Schools Connect

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Barriers to girls' education

A synthesis of British Council research in Africa

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Foreword

The British Council is delighted to publish this report, which is based on recently commissioned research and evaluation undertaken in Ethiopia, Sudan, Nigeria, Tanzania and Kenya. We hope it will help policy makers to identify some of the barriers that remain to girls accessing an equitable, inclusive and quality education.

The British Council supports peace and prosperity by building connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and countries worldwide. International collaboration on the major education challenges of our time is central to this mission.

One of those challenges is gender equality and the empowerment of girls in and through education so we contribute to the global movement to support girls' education. We align with and support the UN Sustainable Development Goal target 4.5: 'Eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous people and children in vulnerable situations.'

Current initiatives include our global programme, Schools Connect, which prioritises three thematic areas: Inclusive Schools, Skills for Schools and Climate Change and Sustainability Education'. Our work in girls' education is a crucial part of supporting Inclusive Schools. The research on which this report is based was completed as part of Schools Connect, with the aim of supporting policy, planning and development in each country and improving girls' education and learning outcomes.

By synthesising the research findings from Ethiopia, Sudan, Nigeria, Tanzania and Kenya, this report highlights the barriers and constraints that remain to achieving gender transformative education in low-income contexts, drawing together similarities and opportunities for improving the ecosystems that surround girls' education. We hope that it will contribute to the discourse on this complex area of inclusion.

As policy makers, school leaders, academics and contributors to communities of learning, we invite you to engage with the research, analysis, insight and recommendations in this report. We will be using it to inform the British Council policy for girls' education and hope you find it equally helpful in striving towards our shared mission to achieve an equitable, inclusive, quality education for all.
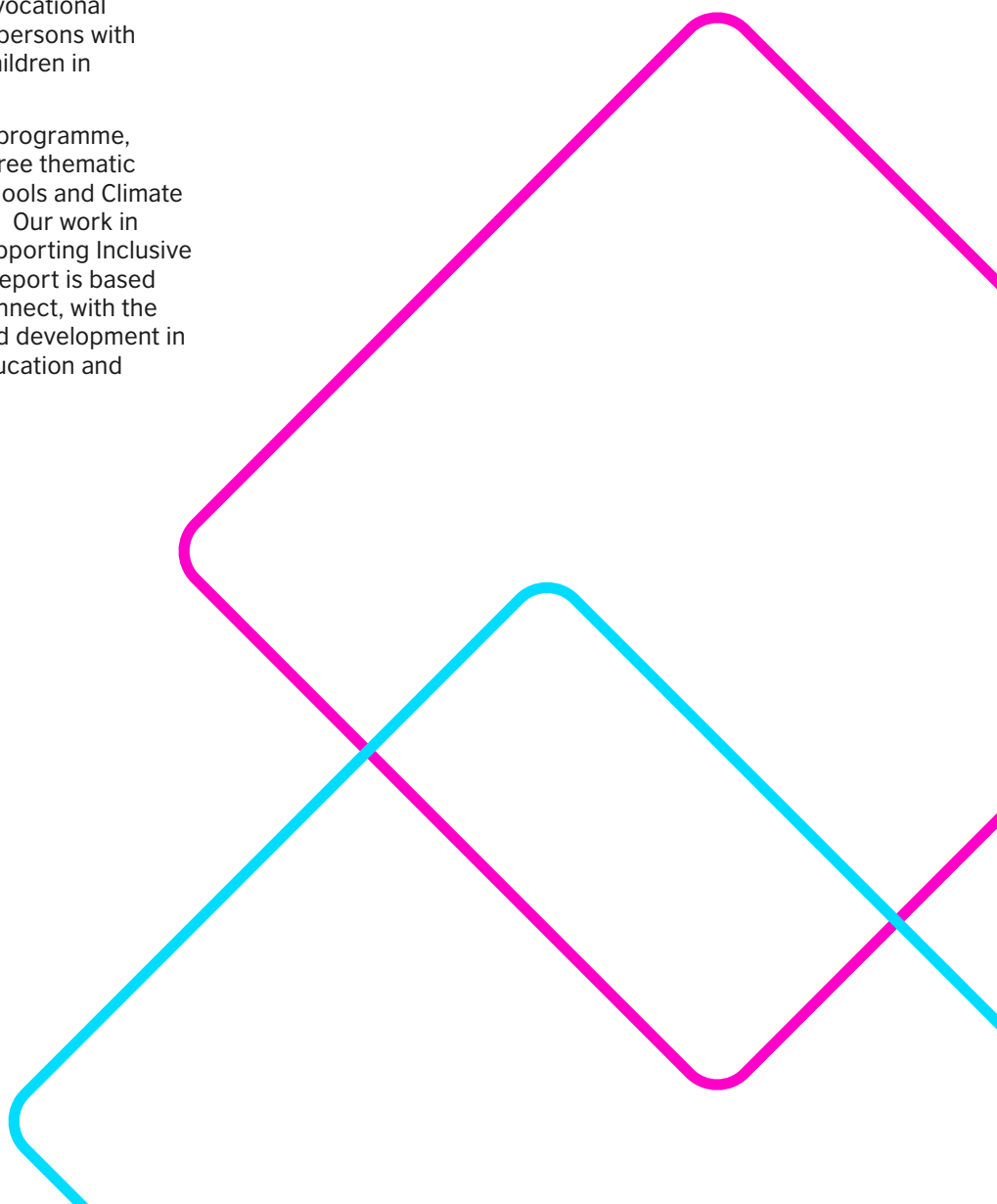
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Executive summary

This British Council report synthesises research in Africa and existing literature to provide an overview of the main constraints girls face in accessing inclusive, equitable, quality education and how these can be addressed. Despite significant progress in improving girls' access to education, challenges remain around the quality of the education they receive once they secure access (Unterhalter et al., 2014; Sperling and Winthrop, 2016; UNESCO 2020a; Psaki et al., 2021; Psaki et al., 2022).

Addressing constraints on girls' education remains a priority for governments and development actors globally. However, to do this, they need an understanding of the intrinsic, pedagogic, systemic and societal barriers that girls face in accessing equitable, inclusive, quality education (British Council, 2017).

Education systems:

- foster equity when they intentionally create equal opportunities and provide equitable resources for all pupils, regardless of their personal characteristics or background
- move beyond equity and towards inclusion when they recognise and address the diverse experiences and needs of different types of pupils and foster their wellbeing (OECD, 2023)
- provide quality when they are equitable, inclusive and attuned to the attitudes, norms and power dynamics that influence girls' education.

The report aims to provide information to help governments and development actors address constraints on girls' education. It outlines the key barriers to equitable, inclusive, quality education in four key areas that influence children's development and learning: the classroom; the school environment; households and communities; and the policy and legal environment.

The findings in this report have been informed by the British Council's work in Africa, including research conducted with teachers and school leaders in Ethiopia, Sudan, Nigeria and Tanzania, and a stakeholders' report from Kenya. The report also draws on existing literature around girls' education.

Key findings

1. Inclusive classrooms

Inclusive classrooms provide positive intellectual, social, emotional and physical spaces for children to learn (Ambrose et al., 2010). They are characterised by supportive pedagogy and classroom management, with teachers avoiding gender stereotyping in their actions and stereotypes removed from the curriculum and learning materials. Evidence from the research in Africa suggests that teachers have mixed views about the creation of inclusive classrooms. Most wanted to have an inclusive classroom and sought to create an inclusive atmosphere; however, some were unable to do so because their own attitudes and beliefs unconsciously reinforced gender stereotypes or because they lacked resources to enable different teaching and assessment practices.

2. Inclusive schools

Inclusive schools promote gender parity in enrolment and achievement, eliminate gender stereotypes, and provide girl-friendly facilities, curricula and processes (Sperling and Winthrop, 2016). This includes specific practices such as providing girl-friendly spaces, adequate hygiene and sanitation, support for menstrual hygiene management, sex and life skills education, adequate childcare arrangements for teenage mothers, and initiatives to address school affordability. The research evidence suggests that teachers and school leaders value the provision of environments like these, but often this does not translate into practice. Generally, teachers and school leaders were unaware of government sexual and gender-based violence guidelines, and there was little training in gender mainstreaming. Budget was limited for provision such as girls' sport and toilet facilities, while school documents rarely contained explicit gender equality statements. Teachers, school leaders and pupils all knew about school-related gender-based violence, but there were limited mechanisms, such as safeguarding/child protection, in place to address it.
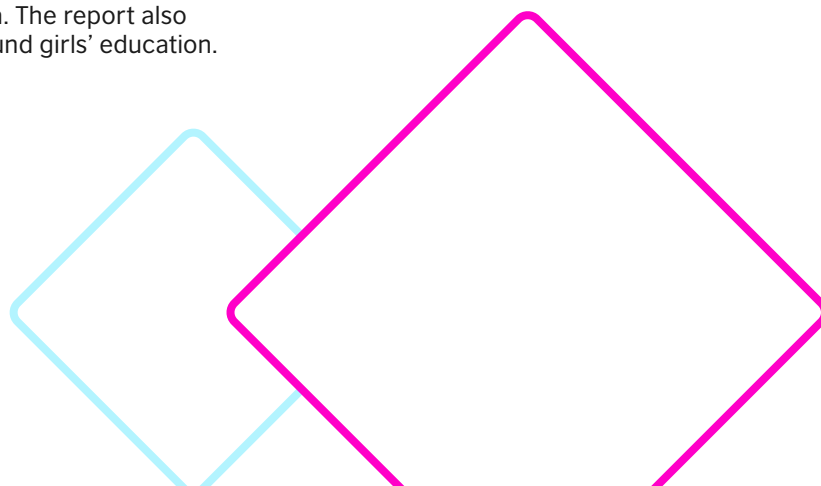
3. Inclusive households and communities

Inclusive households and communities hold supportive attitudes and cultural practices around girls' education and make educational decisions that advantage girls. The research evidence reveals that girls' schooling is constrained by a combination of intersectional challenges relating to poverty and cultural perspectives and practices, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. High poverty levels meant a lack of money for school fees, uniforms, school supplies and, in extreme cases, hunger and famine. Sometimes, girls supplemented family incomes through hawking and petty businesses. Specific to rural and semi-urban areas were parental neglect, child marriages, and cultural perceptions that girls' education is of less value than that of boys. These challenges resulted in absenteeism and lower completion rates for girls.

