

Investing in teachers, school leaders key in keeping girls in school UN-AU Study report

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INVESTING in teachers and school leaders in Africa is the most important factor in promoting educational opportunities for girls, keeping them in school and ending child marriage, ultimately reducing gender inequality through education.

Having more female teachers in schools and having more of them lead the institutions is even more important for keeping the girls in school beyond the primary level and providing them with role models to motivate them to continue learning.

While low educational attainment for girls and child marriage are profoundly detrimental for the girls, their families, communities, and societies, investments in teachers and school leaders are also key in ending lack of learning, identified as the single biggest cause of school dropout for girls, besides traditional factors including social and cultural ones.

Despite data showing that less than a fifth of teachers at the secondary level for example, are women in many African countries, and the proportion of female school leaders is even lower, the teachers have been proven to improve student learning and girls' retention beyond primary and lower secondary school.

As a result, better opportunities must be given to women teachers and school leaders in order to bring additional benefits to girls' education, as women often remain in teaching for a longer time, a report by the United Nations and the African Union says.

The absence of the above has led to high drop-outs, resulting in low educational attainment, a higher prevalence of child marriage, and higher risks of early childbearing for girls across Africa, according to the report, *Educating Girls and Ending Child Marriage in Africa: Investment Case and the Role of Teachers and School Leaders*.

"Increasing investments in girls' education yields large economic benefits, apart from being the right thing to do. This requires interventions for adolescent girls, but it should also start with enhancing foundational learning through better teaching and school leadership," the document tabled at the 1st Pan-African Conference on Girls and Women's Education which took place July 2-5 in Addis Ababa, Ethio-

opia. The lack of foundational learning is a key cause leading to drop-out in primary and lower-secondary schools, it finds, further noting that while teachers and school leaders are key to it, new approaches are also needed for pedagogy and for training teachers and school heads.

"Targeted interventions for adolescent girls are needed, but they often reach only a small share of girls still in school at that age; by contrast, improving foundational learning would benefit a larger

emphasizing practice. Teachers must also be better educated; household surveys for 10 francophone countries suggest that only one-third of teachers in primary schools have a post-secondary diploma," the survey carried out in 2023 laments.

It calls for "better opportunities" for female teachers and school principals, noting that this would bring additional benefits as women also tend to remain in teaching for a longer time compared to men.

Better professional standards and competency frameworks are

the girls—69 percent compared to 73 per cent boys—complete their primary education, and four out of 10 girls—43 per cent compared to 46 per cent boys—complete lower secondary education.

Providing girls and women with adequate opportunities for education could have large positive impacts on many development outcomes, including higher earnings and standards of living for families, ending child marriage and early childbearing, reducing fertility, on health and nutrition, and on well-being, among others.

women's decision-making for their own healthcare by a fourth, helping reduce under-five mortality by one-third, and potentially lowering under-five stunting in infants by up to 20 per cent.

In addition, secondary education while ending child marriage could reduce fertility—the number of children women have over their lifetime nationally by a third on average—slowing population growth and enabling countries to benefit from the "demographic dividend."

Other benefits include a reduction in "intimate partner" violence, an increase in women's decision-making in the household by a fifth and the likelihood of registering children at birth by over 25 per cent.

To remedy the crisis, there was a need to improve the attractiveness of the teaching profession as one way of getting more females heading schools, Wodon, Director of UNESCO's International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa (IICBA), said during the report's launch at the conference.

"Virtually all teachers are dissatisfied with their job, meaning that there is the need to improve job satisfaction in the profession besides improving salaries," he noted.

While retaining girls in school lowered fertility rates by up to a third in some countries, the study's aim for advocating for more education for girls had nothing to do with the need for lower fertility but was in the interest of empowering girls and women in decision-making.

Empowering girls through education places them in a better position in society in terms of power relations between them and males, observed Lorato Modongo, an AU-CIEFFA official.

"It is a fact that we cannot educate girls without challenging power dynamics in patriarchal settings, where men make decisions for everyone," she noted.

Overall, the report regrets that gender imbalances in education and beyond, including in occupational choices, result from deep-seated biases and discrimination against women, which percolate into education. It is therefore essential to reduce inequality both in and through education, acknowledging that education has a key role to play in reducing broader gender inequalities in societies.

"While educating girls and ending child marriage is the right thing to do, it is also a smart economic investment." **IPS**

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share of girls (and boys) and could also make sense from a cost-benefit point of view," it adds.

Parents in 10 francophone countries who responded to household surveys cited the lack of learning in school—the absence of teaching despite children attending classes—for their children dropping out, accounting for over 40 per cent of both girls and boys dropping out of primary school, it further reveals.

The lack of learning, blamed on teacher absence, accounts for more than a third of students dropping out at the lower secondary level, meaning that improving learning could automatically lead to significantly increased educational attainment for girls and boys alike.

"To improve learning, reviews from impact evaluations and analysis of student assessment data suggest that teachers and school leaders are key. Yet new approaches are needed for professional development, including through structured pedagogy and training

also needed for teachers to make the profession more attractive and gender-sensitive, it finds, revealing that countries have not yet "treated teaching as a career" and lack a clear definition of competencies needed at different levels of the profession.

Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, just over two-thirds of girls complete their primary education and four in 10 complete lower secondary education explains the study authored by Quentin Wodon, Chata Male, and Adenike Onagoruwa for the African Union's International Centre for the Education of Girls and Women in Africa (AU/CIEFFA) and the UN agency for education, culture and science, UNESCO.

Quoting the latest data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, it reveals that while nine in ten girls complete their primary education and over three in four complete their lower secondary education globally, the proportions are much lower in Sub-Saharan Africa, where slightly over two-thirds of

It observes that gains made in earnings are substantial, especially with a secondary education, noting that women with primary education earn more than those with no education, "but women with secondary education earn more than twice as much, but gains with tertiary education are even larger."

Each additional year of secondary education for a girl could reduce their risk of marrying as a child and having a child before the age of 18.

"Universal secondary education could virtually end child marriage and reduce early childbearing by up to three-fourths. By contrast, primary education in most countries does not lead to large reductions in child marriage and early childbearing," it declares.

The organisations make a strong case for the importance of secondary education for girls, explaining that universal secondary education would also have health benefits, including increasing women's knowledge of HIV/AIDS by one-tenth, increasing