



## Recommendations from the Girls' Education Symposium



On 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> March 2022, the UKAid funded Building Learning Foundations programme in collaboration with Rwanda Basic Education Board organized a two-day National Symposium on Girls' Education that was held at Kigali Serena Hotel.

The forum brought together over 90 government officials, development partners, selected school leaders and members of several education sector working groups to discuss and share learnings on barriers affecting girls' education in Rwanda with an aim of reaching a common understanding of these barriers and devise ways of addressing them. At the end of the two days symposium, the participants together came up with the following recommendations here below;

### 1. Promoting girls in STEM

According to the 2020/2021 Statistical Yearbook, the percentage of female students in STEM fields has remained constantly low compared to male students. At higher education level, only 35% of STEM students are female. Greater exposure to female role models in STEM is necessary to reverse this trend. There is currently an inequitable number of female teachers in secondary, with only 33% of teachers being female, the gender gap is likely even wider for STEM subject teachers. Additionally, girls lag behind in digital literacy. Data from 2018 indicates that only 9.7% of female youth (aged 15 to 24) were computer literate, compared to 11.4% of male youth. Further, negative stereotypes persist portraying girls as less

interested and capable than boys in STEM. This belief continues to be perpetuated by both parents and school staff.

### Recommendations for MINEDUC:

The revised Girls Education Policy should lay out a plan to increase girls' participation and achievement in STEM which includes:

#### 1.1 Strategies to guide and motivate girls in STEM, such as:

- School-based campaigns to encourage girls in lower secondary to join science at upper secondary STEM. Consider aligning the campaign to thematic celebrations, such as the International Women in Mathematics Day.
- Incorporate gender responsive pedagogy into teacher pre- and in-service training modules with explicit discussion of combatting depictions of STEM as a male field. Prioritize similar GRP training for school leaders.
- Provide career guidance for secondary level girls to build interest and confidence in pursuing STEM
- Strengthen STEM learning from the pre- and primary level. Adopt language supportive approaches to the teaching of STEM to ensure that lack of English is not a barrier to students' learning. Equip classrooms engaging teaching and learning materials to spark interest in primary Science and Math subjects.
- Guide SGAECs to reach out to parents to ensure they understand the importance of STEM subjects and are encouraging their interested children, specifically girls, to enroll in the subjects at all levels.

#### 1.2 Strategies to detect and cultivate girls' talent in STEM, such as:

- Promote STEM achievement competitions in primary and secondary levels, with separate categories for recognizing the most talented boys and girls
- Ensure adequate provision of laboratory materials in all nine- and twelve-years basic education schools
- Strengthen the science hour at school level
- Conduct research to understand how curricular and pedagogical approaches are effective at engaging girls in STEM content to inform curriculum review and teacher training practices.

#### 1.3 Strategies for increasing STEM role models at all schools, such as:

- Establish a female and male STEM focal leader at district level.
- Guidelines for every school to at least have a female science teacher.
- Empowering female teachers in STEM through organized activities such as motivational talks from female STEM teachers, visits from STEM role models to schools, etc.
- Engage an organisation such as Rwandan Association for Women in Science and Engineering (Rawise) to accumulate the relevant success stories and potential role models, including those with disabilities.

## **2. Eliminating school-related gender-based violence, including physical and humiliating punishments**

School-related gender-based violence is a persistent challenge. 10% of incidents of sexual violence against girls reportedly took place in schools (MOH, 2017). A global study on violence against children in and around schools found that in Rwanda some teachers were perpetrators of violence against their students (Save the Children, 2016). Corporal punishment remains commonly reported by girls in schools across Rwanda. In a BLF study of 434 P4 and P5 girls, 68% of girls reported that teachers discipline or punish students who get things wrong in a lesson, with the most reported form of punishment being physical (BLF Upper Primary KAP Study, 2021).