4. Inclusive policy and legal frameworks

Legislation underpins frameworks for inclusive systems (UNESCO, 2017), while policies attempt to guide what happens in classrooms, schools, households and communities. The research evidence highlights the existence of legislation and policy demonstrating the importance of supporting girls' education in the classroom (e.g. in relation to gender discrimination), the school environment (e.g. physical safety), and households and communities (e.g. culture, safety). However, the findings suggest that although considered important, the creation of inclusive schools and girl-friendly spaces is hampered by a lack of knowledge, resources and, in some cases, policies.

Recommendations

In light of the above findings, the report makes the following recommendations.

1. Clarify understanding

Evidence of mixed perceptions of inclusive practices suggests limited understanding among educators of terminology used in relation to girls' education and inclusion, which in turn highlights limited training around gender and education. There is a need for greater clarity in the way gender and education are discussed in policy documents, guidelines, and documents by international development actors. Relevant classroom or school-level examples of what specific terms mean in practice should be included in such documents.

2. Reflect on gender and education in conversations and policies

The findings highlight the challenges teachers and school leaders face when creating inclusive school environments, not least because teachers are often working on their own. Collective reflections around gender and education should be mainstreamed at the school level, into everyday conversations between teachers (both female and male) and school leaders, as well as with communities. This will show teachers that the work they are doing is part of a collective action, potentially encouraging them to persist with their efforts. The integration of gender and education issues into school policies and codes of conduct could also help address school-related gender-based violence, the elimination of which increases girls' participation rates and enrolment (Sperling and Winthrop, 2016). In contexts where children do paid work or have family responsibilities, flexible learning schedules can encourage girls' enrolment.

3. Provide training and support on policies

Evidence suggests limited knowledge and understanding of existing national policies and limited school-level implementation. For new policies or updates to existing policies, governments should provide training for school leaders and, where possible, teachers, who can then sensitise other teachers at the school level. It is important that training is accompanied by adequate and relevant resources, as well as support on how best to apply these resources in a way that promotes inclusive, girl-friendly schools and classrooms. In contexts where school-level policies exist, these should be integrated with national policies.

4. Build strong school community relationships and partnerships

The findings highlight a range of household and community barriers to girls, including poverty, cultural practices, and sexual and other forms of abuse, with some teachers attempting but failing to address issues on their own. Authentic, continuous engagement with communities will help schools to identify ways in which they can better support communities to address barriers to girls' education. Developing relationships with trusted community leaders and working in partnership with them to sensitise communities about practices that adversely affect girls' education can help transform existing power dynamics that deprioritise girls' education (GEC, 2023).

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Introduction

This British Council report provides an overview of the main barriers to girls' education and measures to address the constraints girls face in accessing inclusive, equitable and quality education. It is informed by evidence from the work of the British Council in Africa.

Despite significant progress in improving girls' access to education, challenges remain around the quality of the education they receive once they secure access (Unterhalter et al., 2014; Sperling and Winthrop, 2016; UNESCO, 2020a; Psaki et al., 2021; Psaki et al., 2022). Similar concerns are reflected in Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong opportunities for all'. This report echoes these concerns and contributes to addressing them by providing an overview of key thematic issues relating to girls' education as part of the wider discussion on inclusion.

Terminology

The terms 'inclusive, equitable and quality' are closely related. For Tonegawa (2023), inclusive education is underpinned by equity while seeking to improve the quality of learning that children receive. Concepts of equity and inclusion are operationalised in somewhat different ways by different authors (e.g. Ainscow et al., 2006; Pit-ten Cate et al., 2018), institutions (e.g. UNESCO, 2017; UNICEF, 2014), and even countries (OECD, 2023).

In this report, we refer to equity in education as the equal opportunity to achieve educational potential regardless of personal, social and familial characteristics such as gender, socioeconomic background, location, ethnicity and special education needs (OECD, 2023). Equitable education systems intentionally create equal opportunities and provide equitable resources for all pupils, no matter their personal characteristics or social and economic background.

Similarly, we refer to inclusion as the process of enhancing the attendance, participation and achievement of all pupils, particularly those who are already excluded or at greatest risk of being so in the future (UNESCO, 2008). While some literature on inclusion specifically focuses on children with special educational needs, this report covers the educational needs of diverse pupils, including those with special needs (Tonegawa, 2023), extending the notion of equity by:

• emphasising the need to recognise and address the varied experiences, needs and challenges of diverse and vulnerable groups of pupils

• focusing on individual pupils' needs

• seeking to foster pupils' wellbeing through increased self-worth and belonging (OECD, 2023).

Finally, this report refers to quality learning as an outcome of equity and inclusion. Key to this is inclusive teaching and learning, particularly pedagogical practices that ensure relevant, meaningful and beneficial learning (Douglas, 2019). However, as well as resources and inputs, the term encompasses the freedoms required to be able to develop capabilities. This is in keeping with arguments for the need to extend the notion of quality beyond pedagogical practices or resource inputs (including indirect schooling resources such as food, extracurricular activities, hygiene and sanitation) to include the capabilities that children, communities, and societies value (Tikly and Barrett, 2011; Unterhalter, 2015). The freedoms to develop capabilities include attitudes and norms (Tikly and Barrett, 2011) and power dynamics (Unterhalter, 2015).

Given the interconnectedness between the concepts of equity, inclusion and quality, for simplicity in the remainder of this report we use the terms **inclusion/ inclusivity** to encompass all three terms.

The British Council and girls' education

Girls' education is of paramount importance. It is a human right that acts as 'a gateway' to other rights (FCDO, 2021b, p. 7) and supports the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 and 5. Moreover, it remains a strategic priority for global development actors, including the World Bank, the Global Partnership for Education, and G7 foreign and development ministers. Evidence suggests that educated girls have higher labour market participation, earn more, have fewer children, and promote better health and education outcomes for their own children (FCDO, 2021a; World Bank, 2016).

An awareness that 'gender gaps persist in education at girls' expense due to the sheer number of hurdles that stand in a girl's way' (FCDO, 2021b, p.11) resulted in the UK government advocating for research into barriers to girls' quality education and formulating the plan *Every girl goes to school, stays safe and learns: five years of global action 2021 to 2026*. This sets two targets to be achieved by 2026 in low and lower middle-income countries: 40 million more girls in school; and 20 million more girls reading by the age of 10 or the end of primary school.

As part of this global movement to support girls' education and achieve the SDGs, the British Council has a strategic focus on girls' education. Gender equality and women and girls' empowerment are key to its work and align with its values of equality, diversity and inclusion. The British Council directly and indirectly contributes to the realisation of the government's girls' education priorities through five key objectives (British Council 2022):

1. The UK is recognised as a key champion and convenor of dialogue on 12 years of quality education for girls by addressing girls' education as a theme in all education events at all levels.

2. Teachers and school leaders are better equipped to raise the quality of education for all children, enabling schools to be more inclusive and improving learning outcomes for girls.

3. More excluded girls learn English in priority countries – and there is better quality English teaching for all.

4. Greater support within communities for girls' education and empowerment.

5. Pathways for girls into further/higher education are enhanced.

While the British Council works on different dimensions of diversity, including age, disability, ethnicity or race, religion, sexual identity, and gender, this report focuses on gender with the aim of identifying what contributes to inclusive, and therefore quality, education for girls. Although the British Council supports research in more than 100 countries globally, this report focuses on selected countries in Africa.

Barriers and environments

Understanding constraints to girls' education requires an understanding of the 'web of interrelated barriers' that girls face in accessing equitable, inclusive and quality education, and realising their educational potential (British Council, 2017). The different environments that influence girls' education, learning and development are key to this.

Research by Psaki et al. (2022), categorises barriers to girls' education within the spheres of the home, school and wider community. These constitute the immediate environments in which children live and have been theorised to exert a significant influence on their development (Bonfenbrenner, 1977).

This report diverges from this grouping of environments in three ways.

Firstly, Psaki et al. (2022) include policy and legal environments in the sphere of community, whereas this report considers them as separate, although interlinked, aspects of the wider environment in which girls live. Educational policy and legal frameworks are understood to influence children's development and learning (Kim, 2018).

Secondly, due to the importance of teachers' pedagogical practices (Douglas, 2019), and building on previous British Council research that highlighted the importance of inclusive classroom practices for gender equity (Sayed, Salmon and Balie, 2020), this report distinguishes the classroom setting from the broader school environment.

