



Barriers to education for girls in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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Question

- Based on the available literature, what are the barriers hindering access to education and what are the reasons for low attainment or achievement levels for girls in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)? How have other countries overcome challenges for girls' education?

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1. Summary

There was little published literature on the barriers to girls' education in the DRC. The main findings of the research suggest that cultural history, economic lack, and the coexistence of these are the main factors hindering access to girls' education. Limited data suggest that inequality is less significant at primary age so looking at problems for both boys and girls is likely to be relevant. At adolescence the gap is wider and the barriers are more gendered.

Parents are often asked to supplement the funding of schools and struggle to find the means to pay for uniform and materials. There are also indirect costs such as labour lost from older children who help out with domestic duties allowing parents to go out and earn money. There is some evidence suggesting that girls are more likely to be kept home to help out than boys. Gender inequality in whether boys or girls go to school is more likely in the poorest households. The risk of violence for girls in schools is noted but there is little evidence or deeper discussion of this in the literature identified within the scope of this report.

Unpublished qualitative research conducted by Children in Crisis & Eben-Ezer Ministry International provides an insight into barriers for girls' education in highland areas in eastern DRC: Fizi, Mwenga and Uvira. Attitudes of women and girls towards gender equality were classed as 'negative'. Girls spent around 3 hours per day on domestic duties and chores were reported to get in the way of school attendance. Parents did, however, value education. Traditional views that women are second class citizens persist, and interventions should be sensitive to the perception that a change in this view is Western culture destroying local culture. Identifying and supporting local men and women who believe in gender equality and who have respect in the community may be more effective than imposing 'Western'-led interventions.

Other barriers identified include: early/forced marriage, parents' lack of interest in children's activities and low value placed on schooling, and children's disinterest in school due to lack of school quality. The research provides a very useful insight but there is agreement¹ that there are distinct regional differences in the DRC. For example, rural areas have more children out of school than urban areas.

The VAS-Y Fille! Programme in the DRC includes teacher training, learning opportunities for out-of-school girls, reading clubs for community members, and an innovative savings programme for parents to pay school fees. Evaluation shows good results. The NGO-led programme is supported by innovative private sector partnerships. The donor-funded Accelere! programme includes building emotional and physical safety in schools as well as helping communities to fund schools. Cordaid are trialling a performance-based financing approach.

To supplement the small amount of information on the DRC this report includes some research on barriers to girls' education and overcoming these from other countries. Cash transfers, scholarships and stipends are considered to assist with the costs of schooling. The importance of high-quality teaching is emphasised. Community engagement and support is important for driving cultural change.

Recommendations for improved learning outcomes from DFID Girls' Education Challenge include: coaching for teachers alongside structured teaching materials, extra-curricula clubs and

¹ From experts contacted to contribute to the helpdesk question.

activities, collection of data for planning, working with boys and men to improve gender inequality, and promoting change at all levels (community, school and national).

2. Background

Children in conflict-affected societies suffer more severely than other countries when it comes to school attendance with 50 percent of out of school children globally being in conflict-affected societies (UNESCO 2017; UNESCO Institute for Statistics and UNICEF 2015). Girls are particularly disadvantaged due to risk of sexual violence in humanitarian settings (Landis et al., 2019).

There is a cultural history of discrimination against women and girls in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Gender inequalities are characteristic of Congolese society (Freedman, 2011). A study surveyed 18-24 years olds (291 women and 289 men) in Kinshasa, Western DRC (Lusey, 2018). Both women (91.4 percent) and men (83 percent) agreed that a women's most important role is looking after family and home. Positive findings include relative equality in relation to some decision making such as 93.7% of women and 92.3% of men agreeing that a man and a woman should decide together if they want to have children. Those with more gender-equitable responses to the survey had higher levels of education and were single.

Education participation and gender inequality varies markedly between regions, particularly at secondary school level. DRC was one of the thirteen countries in the world with the worst gender disparity at secondary level and yet is not prioritised by overseas development assistance (Ackerman, 2015). There is a significant drop in attendance from primary to secondary, from 80 to 43 percent respectively (Landis, 2019). In the North Kivu Province, adolescents were found to be twice as likely to have less than two years in school (three times as likely for poor females) compared to the national average (Sperling and Winthrop, 2016). 23 percent of poor young women (age 15-24) are able to read in everyday situations, compared with 64 percent of poor young men (UNESCO, 2014).