### Recommendations for MINEDUC:

- 2.1 The revised overarching Education Policy should reflect a clear policy on positive discipline and corporal punishment.
- 2.2 Establish positive behaviour management protocols within schools and eliminating school-related gender-based violence, including physical and humiliating punishments (PHP)
- 2.3 Issue a Ministerial Order providing guidelines for school codes of conduct and safeguarding policies, including:
  - Requirement for policies to be signed by every teacher
  - Strategies to communicate and mediatize safeguarding policies to raise awareness of school staff and parents/caregivers
  - Plans for decentralized monitoring
  - Rearticulation of accountability and punitive measures for teachers and other school community members in breach of the policies
  - Updated information on reporting requirements and mechanisms

### Recommendations for REB:

- 2.4 Capacity building of school staff, including:
  - Develop School Related Gender Based Violence Information Education and Communications (IEC) tools against school to train teachers during pre-service and in-service CPD
  - Establish mechanisms for trained social workers/counsellors to provide school- based psychological support to abused or at-risk girls
- 2.4 Add the elimination of corporal punishment to school leader's *imihigo* and accountability framework

### Recommendations for NESAs:

- 2.5 Adoption of gender-responsive pedagogy under the quality of education indicators and the safeguarding under the school compliance indicators into revised school inspection framework.
- 2.6 Consider the gender-based challenges in the preparation and delivery of national and district level exams

### **3 Improving primary girls' learning, achievement & transition to secondary**

According to the 2020/2021 Statistical Yearbook, dropout and repetition rates have increased at all levels. In lower secondary, females begin dropping out and repeating at higher levels, with the gap widening by upper secondary, TVET and higher education levels. Even though girls perform better than boys in National Examinations at primary level, they continue to perform worse in secondary-level examinations. 2020/2021 data reveals male students passed the secondary national exams by more than 5 percentage points as compared to their female counterparts. This can impede girls' engagement in later studies and is reflected in the reappearance of the gender gap in enrolment at tertiary level. Moreover, a disproportionate number of vulnerable school-age girls, especially those facing intersecting disadvantages, remain out of school. According to data from the 2015 Demographic Health Survey (DHS), among the poorest 20% of the urban population, 36% of adolescent girls were out of school compared to 22% of boys.

#### Recommendations for MINEDUC:

- 3.1 Establish a REB/MINEDUC department to oversee and monitor the consistency, sustainability, and quality of school-based girls' education initiatives.
- 3.2 Gain cross-sector support to formalise the Back to School Committees, evolving them into 'Inclusion Committees' with a focus on reducing dropout, supporting access for children who have never attended school and removing barriers for the most vulnerable girls.
- 3.3 Provide targeted support, including mentorship and provision of scholastic supplies, to support girls to transition to secondary school.
- 3.4 Conduct research on barriers and challenges that hinder girls to transition to secondary.

#### Recommendations for REB:

- 3.5 Initiate career guidance for girls at the upper primary level with explicit support for the transition to secondary schools
- 3.6 strengthen remedial learning opportunities for girls and boys in upper primary to catch up. Online learning should always be mixed with physical learning support.

#### Recommendations for NESA"

- 3.7 Articulate a strategy for monitoring gender data.

### **4 Increasing women in school leadership positions**

There are persistent gender disparities between male and female school staff, and few women in leadership, leaving girls with few female role models in school. Whilst female teachers are in the majority at nursery (85%) and primary (57%) levels, they remain a minority in higher-paid secondary (31%), tertiary (18%) and TVET (23%) roles (*MINEDUC 2021 Education Statistics*). This trend appears to have slightly worsened since 2019. In school leadership positions, the presence of women is even more scarce: in public primary schools, just 27% of school leaders are female. (*MINEDUC 2020/21 Education Statistics*). A lack of gender parity amongst school personnel can inadvertently socialize girls and young women to limit their educational and economic choices in future.

#### Recommendations for MINEDUC:

- 4.1 Issue a Ministerial order related to the promotion of gender parity in school leadership which includes:
- Establishing 30% targets for female head teachers
  - Directives for SEIs to promote career pathways for female teachers through detection of talented female Director of Studies, Teacher Representatives, School Based Mentors, or School Subject Leads. Issue letters encouraging applications from identified talent in advance of the forthcoming head teacher recruitment cycles

#### Recommendations for REB:

- 4.2 Develop transformational leadership professional development courses for Head Teachers to build confidence and leadership skills, with a particular focus on providing role models for female school leaders.
- 4.3 Establish a strategy for career advancement of female teachers through middle school leaders (SSLs, SBMs) to school leader role.