Thirdly, this report brings together the household and community environments as an interlinked domain, given their interconnectedness within the African contexts from which the British Council evidence is drawn. However, the report acknowledges that there are households whose beliefs and practices diverge from those of the community to which they belong. Notably, the OECD's 2023 definition of inclusion, which draws on UNESCO's definition, subsumes households or homes within communities, highlighting the need to jointly address the diversity and diverse needs of pupils and communities (i.e. not pupils, households and communities as separate elements).

In summary, this report considers barriers to girls' education within four domains of the overall environments in which girls live:

- inclusive classrooms
- inclusive schools
- inclusive households and communities
- inclusive policy and legal frameworks.

Importantly, and consistent with the understanding of quality explained in the introduction, this report does not use the terms 'barriers' and 'constraints' neutrally (Unterhalter, 2015), but in acknowledgement of the relationships and power dynamics that create and deepen them. The addition of 'inclusive' reflects the need to identify and address the different needs of diverse and vulnerable pupils and seek to foster their wellbeing.

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Methodology

This report brings together evidence from existing literature on girls' education, as well as evidence from studies commissioned by the British Council in Africa.

Existing literature

Existing literature is used to:

- conceptually frame the report (the introduction)
- synthesise evidence around girls' education in relation to four domains of girls' lives (literature review)
- provide existing country-specific evidence around these domains (country contexts).

British Council research

Evidence from the British Council's work in Africa is used to generate the findings of the report and is provided by:

- studies conducted in Ethiopia, Nigeria and Tanzania
- a secondary gender analysis in Sudan
- a stakeholders' report from Kenya.

The studies in the three countries were carried out with educators in schools connected to the British Council.

In Ethiopia, the British Council carried out a mixed-methods study to understand teachers' and school leaders' knowledge and skills in relation to gender-responsive, inclusive education (CRADLE Training and Research Center, 2023). Data were generated using interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and document review. Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with school leaders, teachers and pupils from 19 primary schools in four regions (Oromia, Somali, Amhara and Southern Nations Nationalities and People's Region), as well as officials from the Ministry of Education and regional education bureaus. The document review examined existing school policies and practices regarding gender responsiveness and inclusion.

In Nigeria, the British Council carried out a mixed-methods study to better understand teachers' attitudes and practices around girls' education, specifically how public school teachers' practices support girls' learning in the classroom, and how gender equity is promoted in schools (British Council, 2021). The study was carried out in the south-western state of Lagos and the north-western state of Kano. In total, 282 teachers (169 in Lagos, 113 in Kano) and 90 school leaders (53 in Lagos, 37 in Kano) from primary and secondary schools completed a survey and interviews were carried out with 10 participants

from each state – five teachers and five school leaders from schools identified through the surveys as 'bright spots', where signs of promising practices were heard.

Adapted from the model of the Nigerian study, the British Council in Tanzania carried out a mixed-methods study in the Dar es Salaam, Tanga, and Pwani regions to better understand how teachers can overcome challenges to improving girls' education and gender equity (Raphael et al., 2022). In total, 44 teachers and 15 school leaders from schools initially identified as 'bright spots' were interviewed as a pilot for the study. Subsequently, questionnaires were completed by 1,043 teachers and 108 school leaders in government and private schools across the three regions.

The findings relevant to Sudan are drawn from a gender analysis conducted to better understand barriers to girls' education in support of the British Council's girls' education programming in the country. The analysis uses secondary data from the Ministry of Education's documents and strategies, and documents from UNICEF, UNESCO, other international non-governmental organisations, and academic sources (British Council, 2023).

The findings relevant to Kenya are synthesised from stakeholders' perspectives at a consultative session organised to inform the next phase of the review of the country's 2015 Education and Training Sector Gender Policy and the development of a new Gender in Education Policy (Wachira, 2023).

The findings from all these country studies and reports are synthesised in the findings section of this report.
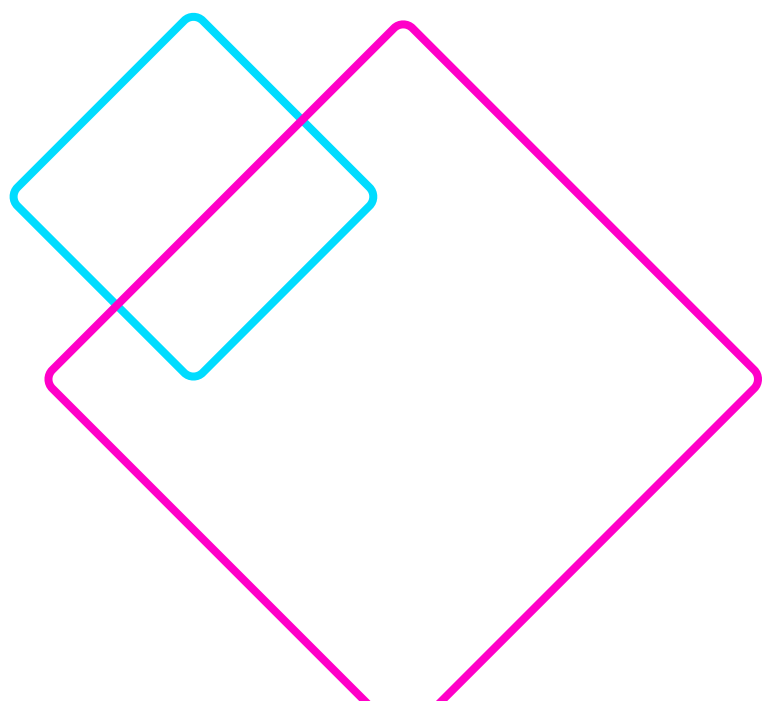
Reviewing the literature

This section of the report reviews the literature around girls' education, providing:

- an explanation of girls' education and inclusivity in relation to the four domains – inclusive classrooms, inclusive schools, inclusive households and communities, and inclusive policy and legal frameworks
- an overview of the context in the five countries from which evidence based on the British Council's work is drawn.

Inclusivity in different domains

Inclusive classrooms

Classroom climate is defined as 'the intellectual, social, emotional and physical environments in which our students learn' (Ambrose et al., 2010, p.170). In this context, gender-inclusive teaching relates to 'teaching with content and pedagogy that acknowledges and overcomes gender-based constraints', so that both girls and boys can be successful pupils (CRADLE Training and Research Center, 2023, p. 4).

In addition to appropriate skills, knowledge and understanding, inclusive pedagogy requires teachers to have inclusive values, attitudes and beliefs about pupils and the nature of teaching and learning, as well as social processes and influences (Pit-ten Cate et al., 2018). An enabling, inclusive classroom considers:

- pedagogy (content, delivery and assessment)
- classroom management
- the opinions of teachers on gender in the classroom
- the language used by teachers
- gender stereotypes in the curriculum and in teaching and learning materials.

(Unterhalter et al., 2014; Nabbuye, 2018; McEwan, 2015; UNESCO, 2019, 2020a, 2020b; CRADLE Training and Research Center, 2023)

Inclusive schools

An inclusive school environment is 'not only gender-sensitive, but also promotes parity in the enrolment and achievement of girls and boys; reduces constraints on gender equity and eliminates gender stereotypes; and provides facilities, curricula, and learning processes that are welcoming to girls' (Sperling and Winthrop, 2016, p. 147).

In an inclusive school, all pupils are welcome, feel a sense of belonging, realise their potential, and contribute to daily school life. Inclusive schools ensure that, regardless of background, ability or identity, pupils are 'present, participating and learning' (UNESCO, 2020b, p. 51). This includes removing explicit and implicit acts and threats of school-related gender-based violence against girls (Psaki et al., 2022), which further implies the need for safeguarding, or 'the protection of children and adults from abuse' (British Council, 2021, p. 5).

Overall, an inclusive school considers girls' specific academic, social, and physical needs. All stakeholders – including school leaders, teachers, administrative staff, pupils and parents – understand the educational principles and practices that promote gender equality (CRADLE Training and Research Center, 2023). Inclusive, girl-friendly schools promote positive teachers' and school leaders' practices and views on gender, and implement gender-equality initiatives (UNESCO, 2020b; Psaki et al., 2022; Tafere et al., 2022); provide psychosocial, social and emotional support (UNESCO, 2020a); and provide academic support such as group remedial work, individual tutoring and school attendance support (Unterhalter et al., 2014; UNESCO, 2019; Psaki et al., 2022).

Inclusive households and communities

Norms and attitudes that foster traditional assumptions about girls' abilities and roles have adverse effects on their attendance, learning and completion (Psaki et. al., 2022, p. 4).

Inclusive households and communities hold supportive attitudes and cultural practices around girls' education; prevent child marriages and limit domestic chores (Opoku, 2020; UNESCO, 2020a; Psaki et al., 2022); and choose to finance girls' education through fees, tuition, materials, etc. (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2019). Inclusive households and communities also complement inclusive school environments by assisting girls with menstrual hygiene management; providing adequate food; and providing psychosocial, social and emotional support, such as the creation of safe community spaces (Psaki et al., 2022).

As already noted, inclusive households may exist within not particularly inclusive communities, while inclusive communities may comprise some non-inclusive households.

Inclusive policy and legal frameworks

Policy and legal environments intersect with the classroom, school, and household and community domains (Unterhalter et al., 2014).

