

KEEPING GIRLS IN SCHOOL: WHAT LESSONS CAN BE LEARNED FROM OTHER COUNTRIES AROUND THE WORLD?

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INTRODUCTION

The education of girls is a major global challenge and even more so in West Africa where there are still many obstacles to their retention in the education system: child marriage, poverty, discriminatory social norms, lack of adapted infrastructure and more. However, in other regions of the world, strategies have enabled significant progress to be made in overcoming these challenges. In this regard, WATHI organized a virtual dialogue with the support of the Embassy of Ireland in Senegal: to draw lessons from inspiring international experiences, highlighting the key factors behind their success, the approaches taken to overcome challenges, and their potential for adaptation to the West African context. By giving the floor to a specialist, this dialogue aims to foster collective reflection on concrete ways to improve the situation of girls in education in West Africa.

Education, especially of girls, plays a key role in the development of societies. According to UNESCO's latest predictions in the Global Education Monitoring Report 2023, an additional five million girls are expected to complete each level of education, from primary to upper secondary school. Even if this progress sounds promising, more than 120 million girls worldwide are still out of school, and the disparities between girls and boys remain significant. It is therefore crucial to redouble our efforts to ensure inclusive and equitable education.

Multiple stakeholders are involved in this topic. While families, children, and teachers are the primary actors, communities, governments, educational institutions, and civil society organizations also play decisive roles in promoting and sustaining girls' schooling.

The barriers to girls' education are varied and often interconnected. Financial constraints are one of the main obstacles, often exacerbated by discriminatory social norms. In many societies, educating boys is seen as a more profitable investment, because they are expected to enter paid employment. Conversely, girls, who are often encouraged to pursue marriage and homemaking, are considered less of a priority when it comes to schooling.

Given these diverse challenges, the responses need to be equally varied and adapted to local contexts. Whether it involves fighting poverty, challenging social norms, or strengthening public policies in favor of girls' education, solutions must be implemented in a flexible and contextualized manner in order to achieve sustainable results.

INVITED SPEAKER

Barbara Scettri, Global Program Manager for Inclusive and Quality Education, Plan International

Note: QUICKs are short documents produced by WATHI's virtual round tables. They present the main findings and courses of action and are intended to fuel public debate, collective action, and decisions by political authorities.

KEY FINDINGS

- On the one hand, in certain regions of the world, school enrollment rates for girls and boys are equivalent. On the other hand, in other contexts, the situation remains alarming. If economic constraints partly explain this gap, the socio-cultural environment has a big impact. Child marriage continues to be one of the major obstacles to girls' education.
- In Zimbabwe, for example, certain communities traditionally encourage early marriages for girls, thus hindering their pursuit of education. To respond to this issue, a flexible approach was put in place by providing them with specific tools and basic skills, particularly in reading, writing, and vocational training, in order to promote their integration into the labor market. A childcare system has also been established to enable young mothers to continue their education. This initiative was coupled with efforts to raise awareness among families, emphasizing the importance of this measure for the girls' future. The entire process was designed to be inclusive.
- The misconception that girls lose confidence in their ability to achieve greater things persists. Their voices are hardly heard, and the lack of family support is particularly concerning. This absence of encouragement often leads them to limit themselves to certain occupations, such as domestic help or hairdressing, while office jobs are associated with boys. These perceptions are closely linked to the educational model and family context. However, many reports from international institutions highlight that as long as societies continue to favor men in terms of working conditions and remuneration, without taking into account the specific needs of girls, inclusive and sustainable development will remain unattainable.
- Discrimination against women is present at every stage of their educational journey. From early childhood, they are not given sufficient consideration. At school, they do not always learn that they have a central role to play in the development of their country. School curricula lack concrete measures to promote their active involvement. Access to digital tools during the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately benefited boys, enabling them to continue their learning. When classes reopened, many girls did not return to school.
- The lack of infrastructure adapted for menstrual hygiene management also constitutes a significant obstacle to girls' education, particularly in rural areas.
- Regarding finances, there remains a significant imbalance between urban and rural areas: the latter generally receive fewer educational resources. The worldwide economic crisis has impacted the budgets dedicated to girls' education.
- Finally, a large number of girls know neither their rights nor the services to which they are entitled. The lack of information limits their access to education and basic protection.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Take an intersectional approach concerning education to respond to the diversity of needs with adapted and contextualized responses. Girls do not constitute a homogenous group: every girl can be confronted with specific problems (poverty, handicap, geographical origin, ethnic belonging, etc.) that need to be taken into account within educational policy making.
- Strengthen family, teacher and community engagement in the promotion of girls' education. The struggle against discriminatory social norms requires targeted awareness-raising initiatives.
- Allocate a significant portion of the national budget to inclusive education, with a particular focus on marginalized groups. Education policies cannot be implemented effectively without adequate funding, adjusted to the realities of the territories and the needs of the populations.
- Change the narrative about girls' education, by emphasizing the benefits for families and society as a

whole. The appreciation of female models of success, especially in rural areas, contribute to reinforcing the legitimacy of girls' enrollment. Recruiting teachers and local assistant educators can play a key role in providing students with positive role models.

- Encourage civil society organizations to conduct impact assessments in order to have solid figures to present to partners, particularly in the private sector. These tangible evidences reinforce the credibility of initiatives and promote the mobilization of funding.
- Develop services that facilitate girls' empowerment on their educational journey, particularly in terms of hygiene and health. This includes the installation of toilets equipped with sanitary protection, the creation of school infirmaries, the establishment of daycare centers for young mothers, the organization of safe transportation, and the development of school gardens as sources of additional income. These measures help overcome the numerous structural obstacles to school enrollment.

QUOTES FROM SPEAKER

Barbara Scettri, Global Technical Lead for Inclusive, Quality, and Gender-Transformative Education, Plan International.

"While girls are in school, they must feel listened to, valued, and aware of the role they have to play. We must also involve boys and men in this process so that they become committed allies for girls' education."

"The challenge is not limited to access to school: it also concerns keeping girls in the education system, which is essential to closing the persistent gaps with boys. Progress has been made, particularly at the primary level, where parity has now been achieved in several contexts."

"It is crucial to identify new solutions and develop innovative partnerships to fund education, including with the private sector. However, the private sector must remain a partner, and not become a dominant player that imposes its own approaches."

"It is essential to strengthen safety nets for families, in particular by supporting their livelihoods. There are excellent examples, particularly in the field of green agriculture, which are sustainable and also help to address the effects of climate change."

"The entire community must commit to the education of girls and other marginalized groups, with a view to promoting diversity without pitting girls against boys."

TO GO FURTHER

VIDEO OF THE CONVERSATION



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