### **5 Increasing access to information & support for Sexual Reproductive Health, including menstruation**

Lack of girl-friendly infrastructure can hinder girls' educational performance. Absenteeism amongst girls during menstruation is common and can be exacerbated by a lack of appropriate hygiene materials or supportive school environment. To reduce absenteeism amongst girls during their periods, in 2020 the Government of Rwanda has invested heavily in improving the availability of WASH facilities in schools and has issued a directive that all educational establishments must have a separate girls' safe room (icyumba cy'umukomwa) to meet menstrual hygiene needs. However, implementation has yet to reach national coverage. As of 2019, 18% of secondary schools, 43% of primary schools and 34% of TVET schools did not have these facilities. Moreover, even when a facility is nominally available, the poor quality of the facilities affects utilisation ((BLF Upper Primary KAP Study, 2021).

#### Recommendations for MINEDUC:

- 5.1 Establish operational guidelines for girls' rooms to provide guidance on the construction specifications, location, accessibility, and operational practices, including water supply, supply of sanitary materials, pain killers and hygiene standards.
- 5.2 Provide capitation grants to school to fund the regular maintenance of girls' rooms.

#### Recommendations for REB:

- 5.3 Analyse the current sexual & reproductive health education package and identify gaps. Conduct research into the effectiveness of education in this area and the training that has been given. Social emotional learning and comprehensive sexuality education should be included to complement the curriculum on reproductive health
- 5.4 Include printed materials to provide to girls' rooms and girls' clubs that can help broaden knowledge on reproductive health.
- 5.4 Scale up of Girls' Clubs at the upper primary and secondary levels so girls have the necessary knowledge to make informed choices and seek support when necessary
- 5.5 Identify and train Gender Focal Points (one male, one female) in each school to lead clubs, share information, engage at risk girls in open dialogue and prevent sexual abuse.

- 5.6 Offer integrated approaches to include boys in SRH education to engage them on the nature of positive relationship with their female schoolmates, to understand issues of abstinence and consent, and how maturely discuss issues like menstruation.

## **6. Reducing teen pregnancy / supporting new mothers re-entry**

Outside of the protective factor of schools, girls are at heightened risk of sexual abuse and exploitation, as well as early marriage, unwanted pregnancies and potential exposure to sexually transmitted infections (STIs). For example, female youth aged 15 to 25 were found to be three times more likely to be HIV positive than their male counterparts in 2018. [\(NISR, 2019\)](#) Girls who are expecting or have recently given birth are less likely to return to their schooling. A 2016 Save the Children study found that in Rwanda school dropout due to pregnancy was a “common consequence” of sexual violence. Global research has shown that furthering girls’ education can delay engagement in both sexual relations and marital arrangements, potential reducing the number of adolescent pregnancies.

### Recommendations for MINEDUC:

- 6.1 Issue guidance expanding on the government policy on pregnant and new mothers’ re-entry into school with information on reintegration strategies and provision of support mechanisms such as lactation rooms and childcare. Ensure school leaders cascade the information to teachers, students, parents and communities.

### Recommendations for REB:

- 6.2 Provide directives for the School General Assembly to establish a relevant committee comprising in-charge of family promotion, executive secretary of the cell, Community Health Worker, and parents. The committee’s mandate will be to provide parenting counselling to pregnant girls and concerned family members, counselling them, and then providing support for a successful return to school.
- 6.3 Require school leaders to report on the monitoring of attendance of new mothers and proactive follow up actions with the family when the girl does not report back to school.

## **7. Mobilizing parent & community support for girls’ education**

Prevailing socio-cultural norms place burdens on girls that can negatively impact school attendance and/or performance. Gender norms dictate the division of labour in Rwanda. Girls – especially those of adolescent age – will often be expected to perform household duties leaving little time for studying. *(Plan International, 2019)*. According to a 2021 study, 43% of P4 and P5 girls report engaging in household chores both before and after school. Social norms also mean that girls are more likely to abandon schooling, or to eschew higher education opportunities due to unexpected family circumstances such as the death of a family member, marriage or childbearing *(Laterite, 2019)*. *Further*, the importance placed on marriage can undermine the degree of support girls receive from their parents, teachers, and communities for their studies, negatively impacting their aspirations and academic achievements.