Legislation specifies the principles and rights that underpin frameworks for inclusive systemic reform (UNESCO, 2017).

Reviewing the literature

Policies affect what happens in:

- the classroom, for example availability of textbooks, teacher training and continuous professional development opportunities (UNESCO, 2017)
- the school environment, for example initiatives such as provision of menstrual products, policies and interventions to address SRGBV (Psaki et al., 2022)
- households and communities, for example the cost of schooling and materials, policies relating to teenage mothers in schools (Psaki et al., 2022).

Country contexts

Ethiopia

Background statistics

Located in the horn of Africa, Ethiopia has approximately 120.8 million inhabitants and over 90 ethnic and linguistic groups (UNFPA, 2022a). Despite having one of the fastest-growing economies in the region, Ethiopia is also one of the poorest countries (World Bank, 2022). The country faces humanitarian challenges resulting from conflict and displacement, prolonged drought, disease outbreaks and the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 (UNFPA, 2022a). Approximately 40% of the population is under 15 years old, while 30% is between 15 and 29 years old (USAID, 2018).

Education system

The Ethiopian education system comprises eight years of compulsory primary education and four years of secondary education.The national primary school enrolment rate has increased from 5.7 million to more than 20 million over the past 20 years (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021). By 2023, approximately 30 million children and youths were enrolled in schools, including about a million tertiary students (Tamrat, 2023).

Challenges at Primary level

The strain of high primary school enrolment has contributed to poor-quality learning, with high dropout rates between lower and upper primary education. Poor school quality, insufficient water sanitation and hygiene facilities, inadequate learning resources, overcrowded classrooms, poorly trained teachers, and teacher absenteeism contribute to high dropout rates (Jones et al., 2019; Tadesse, 2019). Poverty affects access to education in general, and in combination with socio-cultural factors has a particular impact on girls' education (The Borgen Project, 2018). Girls' primary enrolment rate is nearly 9% lower than boys' (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021).

Challenges at Secondary level

Secondary education challenges include low capacity, low school expansion rates, low grade 8 to 9 transition rates, general socio-economic and cultural barriers, natural disasters, conflict, demand for labour, and a lack of accessible schools for rural communities and girls (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021).The secondary enrolment rate is 16% and youth unemployment is 27%.

Barriers to Gender Equality

Young females are twice as likely to be underemployed or unemployed than males (USAID, 2018). Despite the Ethiopian government's commitment to inclusive education, this has not translated into practice (Mergia, 2020). Poorer women and girls face compounded disadvantages, including gender-based violence, lack of empowerment, fewer education and employment opportunities, and higher expectations of domestic work (UNICEF, 2018).

Additional barriers to girls' education include institutional, socio-economic, and cultural factors, such as harmful traditional practices, distance to school, school-based gender-based violence (by peers and teachers), child marriage, low parental aspiration, financial prioritisation of boys' education, lack of girl-friendly facilities, and lack of gender-sensitive teacher training (Federal Ministry of Education, 2021, p. 21).
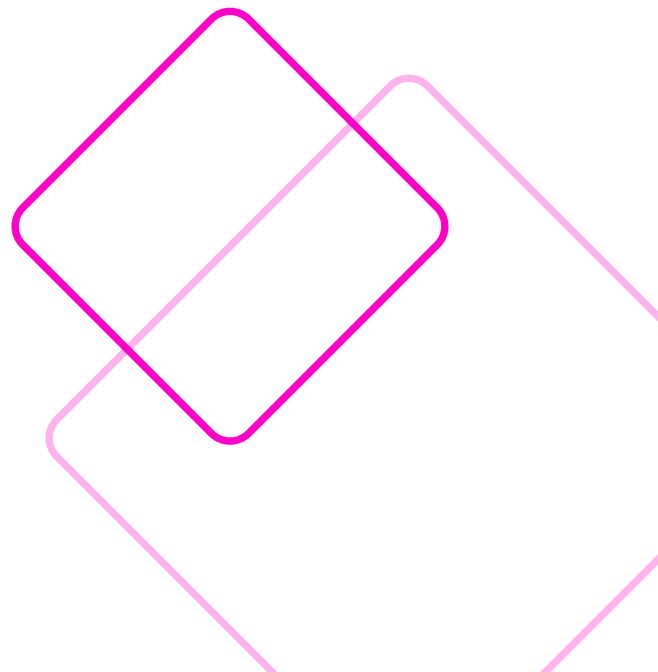
Nigeria

Background statistics

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country, with an estimated population of more than 200 million (UNFPA, 2022b). Of the total population, 43% is younger than 14, and 32% is aged between 14 and 24. Nigeria is classified as a lower middle-income country (World Bank, 2021). Although Nigeria is Africa's largest economy in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) (Naidoo, 2020), it is one of the most unequal countries in the world, with a vast proportion of its population living in poverty. Poverty alongside low human capital and persistent insecurity present significant barriers to quality education (UNESCO-IIEP and World Bank, 2021).

Education System

Education spending is currently 1.4% of GDP, lower than the recommended 4–6%. In 1999, Nigeria launched Universal Basic Education (UBE) to provide free, compulsory education for six years of primary and three years of junior secondary school. UBE also includes one year of early childhood care and education, adult literacy and non-formal education, skills acquisition programmes, and education of nomads, migrants, women and girls, almajirai (boys and girls who attend Islamic boarding schools), street children and children with disabilities (Universal Basic Education Commission, 2005). Although UBE is 'free', families are asked to pay a variety of fees, including entrance, term and examination fees.Three years of senior secondary schooling completes the public schooling system.

Challenges at Primary level

In 2013, the government mandated a year of compulsory, free pre-primary education (Humphreys and Crawfurd, 2014). Despite this, estimates suggest there are now 19.7 million children out of school in Nigeria, the third highest figure globally (GEMR Team and UNESCO-UIS, 2022). Of these, 49% are estimated to be of primary school age (UNESCO-IIEP and World Bank, 2021). The net primary enrolment rate is estimated at 66%, with a gender parity index of 0.84 (UNFPA, 2022b). Reasons for primary children's non-attendance include age (too young), distance to school, cost of schooling and lack of interest (UNESCO-IIEP and World Bank, 2021). Learning outcomes are poor, with some estimates suggesting that only 19% of Nigerian children who complete primary school can read (Kaffenberger and Pritchett, 2021).

Challenges at Secondary level

In 2018/19, estimates suggested a junior secondary net enrolment rate of 75%, with 60% of schools private. Rural secondary school girls' gross attendance rates are particularly low at 54%, especially in comparison to urban boys (87%). Geographical disparities are clear, with stronger outcomes in the southern parts of Nigeria. A high proportion of out-of-school children are likely to be living in the north (Antoninis, 2014) and in rural areas. Conflict in the north-east of the country has targeted the education system.

Barriers to Gender Equality

Gender disparities are particularly stark in the north-west of the country (UNESCO-IIEP and World Bank, 2021). Social and religious perspectives around 'western education', particularly for girls, are suggested as key contributors to the country's regional educational inequalities (UNICEF, 2017). Barriers to gender equality in education include school-related gender-based violence; gender stereotypes in learning materials, the curriculum and teachers' attitudes; and incidence of early marriages and pregnancies (UNESCO-IIEP and World Bank, 2021). Nigerian policies on gender and education include the updated National Policy on Gender in Basic Education and its implementation guide (2021), and the National Gender Policy (2021–26).
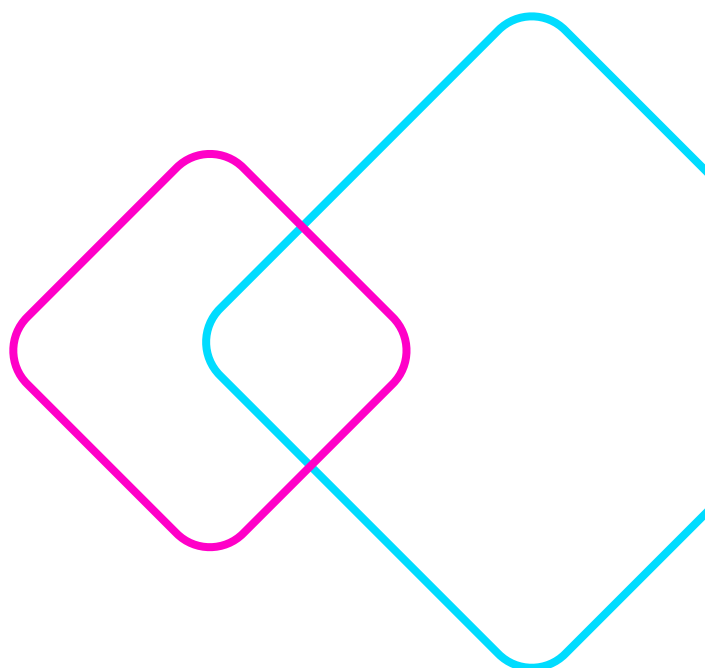
Reviewing the literature

Tanzania

Background statistics

Tanzania is a rapidly developing, youthful country with an estimated population of more than 61 million (World Bank, 2023). Although it has one of the fastest-growing economies, widespread poverty persists in Tanzania. Half of the population lives on less than $1.90 per day (USAID, 2023). The country's 2016/17–2020/21 National Five-Year Development Plan (NFYDP) captured its developmental aspirations guided by the principle of 'nurturing industrialisation for economic transformation and human development' (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2018, p.2). One of the pillars of transformation in the NFYDP, human development, centred on education and skills development. Based on this, the current 2020/21–2025/26 NFYDP includes intervention strategies that focus on improving systems of education and learning, and rationalising education with the needs of the labour market, including the promotion of innovation and technology transfer. One of the youth development programmes focuses on gender mainstreaming, including increasing opportunities for girls' education and training.

