

Girls' Education Challenge Fund: Narrow Windows, Revolving Doors

What affects adolescent girls' ability to stay in school?

A briefing for decision-makers

Introduction

In 2012 the Department for International Development (DFID) launched the £355 million Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) Fund. The GEC aimed to support up to one million of the world's most marginalised girls to improve their lives through education. The GEC intended to use innovative approaches to reach girls aged six to 19 who have not been enrolled in school, have dropped out of school, or are in danger of doing so.

The GEC Evaluation Manager (EM) undertook thematic research to explore why some girls aged 12-15 stay in school, while others facing similar circumstances drop out.

Summary

Many related factors affect girls' ability to stay in school. Trends impacting whole communities can combine with household factors and those affecting individual girls to produce very different outcomes for girls from similar backgrounds. Dropping out of school is a process, and girls are often in a race against time to finish their education before something happens which pushes them out of school. Many girls experience 'revolving door' schooling as a result of not being able to pay school fees. Their time in school is interrupted by periods out of school because of different types of shocks and events that affect their ability to pay.

Some examples of related factors that affect girls' ability to stay in school include:

- Direct costs: marginalised girls are frequently dropping in and out of school ('revolving door' schooling) because of sudden changes in their lives. Changes such as a parent's death or a bad harvest means that some households struggle to pay the fees needed to attend school. We found a disconnect between these types of realities faced by adolescent girls, and the attitudes and practices of the schools that they attend. For example, we found schools across all three countries that repeatedly 'chased' girls from school who could not pay their fees. Many of these girls finally gave up coming to school.
- Sex, pregnancy and marriage: girls may be triggered by pregnancy and marriage to drop out of school. However, the decision to drop out is often linked to underlying factors like household poverty, and a feeling of dejection after repeatedly being excluded from school. Girls who become pregnant at an early age often find themselves unable to attend school, even when they want to after childbirth.

Costs of schooling and pregnancy are a result of underlying economic, social, governance and cultural factors as well as characteristics of the education system itself.



GEC evaluation at a glance

This brief is based on the GEC Thematic Research Report, "Narrow Windows, Revolving Doors" produced in March 2016. The objective of the research was to explore the factors that affect girls' school retention and drop-out, with a focus on girls aged 12-15. These ages are an important transition period in girls' lives, as they move from primary education to secondary school and from girlhood to womanhood.

We spoke to adolescent girls, young women, families, teachers and school leaders in three countries - in Katanga Province in the Democratic Republic of Congo, in Samburu East sub-county in Kenya, and in Mberengwa District in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe.

Coffey International Development is leading the GEC Evaluation Manager (EM) consortium, which includes Research Triangle International (RTI) and Opinion Research Business (ORB). We are responsible for establishing, leading and managing a rigorous monitoring and evaluation framework to assess the effectiveness and impact of the GEC. We regularly share key findings and lessons learned to inform the future design of the GEC and wider DFID programming and policy-making.

Lessons learned

There is strong demand for girls' education, but many inter-connected, context-specific and dynamic problems prevent girls completing secondary school.

We found strong demand for girls' schooling among our study participants. Both girls and parents understood potential long-term benefits like formal employment, and parents were aware of benefits based on their own experiences of poverty and hardship. These perceptions of the benefits of schooling are not always reflective of the bleak reality (formal employment sectors are very small in all three countries involved in the study). But parents do not appear deterred by disappointing experiences with unemployed children who have completed their schooling.

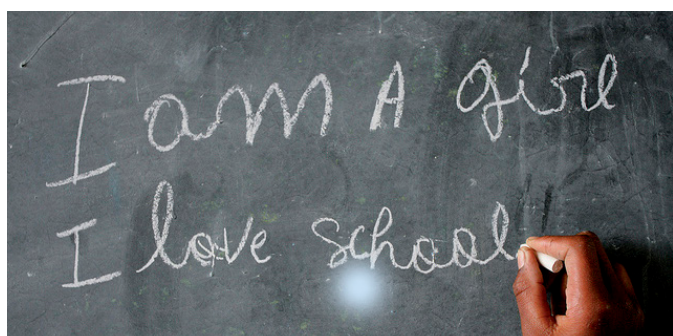
"Parents see hope in children who go to school. They have confidence that they will take care of them in later life, whereas they have no such hopes of unschooled children."

