight African countries have implemented laws or policies aimed at protecting the education of adolescent girls during and after pregnancy.⁴⁵ Some countries have also enacted harmful policies that perpetuate systemic barriers to girls' education and undermining their sexual and reproductive health and rights. For instance, in 2018, Human Rights Watch identified four countries (Equatorial Guinea, Sierra Leone, Tanzania and Togo) with discriminatory bans on pregnant students. By 2022, three of these countries had revoked these restrictions, with Sierra Leone adopting a comprehensive 'Radical Inclusion' policy.⁴⁶

Given Tanzania having one of the most explicitly discriminatory set of policies,⁴⁷ in 2022, the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) condemned Tanzania for severe human rights and gender-based violations against schoolgirls.⁴⁸ These included coercive pregnancy testing, expulsion of pregnant students, their unlawful detention, a blanket ban on post-childbirth education, and inadequate access to sexual and reproductive health services and information. Consequently, the Tanzanian government reversed its previous policy on

⁴² UNESCO, 2017.

⁴³ [African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child "General Comment No. 5 on 'State Party obligations under the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child \(Article 1\) and systems strengthening for child protection' 2018".](#)

⁴⁴ UNICEF 'Ahead of the Day of the African Child, UNICEF says African governments still not spending what they need to secure quality education for the continent's children' (14 June 2024).

⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch 'Across Africa, many young mothers Face Education Barriers' (2022).

⁴⁶ As above.

⁴⁷ Center for Reproductive Rights 'Forced out: mandatory pregnancy testing and the expulsion of pregnant students in Tanzanian schools' (2013).

⁴⁸ [Legal and Human Rights Centre and Centre for Reproductive Rights \(on behalf of Tanzanian girls\) v United Republic of Tanzania \(Communication No. 0012/Com/001/2019; Decision No. 002/2022\) \[2022\] ACERWC 2 \(1 April 2022\).](#)

pregnant girls in schools.⁴⁹

While progress has been made, challenges persist. For instance, 10 countries in North Africa and the Horn of Africa, including Libya, Mauritania, and Morocco, lack such protections, often due to laws criminalizing sexual activity outside marriage, which indirectly penalize pregnant girls.

Adolescent pregnancy remains a primary driver of school dropout in both primary and secondary levels. Zanzibar's adolescent pregnancy rate has climbed from 6% in 2010 to 8% in 2015/16, according to the TDHS-MIS, highlighting a growing challenge.⁵⁰ In certain cases, policy frameworks inadvertently create a system that systematically marginalizes pregnant girls by omitting specific protections for their right to continue education. These challenges may be further exacerbated by crises such as climate change, conflict, and pandemics like COVID-19.

Addressing the barriers

In addressing the barriers to access to quality education for girls, it is vital to tackle discriminatory gender norms and harmful practices that deny girls access to school and quality learning. More specifically, the following recommendations should be considered:

To The AU Assembly

The Assembly of the African Union, as the supreme organ of the AU should provide stronger political leadership and commitment towards addressing the barriers to girls' access to education. This can be achieved through the following measures:

- Adopt a continent-wide strategy and action plan on girls' education, with clear targets, timelines, and accountability mechanisms. While the AU has a broader education policy, a dedicated strategy is essential to address the unique challenges faced by girls, including menstrual health management and addressing school related gender-based violence.
- Ensure that the issue of girls' education is a standing agenda item at the biannual Ordinary Sessions of the Assembly, with progress reports and discussions on the implementation of the strategy.
- Encourage member states to significantly increase financial and human resource allocations to meet the 20% annual benchmark on spending on education by 2025.

To The African Union Commission (AUC)

The African Union Commission, as the executive and administrative arm of the Union, should play a central role in coordinating and supporting the implementation of initiatives to address the barriers to girls' access to education. More specifically, the AUC Directorate of Education, Science, Technology, and Innovation through its technical and specialised office, the International Center for Girls and Women's Education in Africa (AU/CIEFFA) should:

- Offer robust technical and financial assistance to member states to conduct an evaluation of national gender-responsive policies and programmes to advance girls' education in line with

⁴⁹ [Girls Not Brides. High Court judgment in Tanzania rules age of marriage laws discriminatory and unconstitutional. Rebecca Z. Gyumi vs Attorney General \(Misc. Civil Cause 5 of 2016\) \[2016\] TZHC 2023 \(3 March 2016\).](#)

⁵⁰ Tanzania 2015-16 Demographic and Health Survey and Malaria Indicator Survey Key Finding.

international and regional standards.

- Facilitate the exchange of best practices and lessons learned among member states on successful interventions to improve girls' access to education.
- Collaborate with relevant regional economic communities (RECs) and other stakeholders to mobilize resources and coordinate efforts to address the barriers to girls' education.
- Encourage all its member states to respect and protect the sexual and reproductive health and rights of adolescents.

To The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) and African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Children (ACERWC)

The ACHPR, as the premier human rights body of the AU, and the ACERWC should play a key role in monitoring and advocating for the protection of girls' right to education. Both human rights bodies should:

- Conduct regular country visits and issue concluding observations on the state of girls' education in member States, with a focus on identifying and addressing human rights violations that impede girls' access to education.
- Develop a General Comment on the right to education for the girl child, including addressing school related gender-based violence and menstrual health management.
- Foster the collection and analysis of gender-disaggregated education data to identify and address the multiple barriers faced by girls and women through the state reporting procedures.
- Collaborate to monitor the implementation of both the [Maputo Protocol](#) and the [African Children's Charter](#), which includes provisions on the right to education.

To African Union Members

In line with their international and regional human rights obligations, African states should ensure that:

- Ratify and implement both the [Maputo Protocol](#) and the [African Children's Charter](#).
- Enact legislation that prohibits the expulsion of girls from schools due to pregnancy.
- Prohibition of child marriage in their laws.
- Develop strategies on the promotion of girls' education and effective implementation.
- Prioritize gender-responsive budgeting and costing of national education plans and policies.
- Tackle challenges such as geographic barriers to education, reintegration pathways for young mothers, and menstrual health support in schools.

Conclusion

Addressing the barriers to girls' access to education in Africa through practical and holistic interventions is essential. Gender equitable education systems are vital to achieving the continent's sustainable development and the realisation of [Agenda 2063](#). The African Union, its various organs and states must take decisive action to prioritize and coordinate efforts to promote girls' education, through the adoption of targeted strategies, the provision of technical

and financial support to member states, and the strengthening of monitoring and accountability mechanisms. By doing so, the African girls and women will be empowered, contributing towards the building of a more just, equitable, and prosperous continent.

END



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