Education System

Reforms in the country's education system through policies and strategic implementation plans have resulted in increased pupil enrolment, improved pass rates, and improved infrastructure at all levels (Mmari et al., 2021). For example, between 2016/17 and 2020/21, achievements included rolling out a fee-free policy, constructing classrooms, increasing enrolment in teaching colleges, and supplying teaching and laboratory equipment (United Republic of Tanzania, 2021).The Tanzanian education system comprises basic and compulsory education (one year of pre-primary, seven years of primary and four years of ordinary secondary education) and advanced secondary education (a two-year programme that includes technical and vocational education, teacher education, adult education, and non-formal education). Notable examples of expansion include the increased general enrolment ratio in primary education, from 91.3% in 2015 to 110.3% in 2019. The gender parity index stands at 1.01, meaning numbers are close in terms of male and female pupils. Meanwhile at lower secondary education level, the general enrolment ratio has increased from 36% in 2016 to 43.9% in 2020 (United Republic of Tanzania, 2021). The number of secondary schools increased from 4,708 in 2015 to 5,402 in 2020.

Challenges at Primary and Secondary levels

Despite Tanzania's achievements in expanding education access, challenges remain. These include poor learning outcomes (reflected in poor pass rates in the basic national examinations at primary and lower secondary levels) and poor literacy and numeracy skills of children participating in basic education, including disparities in gender participation (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2018).

Barriers to Gender Equality

At the upper secondary level, fewer girls than boys are enrolled in school, with teenage pregnancy suggested as the main factor behind girls' dropping out (British Council, 2022). Other barriers to girls' education in Tanzania include gender discrimination and stereotypes, cultural beliefs, poor school environments and early marriages. In 2021, the government reversed a 2017 policy that endorsed the expulsion from school of pregnant girls and young mothers.
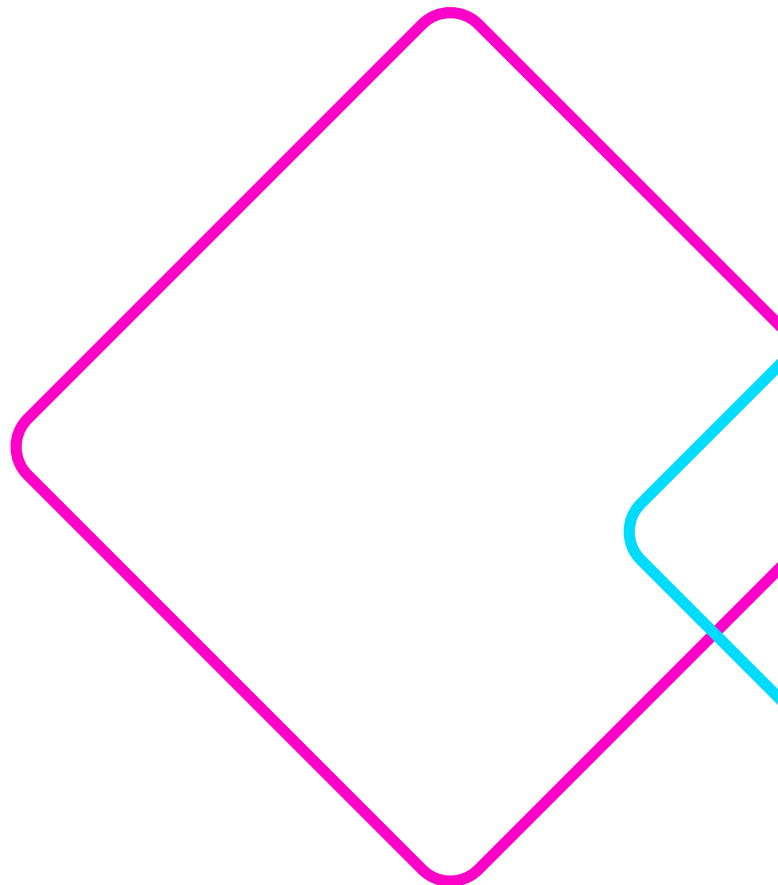
Sudan

Background statistics

Sudan's population reached 43.8 million in 2023, growing by 2.42% annually (World Population Review, 2023). Poverty remains intractable. An analysis of the 2014 Household Budget and Poverty Survey indicates that although the number of people living below the poverty line has decreased, abject child poverty rose from 12% in 2014 to 85% in 2020, while the overall poverty rate rose from 31% in 2014 to 71% in 2018 (UNICEF, 2021).

Education system

Education in Sudan is guided by the Interim Consultation of 2005 and governed by the Federal Ministry of Education. Its vision is to create a distinguished education system in terms of values and science that, as the country recovers from civil war, can play a vital role in alleviating poverty and increasing literacy (Republic of the Sudan, 2019). The National Development Strategy for 2017–20[1] placed a particular focus on basic education and primary healthcare. There are now 2,800 more schools (public and private), enabling a million additional children to receive an education. More than 300,000 pupils have completed primary school and advanced to secondary school (UNICEF, 2023a). However, despite this, high dropout rates persist and around 6.9 million children are out of school. School closures caused by political instability and the pandemic have disrupted the education of more than 8 million children since 2019, decimating years of progress (UNICEF, 2023a).

Challenges at Primary and Secondary level

Despite free and compulsory primary education, parents incur additional costs such as uniforms, textbooks and transportation. Conflict and a shortage of qualified teachers also pose barriers to access and quality education (Habiba, 2016; Ajak, 2019). Further fighting that broke out in April 2023 forced millions more children out of school, with one in three girls and one in four boys unable to learn and exposed to risks such as recruitment and use by armed groups, and sexual violence (UNICEF, 2023b). Estimates suggest that two-fifths of grade 3 pupils in Sudan cannot read independently. Regional disparities exist, particularly between rural and urban areas. Urban schools have a gross enrolment ratio of 91%, compared to 78% in rural schools (World Bank, 2021). The completion rate of urban pupils is 77%, more than double that of rural pupils at 38%.

Barriers to Gender Equality

Some parents prioritise the education of their male children and evidence suggests girls are more prone to dropping out due to factors including corporal punishment and household chores (Huser and Zuriel, 2018; Habiba, 2016; Gitonga, 2009).

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1. According to the African Development Bank (AFDB), Sudan's Long-Term Development Vision (2022–40) was under preparation in 2021, however the full policy is not yet accessible (AFDB, 2021).

BRITISH COUNCIL

Findings synthesis

Kenya

Background statistics

Kenya is a lower middle-income country (World Bank, 2021) in East Africa with a population of approximately 56 million (UNFPA, 2022c). Of the total population, 37% is under the age of 14, and 33% is between the ages of 10 and 24.

Education System

Like other countries, Kenya's economy and education have been disrupted by the COVID-19 crisis, during which school closures resulted in more than six months of formal schooling interruption for more than 17 million children (UNICEF, no date). However, the education sector has recovered quickly and implementation of pre-pandemic reforms – such as a competency-based curriculum (CBC), renewed teacher professional development and local education management policies and practices – have continued (World Bank, 2022b). The CBC consists of two years of pre-primary, six years of primary, three years of junior secondary, three years of senior secondary and three years minimum of tertiary education (Republic of Kenya, 2019). Its first cohort of primary level pupils began in 2017 (Kibrara, 2023). However, implementation of the CBC is challenged by teacher preparedness and availability of teaching resources, lack of physical infrastructure to accommodate new pupils, and affordability issues for low-income parents due to the cost of practical materials (Kibara, 2023). Public primary education has been free and compulsory in Kenya since 2003. Secondary education became free in 2013 but is not compulsory.

Challenges at Primary and Secondary level

In 2018, primary net enrolment rate was 90%, while secondary net enrolment rate was 53% (Republic of Kenya Ministry of Education, 2019), although these rates are likely to have been affected by the pandemic. Enrolment rates are significantly higher for children from the top 20% wealthiest families compared to those from the bottom 20% in terms of income. Regional inequalities exist, with weaker education outcomes concentrated in counties in the north and north-east, in arid and semi-arid areas, and in rural areas (World Bank, 2022b). Regional inequalities, gender and wealth intersect to deepen educational disadvantage. According to the Ministry of Education, barriers to primary education include direct costs (e.g. uniforms, school meals) and indirect costs (e.g. poverty, distance, lack of food and water at home) (Republic of Kenya, 2019). These primarily affect children from poor families, urban informal settlements, and rural, arid and semi-arid areas. For girls, these barriers intersect with gendered cultural practices that prioritise boys' school attendance (due to girls' domestic responsibilities), issues of safety in and on the way to school, inadequate sanitary facilities and early pregnancy.

Gains in Gender Equality

Important gains have been made around gender, with the primary gender parity index (ratio of boys to girls) nearing 1 before the pandemic. UN data suggests Kenya now has a gender parity index of 1.04, meaning there are more girls than boys in primary school (UNFPA, 2022c)

This section of the report synthesises evidence from the British Council's work in Africa:

- studies conducted with teachers and school leaders in Ethiopia, Nigeria and Tanzania
- a secondary gender analysis in Sudan
- a stakeholders' report from Kenya.