- Mercy, ISG, Katanga

Despite this, many different factors can prevent girls from low-income households from staying in school. Large-scale trends affecting whole communities, such as economic recession and climate change, can, in combination with the nature of households and individual factors, produce very different outcomes. Even girls in similar households in the same village can experience very different paths of schooling, as a result of seemingly minor differences. This shows how fragile girls' access to education is:

"Households depend mainly on farming for income. People grow and sell tomatoes and maize as well as farming for subsistence. But harvests were poor last year. It rained late, not until March, this year, but rains have always been variable in the area. The price of maize has fallen. So many children are enrolling late this year, as parents did not have the money to pay their fees at the start of the school year. Even in a good harvest year, the cash proceeds of an entire harvest are not enough to pay the annual fees for two children."

- PTA group discussion, Katanga



"My father died when I was in Grade 4, aged nine. My mother said that she would only take care of the boys and she would marry the girls off. That's how the one who was in 6th year of secondary and 3rd year of secondary got married. The girls were married off three years ago when we moved here. My mother received their bride price, which she used to send the boys to school. . . Since I was the youngest, I had to drop out in fourth grade and stay at home for a year. Later I got a bursary, so I could re-enrol."

- Ramona, ISG, Katanga

Costs and pregnancy are the main factors that affect girls' ability to stay in school.

Our study found that failing to meet the direct costs of girls' schooling, and pregnancy, are important direct causes of girl drop-out. Poor households pursue multiple strategies, often requiring great efforts and sacrifices from parents and carers, to pay fees. Yet, girls often have to drop out of school because they have not paid fees.

There are many pathways to pregnancy, and the trajectories of girls who become pregnant are by no means uniform. For example, girls in school may run away from home to cohabit with a man or get married, they may become pregnant after brief relationships involving gifts or money, or in a few cases they may become involved in prostitution. While pregnancy and marriage may be the immediate reasons why girls drop out of school, they are often linked to underlying factors like household poverty, and a feeling of dejection after repeatedly being excluded from school.



Education policies and practices do not address the factors that lead to girls dropping out of school

The transition to secondary school coincides with girls' transition to adulthood. This is a period filled with distractions and risks. One of the most important points emerging from our evidence is that there is a marked disconnect between the realities of life in this period of transition and the policies and practices of school systems. Many different kinds of shock and stress can lead to non-payment of fees or the lack of a uniform, despite parents' and carers' struggles to cope. As a result, girls may drop out for varying lengths of time.

The resulting 'revolving door' schooling often leads to poor performance, low morale, and pregnancy. As difficulties pile up, a girl may reach a critical point where the balance tips and she permanently drops out. Dropping out is a process rather than an event¹, and girls are often in a race against time to finish school before circumstances push them out of school.

"My grandfather used to pay school fees for the first two terms but not the third time. So, at times I would have to miss school in the third term. I would still turn up for school during the third term, but sometimes I would be chased away. At other times, my grandfather would come in to talk to the teachers, so I would not be chased away."

-Batsirai, OSG, Mberengwa)

¹ Hunt, F. (2008). Dropping out from school: a cross-country review of the literature. Create Pathways to Access Research Monograph 16. University of Sussex Centre for International Education.

Recommendations

The constraints that prevent schools and education systems from supporting girls to stay in school because of various shocks should be further explored.

For instance, strategies could be developed to minimise the number and duration of gaps in girls' attendance.

A joined-up approach linking economic growth, access to job markets and education would help to ensure that completing secondary school delivers real benefits for girls in terms of their life chances and economic prosperity.

If education is intended to help girls to achieve better livelihoods and life chances through improved employment opportunities, future policy on girls' education could address the lack of income-earning opportunities awaiting girls after finishing secondary school.

Programme designers need to understand how complex factors affecting education interact, so that they can tailor interventions and achieve sustainable change.

The demand for girls' education is shaped by complex social, economic, environmental and cultural contexts, as well as by supply issues such as teaching quality. Education programmes should try to identify, and address, the most influential context-specific factors that affect girls' educational outcomes.



"Some children do not like school because they see the economy in Zimbabwe and they see that there are no jobs. They ask 'what is the point?', because I can be learned but it is all one, because there are no jobs. So whether or not you go to school, you end up in the same place. Although parents know the importance of education and they try to educate the child, the child will say, well look at the others who went to university and received a degree, but they are still like me with no job. This has all become an issue recently related to the economy. Children see no future in education. Students used to be excited about what they would become after studying: teacher, nurse, soldier... Now, they say I will finish then I will put the certificate up [on the wall] and it will be the same, because there are no jobs. A long time ago, the young used to be inspired by adults or older siblings. Now with the economy in Zimbabwe, they are not motivated to continue studying."

- Key informant, Mberengwa)

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Disclaimer

We have not used the real names of any study participants in the report to ensure confidentiality.

Credits

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