A coordinator of youth volunteers working on health, education and gender equality and Global Youth Ambassador from the Democratic Republic of Congo identifies a number of problems in the education field (Israel, 2019). Firstly, the Congolese government are not showing enough involvement in assisting young people in conflict zones to access quality education. Secondly, a lack of structure for orphans was noted as preventing access for them. And thirdly, low attendance of school for survivors of sexual violence. Discussing cultural discrimination she says "girls are denied and discouraged from attending school as it is assumed they are made for weddings, not school".²

² <https://theirworld.org/voices/drc-young-volunteers-help-children-youth-overcome-education-gender-barriers>

3. Finance/poverty

Financial barriers emerge as the most important. Despite governments reported commitment to funding education for all, sufficient provisions are not always made. Parents are often asked to subsidise teachers pay for example. There are also indirect costs such as uniform and materials and opportunity costs where children are valued for domestic work.

Parents with financial difficulties will tend to withdraw girls from education rather than boys to support income or running of the household (Ihebuzor, 2014). The Research Base (2016) highlight the compounding factor of poverty with data showing that although girls from the poorest quintile are the least likely to go to school, both boys and girls from the highest wealth quintile (and living in urban areas) are the most likely to complete primary education.

4. Violence

The risk of violence is a barrier for sending girls to school. Girls have been known to have experienced sexual abuse from military personnel on their way to school in the DRC (Sperling & Winthrop, 2016). Protection and safety of a child is sometimes a choice made by parents over education.

Research carried out with soldiers suggests that sexual and gender-based violence has become “normalised” and “a product of fundamental social structures of inequality within society” (Freedman, 2011, p171). Policy frameworks and legislation are set out to reduce gender inequalities but are not adhered to. Fiske and Shackel (2015) suggests it is the mutually reinforcing relationship of gender, poverty, and violence that lead to inadequate outcomes of transitional justice. Women’s justice needs must be recognised as multiple and interlinked.

Community pressure for safe schools and engaging with communities is seen as crucial in addressing issues (Sperling & Winthrop, 2016).

5. School quality/textbooks

The Research Base (2016) Education Equality Country Profile notes that the lower attainment of girls may be down to the distribution of limited resources such as text books and pens being given to male students over females.

The Global Partnership for Education are working on removing gender stereotyping from teaching materials and textbooks (Global Partnership for Education, 2019). They are also supporting performance indicators to promote girls education.

6. Data from highland areas in DRC

A baseline study conducted by Children in Crisis & Eben-Ezer Ministry International (2014) was carried out in the Uvira area of the DRC as part of a Comic Relief funded education project. One

survey questioned girls enrolled at school and one was conducted with their families. 'Out of school' girls were not surveyed. Findings include:

- Less than half the girls who responded were classed as having a positive attitude towards gender. A description of "positive attitude" was not provided in the brief. Questions to women on attitude towards gender were answered very negatively.
- Half of the girls reported working more than three hours per day.
- A third of parents said that school would be an obstacle to household income in the near future.
- More than two-thirds of parents admitted to asking their children to do chores instead of going to school.
- All parents said they recognised the value of education.
- The majority of girls had a positive view of marriage. A quarter of girls said they would stop going to school after they were married. The remaining girls said they would decide when they were married.
- 20.9 percent of households had already married their daughters before the age of 18.

A further study identifying barriers to schooling and reasons for drop-out in the highland territories of Fizi, Mwenga and Uvira was conducted by Children in Crisis & Eben-Ezer Ministry International (2018). A questionnaire was distributed to 955 people from different target groups alongside focus group discussions and key informant interviews.

Key barriers identified:

- **Gender discrimination.** The report authors describe the discriminatory culture, whereby girls are considered intruders, as down to ignorance. Girls tend to accept that they are inferior to their brothers. Modern social values tend to be rejected for being from a Western culture that intends to destroy their own.
- **Housework.** This survey found that girls were often kept out of school to look after younger siblings as well as to do kitchen work and laundry whilst parents are out doing farming work. More girls were found to be out of school than boys for domestic work.
- **Poverty and high numbers of children.** High birth-rates compound problems for poor families. Families that are large cannot afford the fees to send all of their children to school.
- **State disengagement.** Parents need to supplement teacher pay to motivate them as state salaries are insufficient. Many schools are not covered at all by the state and the burden falls entirely on the community. Children often drop out when they realise they cannot manage the fees.
- **Early/forced marriage.** Parents may treat a daughter as a material good and exchange her for dowry money against her will. Whilst abduction cases appear to have decreased it still remains a significant barrier to education. Some children seem to have more choice. One grade 6 girl interviewed reported that she wanted to continue her studies and that marriage is not a priority. She says that girls who have studied have a better life than those who have not studied. Educated girls have the chance to marry educated boys who have a better life.
- **Lack of dialogue between parents and children.** Some parents were found not to take an interest in a child's activities or achievements. Parents are often preoccupied with concerns over agricultural activities and children are not given any encouragement.