Inclusive classrooms

As highlighted in the literature review above, the key elements of an inclusive classroom include:

- girl-friendly pedagogy
- classroom management
- the removal of gender stereotypes in the curriculum and in teaching and learning materials
- supportive teachers' opinions and actions relating to gender in the classroom.

Based on evidence from the Ethiopian, Nigerian, Tanzanian and Sudanese reports, teachers' perceptions of inclusive classrooms generally align with those above, including:

- opinions on gender-related issues
- experiences of reviewing teaching and learning materials
- understanding of classroom setting
- use of language, pedagogical practices and assessment techniques
- assignment of classroom tasks
- classroom management.

These perceptions tend to be influenced by teachers' own social and cultural values and practices, which may unconsciously reinforce gender-stereotyped attitudes and beliefs in the classroom (CRADLE Research Centre, 2023).

In addition to general problems that affect all pupils, such as overcrowding and lack of resources and facilities for teaching and learning, the country reports reveal mixed results on gender inclusivity in the classroom. In countries such as Nigeria and Ethiopia, where culture permitted, a conscious effort to promote inclusivity in the classroom was evidenced through measures such as intentional boy/girl seating arrangements. In contrast, the secondary gender analysis in Sudan revealed that in some instances the curriculum reinforced gender stereotypes and did not empower girls and their families to challenge gender discriminatory norms. A lack of role models and life and employment skills training for adolescents resulted in boys and girls frequently being steered towards certain subject choices and specific careers from an early age.

The Nigerian survey notes the language of 'equality' used by respondents to describe efforts to ensure girls' equal participation, although the extent to which the term was understood to contribute to gender inclusivity is unclear. Teachers' attempts to ensure inclusivity in class included practices such as group work, use of teaching aids, encouraging girls to answer questions, practical demonstrations, creating competition between boys and girls to motivate pupils and build confidence, and the assignment of group leadership to both boys and girls. Teachers indicated that they asked male and female pupils an equal number of questions and listened to their views equally, although school leaders disagreed that this was always the case. Some male teachers in Nigeria withheld support from girls for fear of being perceived as engaging inappropriately with them.

In Ethiopia, while some teachers were aware of needing to use different teaching and assessment methods to encourage boys' and girls' learning, their efforts to do so were hampered by a lack of resources. There were also variations across schools in terms of the language used by teachers. While specific gender-biased language was not observed, some teachers used language that favoured boys in lessons, for example the 'he' pronoun more than 'she/he'. Teachers were tasked with reviewing textbooks and teaching materials, but they mostly focused on checking educational value and cultural appropriateness rather than gender equality. In addition, curriculum changes had resulted in teachers not having the opportunity to review teaching materials.

Teachers' perceptions of girls and how they learn also constrained inclusivity in the classroom. In Tanzania, 85% of 843 sampled teachers reported that girls were generally shy in class, lacked confidence and had low self-esteem because of the physical changes they experienced during adolescence. Although teachers indicated that they used gender responsive teaching practices, they were unable to elaborate on what these were and took the term 'gender responsiveness' to include issues of biology (e.g. the provision of sanitary towels), rather than participation and engagement in learning. Teachers noted that because of girls' discomfort with being taught about the menstrual cycle in biology, they were often silent and did not concentrate during these lessons. Girls were also allowed to leave school early or stay at home when menstruating.

In Ethiopia, 36% of surveyed teachers believed that girls struggled to study science subjects. Teachers in Nigeria mentioned play-based ('play-way') methods as particularly effective for girls because they believed girls like to sing and dance.

Of the 120 teachers sampled in Ethiopia, 81% believed that the concept of gender was fixed and did not change over time. Just over half (44%) believed that gender discrimination could not be manifested in the classroom. Moreover, teachers did not appear to understand the impact of gender-specific issues on girls, with 62% not believing gender could prevent girls attending school or learning. Nearly half the teachers felt that boys should be leaders in group assignments.

Some gender disparities also existed in terms of enrolment and learning outcomes. For example, in north-eastern Kenya, gender enrolment was skewed in favour of boys. In terms of learning outcomes across Kenya, girls outperformed boys in Swahili in 29 counties and in English in 21 counties, while boys outperformed girls in maths in 27 counties.

In summary, the country reports reveal that teachers have mixed perceptions regarding the creation of inclusive classrooms. While most desired to have inclusive classrooms, some were constrained by their attitudes and beliefs, lack of gender-sensitive knowledge and skills, and a lack of resources that enabled different teaching and assessment practices.

Inclusive schools

An inclusive school environment implements initiatives such as:

- girl-friendly spaces, sports and clubs
- adequate hygiene and sanitation
- sex and life skills education
- support for girls' menstrual hygiene management
- adequate childcare arrangements for teenage mothers
- measures to address issues of school affordability.

While girl-friendly school environments were considered important, the country reports reveal gaps in practice.

In Ethiopia, despite leaders' awareness of the importance of gender mainstreaming, it was rarely mentioned during staff, parent-teacher association or committee meetings. There was also limited gender equality training and budget for gender equality activities. School documents, including strategic annual and lesson plans, rarely explicitly included gender equality statements. Similarly, in Kenya, it was reported that few primary and secondary teachers had seen the government's sexual and gender-based violence guidelines. Some reportedly knew of their existence but had not seen them, while others did not know of their existence at all.

The Nigerian study also revealed a knowledge gap in relation to guidelines. Some teachers and school leaders stated that it was illegal for pregnant girls to continue schooling in Kano and Lagos, despite this not being the case. Evidence suggested that teachers in the northern state of Kano, where early marriages are more prevalent, were more supportive of the attendance of married girls than those in Lagos, and that school leaders tended to be less supportive of enrolling pregnant girls in school. In Sudan, it is not prohibited by law for married girls and young mothers to return to school, but equally no policies exist to allow this. Local authorities tend not to allow them to enrol, although school-level support for married girls appears less controversial.

The Tanzanian study revealed limited training in gender mainstreaming for school leadership boards. Despite school leaders' and teachers' ability to identify disadvantaged girls, they generally reported a lack of appropriate tools for supporting them at school.

A common response to girls' challenges was to send them to guidance and counselling, but teachers were typically unable to describe the type of counselling provided or how it supported the girls. While school leaders and teachers were aware of girls' non-attendance, they could not identify their own role in supporting girls' attendance or helping them return to school after dropping out.

In Nigeria, teachers and school leaders believed they had a role to play in shaping pupils' gender beliefs and knowledge about gender issues, but it was unclear whether this was to promote girls' education or to reproduce traditional gender norms. While school leaders positively reported their support for girls' education through the provision of guidance materials and training, there were only a few examples of school-level practices and actions, and few teachers reported receiving specific training. School leaders also generally believed that teachers discouraged gender stereotypes in schools. Teachers reported being available to discuss personal struggles and issues of gender equality with female pupils, but there was no mention of similar discussions with boys. For girls dealing with difficult personal situations, Nigerian teachers spoke of mentorship, referrals to school guidance and counselling, and conducting household visits.

The presence of female leaders, and the actions of both male and female leaders, were considered as a sign of inclusive schools. Of the 19 schools studied in Ethiopia, only 24% had female leaders. In Kenya, only 20% of public and 15% of private primary school leaders were female, with the figures standing at 22% and 5% at secondary level. In both countries, there were generally fewer female teachers for maths and science subjects. For example, in Kenyan primary schools, only 11% of female teachers taught maths and 23% science, compared to 40% teaching English. This was similar in secondary schools, where only 17% taught maths, 8% physics, 23% chemistry, 15% biology and 35% English. Although figures were higher in Ethiopia, the trend in subject teaching was the same, with 66% of language teachers female compared to 46% teaching general science and maths.

In Nigeria, gender equality was considered at the school level through pupil leadership opportunities, including alternating assignment of lead and assistant prefects, equal assignment of class representation and school prefects, and equal representation at external competitions. In Ethiopia, gender clubs were used to build skills and knowledge on respectful relationships, encourage female dropouts to return to school, provide gender-based violence awareness and training, and provide sanitary products. More than half (53%) of club leaders were female, as were club members.

Overall, school facilities supported boys' and girls' learning, but lacked girl-specific support. In Ethiopia, school facilities were generally found to be inadequate and toilets unsuitable and unclean. Most schools lacked separate toilets for girls and boys, did not provide sanitary pads, and some had no doors or water. A lack of private female changing rooms and spaces meant girls had to change for sport in dirty toilets, resulting in low participation. For Kenyan refugees, girls appreciated female-only learning spaces because the freedom to interact with teachers and psychosocial support were seen to reinforce positive decision-making and behaviour.

School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV), including rape, unwanted sexual touching, unwanted sexual comments, corporal punishment, bullying and verbal harassment, can be perpetrated by teachers, pupils or community members, and can occur in and around school, or on the journey to and from school. In Ethiopia, evidence suggested that school leaders, teachers and pupils shared an understanding of SRGBV. Pupils considered bullying, harassment, child marriage, marriage by abduction and female genital mutilation as common examples of gender-based violence in their school and communities. They noted a lack of mechanisms to support victims or to report SRGBV to teachers or school leaders. In Nigeria, teachers reported girls' experiences of sexual and gender-based violence from peers at school, although these incidents mostly occurred at home. Where school guidance and counselling services existed, teachers generally encouraged girls to report issues to them, although it is unclear whether such services existed specifically to address SRGBV. The evidence suggested a lack of mechanisms such as safeguarding/ child protection, which might continuously work against other efforts to create inclusive school spaces. In Sudan, gender-based violence and corporal punishment were reportedly widespread but largely invisible, given the absence of reporting mechanisms.