### Recommendations for MINEDUC:

- 7.1 Establish community education volunteers at the cell level to mobilize the community, provide ongoing support, and encourage girls to go to the highest possible level in education. Consider engagement from the National Women's Council (NWC) and National Child Development Agency (NCDA).
- 7.2 Raise community awareness on equal treatment of girls and boys from their early childhood at home through Umuganda and Umugoroba w'ababyeyi.

## **8. Targeting learning support for girls with disabilities**

Girls with disabilities continue to face serious challenges to accessing education. The number of girls with disabilities enrolled at school appears to be lower relative to the number of girls with disabilities within the general population. At upper secondary level, only 0.3% of girls enrolled have a disability, although the percentage of girls aged 15-19 with a disability is thought to be around 2.9%. Meanwhile, only 41 young women (relative to 69 young men) with disabilities studied at tertiary level, according to latest data. Social and cultural norms can prevent girls with disabilities accessing and staying in education because they are seen as less likely to be able to succeed or due to fears for their safety.

Limited availability and analysis of data on girls and women with disabilities, as well as challenges in identification of disability, limits the understanding of their experience and how it can be improved. Data analysis is often limited to enrolment and therefore the experience girls with disabilities in terms of retention, attendance and learning outcomes is not easily known. In addition, distance to school, a lack of accessible infrastructure (including girls' rooms), and inappropriate teaching methodologies and attitudes also constitute major barriers to girls with disabilities.

### Recommendations for MINEDUC:

- 8.1 Earmark budget lines for teaching and learning materials to accommodate children with disabilities needed in all schools and system and funding in place for provision for specific children as per government commitment made at the 2022 Global Disability Summit
- 8.2 Data is collected systematically on the retention, attendance and learning outcomes of children with disabilities to inform planning and budgeting
- 8.3 Plan and finance the deployment of teachers and interpreters fluent in sign language to meet needs of deaf girls and boys
- 8.4 Ensure all TTCs, TVET schools and Higher Education Institutions plan and budget for reasonable physical and material and human resource provisions to put in place to enable effective access for children and people with disabilities
- 8.5 Work with NESAC to create a system whereby the accommodations necessary for girls and boys to demonstrate their learning in national examinations are identified and implemented
- 8.6 The system for referral and assessment of children with special educational needs is funded to operate at national scale and at all levels of education and monitored to see whether girls benefit at least as equally as boys
- 8.7 Ensure operational guidelines for construction of girls' rooms include accessibility features to support usage by girls with disabilities. The provision of toilets that accommodate use by children with disabilities is extended to all schools

8.8 The position of Special Needs Education Coordinator is institutionalised to enable technical support for education of girls and boys at local level as per government commitment made at the 2022 Global Disability Summit

Recommendations for REB:

- 8.9 Accelerate the completion of the sign language dictionary and integrate the sign language in teaching and learning process
- 8.10 Research and provide specifications on the necessary assistive devices to support common disabilities and learning difficulties
- 8.11 All measures to safeguard children at school and whilst travelling to school take into account the additional vulnerabilities of girls with disabilities and concerns of their parents
- 8.12 Specialists in the REB Special Needs and Inclusive Education Unit work with REB subject specialists to identify specific barriers for children and young people with disabilities for learning in STEM subjects
- 8.13 Scale up to all schools the selection and training of Inclusive Education Focal Teachers and institutionalise the role as per government commitment made at the 2022 Global Disability Summit
- 8.14 Training teachers at all levels of basic education on inclusive and disability education. Pre-service and in-service training is provided on ensuring that girls and boys with disability are able to demonstrate their learning in continuous assessment activities and end of term/year school tests through the provision of accommodations.

**9. Eliminating girls' exposure to sexist ideas, toxic masculinity & negative representations of gender**

There is a need to study and document the prevalence of this content and its influence on girls, boys and the adult population.

Recommendations for MIGEPROF:

- 9.1 Train media house and media personalities on how understand how toxic masculinity, gender harmful programs affect the community.
- 9.2 Incentivize innovative media programs that promote gender transformative, age-appropriate content
- 9.3 Create a committee or monitoring mechanism to allow citizens to flag inappropriate or sexist content published on social media