Other barriers identified but classed as minor:

- **Ignorance related to the parents' very low level of education.** Study results show that illiterate parents place low value on children's schooling.
- **Enlisting children in armed groups.** Survey reveals a number of young teenagers are recruited to take part in organised theft and looting. The financial rewards are attractive. The majority are boys but some girls are enlisted.
- **Responsibility for children of widows.** Most orphaned children are out of school as widowed mothers have very limited income. Both boys and girls need to earn money where they can farming or performing domestic duties for others.
- **Childrens' disinterest in school.** Inadequacy of schools (such as teacher absences) and repetitive learning discourage children. Children who fail (because they are unable to attend fully because of home duties) feel judged and drop out. Peers who are earning money (for example weaving mats, cutting bamboo, or transporting corn) influence children to leave school.
- **Polygamy.** Some still feel it is useful to have several women and children which can cause parents to turn their backs on children. People believe that having many children is great prestige. Only the privileged wife gets support from the father at the expense of co-wives and their children. Polygamous men are not interested in the wellbeing of their children. The situation is becoming more rare but still present.
- Extra-curricular activities could help motivate children to stay in school as well as rehabilitating school buildings.

The research reports that government and partner organisations are working on the issues of polygamy, birth planning, and limiting abduction marriage. Authors recommend that education organisations be involved in community awareness raising of the value of girls education. There is a need for government to motivate teachers with adequate pay. Literacy programmes for adults could help to educate on child rearing.

The study found differences between areas. The Banyamulenge community is said to be close to schooling all children without gender-based discrimination. The Bifuliru, Banyindu and Batwa were found not to understand the value of girls' education. The Banyamulenge community had to disperse due to cyclical wars. The children taken in by households of family connections in the city centers of Uvira, Bukavu, Kigali, and Bujumbura are going to schools available in the city. Those that remain isolated in the highlands lack role models. The authors emphasize the need for partnerships between state institutions, NGOs, civil society, and UN agencies to tackle the barriers to education.

7. Girls education programmes in the DRC

Core components of the multi-donor VAS-Y Fille! programme³ aims to improve enrolment, retention and learning. It is led by the International Rescue Committee who partner with Save the Children Fund (SCF), and Catholic Relief Services (CRS). It has been developed as a strategic partnership with the Ministère de l'enseignement primaire, secondaire et professionnelle (DFID, 2017). It includes teacher training, learning opportunities for out-of-school girls, reading clubs for community members, and an innovative savings programme for parents to pay school fees (The

³ <https://devtracker.dfid.gov.uk/projects/GB-CHC-1065972-DF080>

Research Base, 2016). Partnerships with innovative private organisations strengthen the programme (Girls Education Challenge, 2015). Trust Merchant Bank assist with needs-based scholarships⁴ and female champions such as 'Airtel⁵ for girls' education' are involved. Evaluation of VAS-Y Fille!'s activities show the programme to have strengthened existing systems, which look to continue beyond the life of the project (DFID, 2017).

Cordaid are implementing a performance-based financing approach where a school receives more money for enrolling a girl.⁶ Results are yet to be published.

The Accelere! project is supporting education for both girls and boys in the DRC funded by USAID and DFID.⁷ Chemonics are one partner working with local actors to build emotional and physical safety within schools. The project also helps parents to fund education as schools still often charge fees despite the government mandate that education should be free.

8. Adolescence

A policy note (GAGE, 2017) focusing more specifically on the problems for girls of adolescent age in accessing schools is not focussed on DRC but provides some useful considerations for the significant gender gap in secondary education.

The policy note highlights that the most disadvantaged adolescent girls in terms of access to education include those with disabilities, ethnic minorities, those living in remote areas, and those in conflict-affected settings. Where there are improvements in access, often these are not accompanied by attention to safety and quality instruction. Learning environments are often not age-appropriate or gender-responsive.

Barriers to girls participation identified: costs, domestic and care-related duties, marriage and motherhood, violence, facilities that aren't girl-friendly, teaching environment overcrowded and poorly supplied, disincentivised by weak linkages between school curricula and labour market demands, lack of support for most marginalised – poorest, ethnic/linguistic minorities, refugees and girls with disabilities.