In summary, the country reports reveal that although the creation of inclusive schools and girl-friendly spaces is considered important, it is hampered by a lack of knowledge, resources and, in some cases, policies. This constrains the full participation of girls in school activities such as sports, clubs and leadership.

Inclusive households and communities

Inclusive households and communities hold supportive attitudes and cultural practices around girls' education and make educational decisions that do not disadvantage girls relative to boys.

Across the countries of focus, the evidence generated by the British Council demonstrates that poverty remains a real barrier to girls' participation in schooling. In Ethiopia, girls' lower completion rates were partly attributed to families' inability to bear the cost of schooling for all children and prioritising boys' education. In Kenya, girls' primary school absenteeism was attributed to a range of factors, including famine and hunger, while reasons for girls' secondary school absenteeism included a lack of school fees. A COVID-19 report highlighted that because of not attending school, girls missed out on the sanitary pads they would have received at school as part of a government programme – another indicator of poverty.

In Sudan, poverty was cited as a form of marginalisation that reinforced the exclusion of girls, particularly among disadvantaged urban populations, in remote and mountainous areas, and in other locations with low educational and employment outcomes. Nigerian teachers reported that two of the top three reasons for girls' failing to enrol in school were economic – lack of money for school fees, uniforms, and school supplies; and households needing girls to work or make an economic contribution, for example through hawking.

Efforts teachers made to try to convince girls to stay at school rather than work to earn money proved futile, as some girls were reported to be more interested in income-generating activities or believed they needed to support their families. Likewise in Tanzania, the need for girls to work or participate in petty businesses to earn money was cited by nearly half of teachers surveyed.

The prioritisation of boys' education was another key factor in girls' lower completion rates in the countries surveyed, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. In Kenya, cultural practices and lack of interest in schooling were given as reasons for girls' primary school absenteeism, while lack of interest in schooling and parental neglect were cited for secondary school absenteeism. It is unclear whether the 'lack of interest' at primary school level was on the part of parents or girls, but the highlighting of parental neglect at secondary level suggests that it might be the younger girls who were uninterested. Lack of interest in schooling was also reported by stakeholders as a contributor to adolescent girls dropping out during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, incidences of child marriage increased in Kenya, with estimates of a more than 50% incidence of child marriage in the six counties where the practice is most prevalent. In addition, it was reported that girls had less access to digital tools for remote learning, although it is unclear whether this was due to poverty, priority being given to boys, or a combination of both factors.

In Sudan, cultural concerns about the presence of male peers and teachers in the classroom have led to community demands for single-sex schools. In response, the government has created a policy to increase the number of single-sex schools, although it recommends that schools will need to be monitored to ensure that gender attitudes at the community and school council level are not reproduced in the management of the schools. Early and forced marriages are commonly practised in several regions of Sudan and until 2020 girls as young as 10 years old were legally able to be married. Once married, their access to education is severely limited because of mobility restrictions, domestic burdens, child-rearing duties and social expectations. Particularly challenging attitudes around girls' education exist among the country's nomadic communities. In addition to having some of the highest proportions of out-of-school children overall, for example 73% of 11-year-olds (UNESCO, 2019), the proportion of out-of-school girls relative to boys is even higher.

The third reason Nigerian teachers gave for girls' lack of enrolment in school was parental belief (this was reported more in the north of the country than the south). Teachers noted that parents' lack of interest appears to intensify as girls enter secondary school, as a result of increased perceptions of the opportunity cost of schooling for adolescent girls. Some parents also reportedly removed girls from schools due to early marriages.

In the Dar es Salaam region of Tanzania, responsibility for domestic chores was cited as one of the main reasons for girls not being enrolled in school, along with early marriages and pregnancy. Across all regions, nearly half of all teachers and school leaders believed early pregnancies were the main reason for girls' non-enrolment. In addition, teachers noted that girls missed classes due to cultural practices such as traditional dances and rites of passage ceremonies, which are compulsory in some communities for boys and girls. Some teachers believed these ceremonies had a more adverse long-term impact on girls, as once they are concluded girls are considered grown women who no longer fit in school. Cultural norms around girls' interactions with boys were also reported as an issue in Tanzania, with girls not interacting with boys in the classroom or with male teachers.

Incidences of sexual and gender-based violence and abuse were reported across almost all countries in relation to girls' household and community environments. In Kenya, five counties, including Nairobi, reported a more than 50% prevalence of physical and sexual violence against girls, reportedly by relatives, romantic friends, and partners. Stakeholders reported that girls' experiences of sexual abuse during the pandemic led to dropouts due to pregnancy. In Nigeria, teachers revealed female 'part-time' pupils who worked as domestic workers experienced abuse and violence by their employers, as well as other experiences of sexual and gender-based violence within families and communities.

As the above evidence suggests, intersectional challenges include the deepened exclusion of girls from specific topographies and geographies, as well as those who come from poor households. Although disability is another intersectional factor, it was evidenced to a lesser degree. However, in Kenya, illness or disability was among the factors cited for girls' absenteeism, with stakeholders highlighting the generally low enrolment rates of both boys and girls with disabilities. Stakeholders also noted the higher incidence of sexual and gender-based violence for girls (and boys) with disabilities, and girls' particular need for 'dignity kits' (sanitary pads and diapers). In Nigeria and Tanzania, physical or learning disability was cited by a small percentage of teachers (less than 6% in each case) as a reason for girls' lack of enrolment.

In summary, evidence from the British Council studies reveals a host of challenging cultural perspectives and practices that constrain girls' schooling, which were further exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. The few teachers who sought to positively influence these practices did not succeed.

Inclusive policy and legal frameworks

Legislation underpins frameworks for inclusive systems (UNESCO, 2017), while policies attempt to guide what happens in classrooms, schools, and households and communities. Legal instruments are context-sensitive and, although countries may face similar challenges around girls' education, each country prioritises specific aspects in terms of legislation and policy.

In the countries of focus, various legal instruments exist that demonstrate the importance of supporting girls' education:

- in the classroom (e.g. in relation to gender discrimination)
- in the school environment (e.g. physical safety)
- in the household and community spheres (e.g. culture and safety).

In Tanzania, the Education and Training Policy of 2014 aims to create gender equity and equality through free schooling. In conjunction with the removal of fees and contributions, all Tanzanian schools were directed to implement Education Circular No. 5 of 2015 – the government's policy on free and compulsory education.

In Sudan, to support education in the mother tongue and in response to the country's linguistic diversity, the government approved the development of materials in several languages.

In Kenya, the National Education Sector Strategic Plan (2018–22) stipulates classroom seating arrangements in mixed schools, gender-responsive responsibilities in class and school, and enhanced advocacy on the use of gender-responsive classroom language.

In 2014, Ethiopia introduced a code of conduct on the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence in schools and regions, and a violence reporting tool was developed to collect information about violent incidents in schools. Schools have implemented codes of conduct that include guidelines for the behaviour and actions of teachers and school administrators to prevent gender-based violence, harassment, and bullying in schools, as well as to promote respect for the dignity and safety of pupils. These codes may also include rules regarding uniforms, school facilities, and property, and disciplinary measures.

In relation to school environments, Kenya has implemented gender-sensitive amenities (e.g. kitchens and toilets), provided psychosocial support, employed teaching and non-teaching staff, implemented school uniforms, instituted school culture (established beliefs, expectations, norms, values that inform schools' operating procedures and identity), and included pupils with disabilities through adaptations of facilities (e.g. wheelchairs, beds and ramps). Interventions that have helped to improve equity and inclusion of girls in education include changes to the teaching and learning infrastructure and bursaries. Stakeholders reported that around 200 scholarships provided to refugee girls in Dadaab and Kakuma camps increased retention and transition rates by 2–10%. As a result of improvements in infrastructure, including the construction of dorms and latrines, the number of pupils increased by 17% in 2019–20. This aligns with the country's commitment to adopt gender-responsive budgeting in education , as well as specific guidelines for schools to follow regarding implementation and gender indicators in education.

In Tanzania, the government has provided funds for the construction of dormitories for girls in secondary schools, but there are no reports on whether this has had a positive effect on girls' enrolment.

Safe spaces for girls extend beyond school boundaries to households and communities. Since 2019, Sudan's transitional government has significantly improved the legal framework protecting women and girls, including the outlawing of female genital mutilation/cutting and child marriage, and has demonstrated legal and political commitment to gender equality in education. Despite this, the enforcement of these policies and laws is often ineffective and remains undermined by entrenched gender norms, values and traditional practices. Lack of local knowledge of legislation and ongoing crises continue to leave women and girls at risk of gender-based violence, harmful traditional practices, child marriage and restrictions on their educational opportunities. Moreover, there is a lack of institutional capacity and coordination in relation to gender planning, particularly at the local level.