⁴ <https://educationinnovations.org/program/valorisation-de-la-scholarisation-de-la-fille-vas-y-fille>

⁵ Corporate Social Responsibility activity for telecom provider in India

⁶ <https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/better-education-half-million-girls-and-boys> <https://www.cordaid.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2018/08/Cordaid-2pager-PAQUE-Education-in-Congo-FR-LR.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.chemonics.com/impact-story/building-safe-spaces-learning-democratic-republic-congo/>

9. Tackling barriers: learning from other low-income countries

The Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE)

The United Nations Girls' Education Initiative produced a report of successful intervention case studies in the areas of Kenya, Malawi and Zambia (Musundi, 2016). The Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) set up a boarding school in Kajaido, **Kenya** for the Maasai community. They introduced the "Centre of Excellence" concept to provide a gender responsive environment to rescue girls at risk from child marriage, female genital cutting, and other forms of gender-based violence. The model trains teachers, administrators, and the surrounding community to understand specific needs of boys and girls. Children are empowered in *Tuseme*⁸ clubs where they learn to speak about their problems. They participate in debates with other schools and increase self-confidence. According to the headteacher, the school works closely with the area chief to rescue girls who are going to be married off. Girls are given psychosocial support. Carrying out rescue missions comes with security threats. There is support from the area chief against female genital cutting and for girls' education.

In other parts of Kenya, FAWE have supported women's groups to do outreach to support girls' education and adolescent girls issues. Women interviewed felt they were achieving some success in changing community attitudes.

Education has had low levels of government investment in **Zambia** compared to other African countries (Musundi, 2016). Teenage pregnancies are also a notable problem. FAWE in Zambia has encouraged Student Alliance for Female Education (SAFE) Clubs promoting peer-to-peer mentorship, building self-esteem and encouraging conversations around issues such as sexuality. The Clubs have been found to have reduced teenage pregnancies.

FAWE in **Malawi** have supported local women to advocate for girls' education. This empowers the local women and helps to create change.

Evidence review: What works in girls' education

The evidence review of 'what works in girls' education' (Sperling & Winthrop, 2016) identifies seven categories: 1) making schools affordable, 2) overcoming health barriers, 3) reducing time and distance to school, 4) making schools more girl-friendly, 5) improving school quality, 6) increasing community engagement, and 7) sustaining girls education during emergencies.

Schools costs is an issue identified in the DRC. The review finds that abolishing school fees is important to eliminate direct costs. Governments should ban schools from collecting fees, however governments must prepare for and fund the subsequent increase in enrolments. High-quality learning must be ensured for all enrolled.

⁸ Swahili for 'let's speak out'

Cash transfers (conditional and unconditional), scholarships and stipends also target the costs of schooling. These can help reduce the indirect and opportunity costs of girls' schooling. There are many examples of rigorously evaluated cash and in-kind transfers proven to effectively increase girls' enrolment. Research highlights the importance of well-designed programmes that are properly implemented. Conditionality is most successful but must be thoughtfully designed.⁹ Mechanisms must be explicit and transparent. Monitoring for compliance is recommended. Successful examples in Africa include: 1) the **Child Sponsorship Programme** in Kenya where NGOs raise money from people willing to sponsor a girls education; 2) **The Zomba Cash Transfer experiment** in Malawi organised by the World Bank and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation; and 3) the **Girls' Scholarship Program in Kenya** where top scoring girls were funded by International Child Support (ICS) Africa. All interventions aimed at getting girls into schools must be paired with interventions to improve learning.

Offsetting indirect costs and encouraging commitment by providing school uniforms in Kenya has proven statistically significant in dropout rates and teenage pregnancies in Kenya compared to a control.

Girls being late for school due to chores was raised as an issue in DRC. The review finds some examples of schools in other countries offering flexible schedules to help accommodate children's domestic duties. It also finds further examples of safe spaces and girls clubs in girl-friendly schools.

Improving educational quality for girls includes hiring high-quality teachers who attend and engage students, and improving how teachers teach.

Increasing community engagement is seen as important but noted that it is difficult to gather evidence on this as it is entangled in a larger package of interventions. Some successful approaches are identified including, explicit community agreements to educate girls, community involvement with teacher recruitment and school management, and genuine government-community partnerships.

Literature review: Enhancing girls' education

A rigorous literature review looking at interventions to expand and improve girls education from 2014 (Unterhalter et al.) identified that resource interventions are effective when they target families most in need. Infrastructure interventions should be linked with ensuring learning and teaching. The importance of motivated, supported teachers was emphasised to enhance girls' learning.

⁹ See pp 118-130 of the review for specific recommendations on cash transfer programme design. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/What-Works-in-Girls-Educationlowres.pdf>

DFID Girls' Education Challenge

Learning from the DFID Girls' Education Challenge identifies factors found to improve outcomes for girls (DFID, 2017):

- In-school coaching for teachers coupled with structured teaching and learning materials.
- Clubs and activities outside the curriculum to improve motivation and self-esteem.
- Collection of data to use for planning and decision-making.
- Recognition of the need to work with boys and men to improve outcomes for girls.
- Promoting change at all of the following three levels: community, school governance, and national.

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Key websites

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<https://www.unicef.org/education/girls-education>

<https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-and-gender-equality>

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/girlseducation>

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