Across countries, 'gender responsiveness' is often poorly defined and there are no clear implementation guidelines. As well as developing interventions for girls from underprivileged and low-income communities, Kenya intends to implement an evaluation and monitoring plan. However, a review of the 2015 Education and Training Sector Gender Policy remains ongoing, with a view to aligning the new version of the policy with gender objectives in instruments such as the Kenya Kwanza Manifesto, Kenya Vision 2030, and the Medium-Term Plan.

Ethiopia has yet to fully implement its policy to reduce gender-based violence and school leaders, teachers and pupils are unaware of the gender strategy in education, despite the Ministry of Education and regional education bureaus noting some progress in its implementation. School leaders reported not being provided with gender mainstreaming documents, guidelines or training opportunities, and government officials reportedly failed to pass on important information due to school leaders' failure to take gender inclusivity seriously. A similar situation exists in Nigeria, where there was no mention by teachers of education officials' engagement with schools or policies around girls' education. Apart from a few teachers in Lagos who mentioned the national ban on corporal punishment, the evidence demonstrates limited knowledge of existing policies.

In summary, at a national level across the countries, the evidence demonstrates that policies and legal instruments relating to girls' education exist. However, knowledge and implementation – both nationally and at a school level – are limited.

2. An analysis of the impact of the budget on gender equality and a process of changing budgetary decision-making and priorities to ensure that the needs and interests of individuals from different social groups (sex, age, race, ethnicity, location) are addressed in expenditure and revenue policies (UNFPA, 2006; Sharp & Broomhill, 2013)

Conclusion and recommendations

Based on this overview of evidence from the British Council's work in Africa, this report finds that there is scope to improve the equity, inclusion and quality of girls' education in classrooms, schools, households and communities, and the policy and legal environment.

Evidence from the five countries studied reveals mixed perceptions regarding the creation of inclusive classrooms. While most teachers want to have an inclusive classroom, some are unable to do this because of prevailing attitudes and beliefs, and lack of teaching and learning resources. Similarly, girl-friendly school environments are widely considered important, but gaps remain in practice. There is some understanding of school-related and other forms of gender-based violence, but no reporting mechanisms. Poverty remains a significant barrier to girls' education, as do practices such as early marriage in some locations.

Considering specific evidence from the country findings, this report makes the following recommendations.

Clarify understanding

The country evidence highlights educators' use of gender terms with limited understanding of what they mean in practice. Despite having received limited training on gender and education, teachers and school leaders are expected to understand terms such as 'gender bias', 'gender mainstreaming', 'gender responsiveness', 'gender sensitivity', 'gender equality', 'gender equity' and 'inclusion'.

To support the practice of inclusion in classrooms and schools, there is scope for greater clarity on the meaning of these terms – their similarities, differences and uses. Government policy documents and guidelines, as well as documents by international development actors, should be clear on terminology and provide relevant classroom and school-level examples of what specific terms mean in practice. Training interventions for teachers and school leaders, as well as continuous professional development programmes, should incorporate training on terms and provide examples of how they can be enacted to better support girls. Greater clarity is also likely to help teachers identify and work to overcome their existing biases to create a more positive classroom and wider school environment.

Reflect on gender and education in conversations and policies

The British Council's research evidence reveals that schools often only reflect on and talk about girls' education as a one-off event. As a result, teachers feel alone in their efforts to support girls within the classroom and school. This report recommends that reflection on gender and education should become mainstream – included in everyday school development conversations between teachers and school leaders (both male and female) and with communities. There should be a focus on the diverse needs of girls, including those who are enrolled in school, those who are out of school, and those who are out of school but may wish to re-enrol (e.g. pregnant girls, young mothers, older girls).

School-level policies should include girl-friendly codes and policies developed in collaboration with teachers, pupils and the community (Sperling & Winthrop, 2016). New teachers should be sensitised on these codes and policies, while all teachers and community members should periodically review and reflect on the policies to ensure they continue to meet the needs of girls in school. To encourage girls' enrolment, it may be helpful to include approaches to school-related gender-based violence and family responsibilities in policies, both of which have been shown to affect participation rates. Flexible learning schedules should be considered in contexts where girls have to care for siblings, do paid work, or care for their own children.

Provide training and support on policies

The research evidence suggests that there is currently limited knowledge of national policies and little school-level implementation. In Nigeria, for example, teachers and school leaders misunderstood the legal situation with regard to pregnant pupils in school and made no mention of other policies related to gender and education, despite their existence. Similarly, in Ethiopia, teachers and school leaders had no knowledge of a ministerial code of conduct on the prevention of school-related gender-based violence and the rollout of a violence reporting tool for schools. Although schools had their own codes of conduct, these did not include school-related gender-based violence or make explicit reference to gender.

Where national policies exist, there needs to be a focus on increasing schools' knowledge of these, with greater integration of school-level and national policies. In line with the previous recommendation, regular school-level reflection should include inputs about existing national and regional policies around gender and education. When new policies or updates to existing policies are introduced, governments should provide mandatory training for school leaders and, where possible, teachers, who can then sensitise others at the school level. Training should be accompanied by relevant resources and support on the most effective way to use these to create inclusive, girl-friendly classrooms and schools. Regular monitoring of policy implementation, particularly around access and re-entry (e.g. for pregnant girls), should also be carried out to ensure that girls are not unduly disadvantaged.

Build strong school community relationships and partnerships

The research evidence highlights a range of household and community barriers to girls' education, including cultural practices (e.g. domestic work, ceremonies, early marriage), poverty, and sexual and other forms of abuse. Some teachers attempt and fail, to address these issues on their own. It is clear there is considerable scope for school-level engagement with communities, led by school leaders, to better address community-level barriers to girls' education.

Interventions to address economic barriers, such as the affordability of tuition fees and food, have been suggested as particularly effective for girls' education (Evans et al., 2023; Psaki et al., 2022). While schools may not have the resources to implement measures like these on their own, much can be achieved through partnerships with communities. Similarly, schools may find it helpful to partner with communities to develop reporting and support mechanisms for girls experiencing sexual and other forms of abuse. Evidence has shown the importance of trusted and influential community leaders, such as religious leaders, supporting girls' education (GEC, 2023). By developing relationships with such leaders and working in partnership with them to sensitise communities and change practices that negatively affect girls' education, existing power dynamics that deprioritise girls can be transformed (GEC, 2023).

In summary, it is clear from this report that challenges to girls' education traverse the classroom, school, household and community, as well as legal and policy frameworks. A holistic strategy that considers the role of critical stakeholders and offers complementary approaches across each of the domains is likely to provide the greatest dividends for girls' education and inclusion.
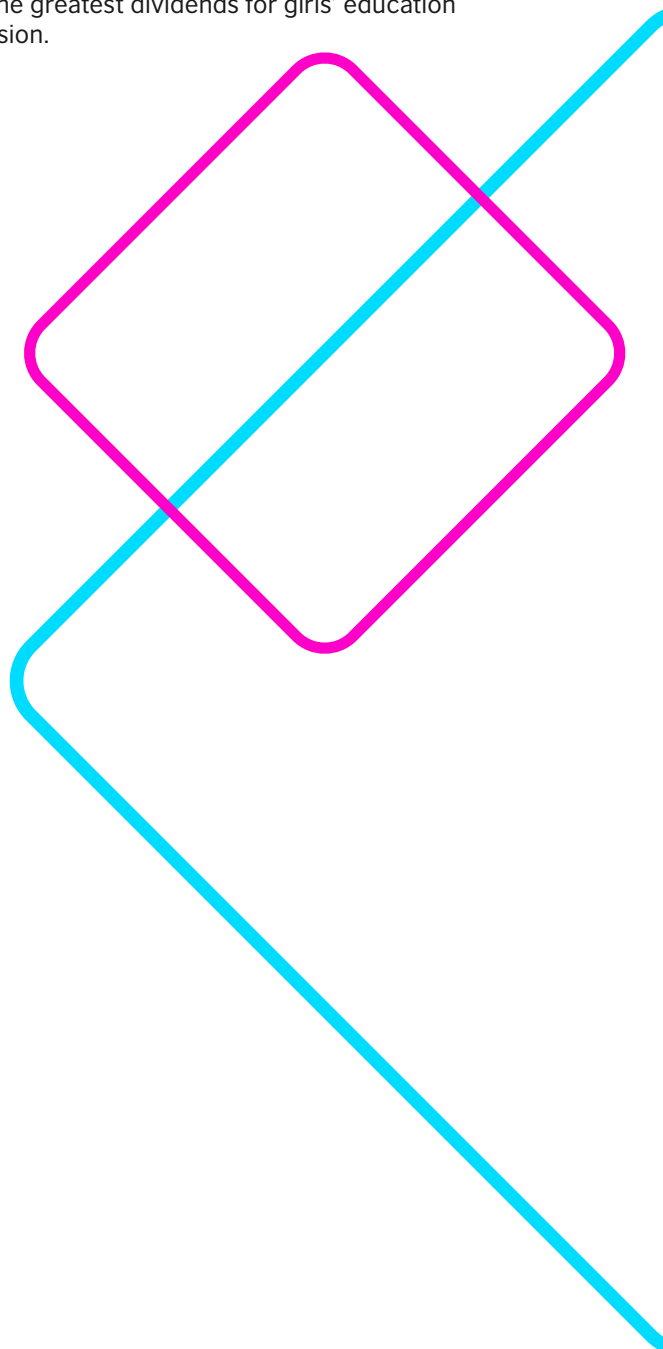
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