

Constraints to girls' access to secondary education in Uganda

Executive Statement

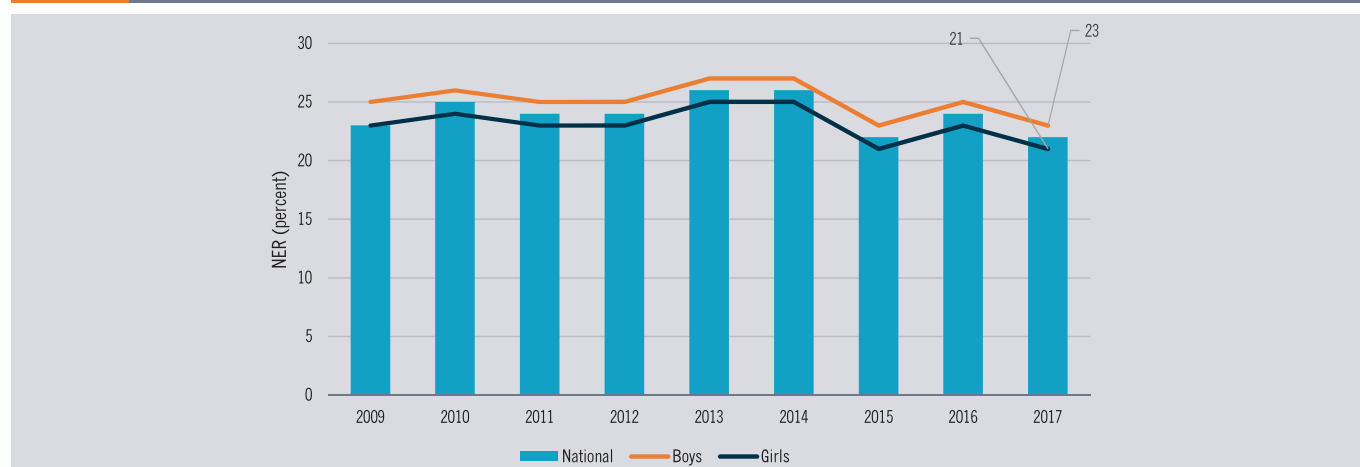
The Government of Uganda has made significant strides towards achieving Sustainable development goal (SDG) 4 targets—which aims at ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education. For secondary education, government has heavily invested in Universal Secondary Education (USE) through public-private partnerships and construction of one government aided secondary school per sub-county. These have yielded positive results in terms of increased number of secondary schools in the country and increase in secondary school enrolment. However, the enrolment of girls in secondary schools has persistently been low compared to boys. This is partly attributed to: (a) Parents continue to be the main funders of secondary education; (b) Unfulfilled government goal of one secondary school per sub-county; and (c) Early marriages and teenage pregnancy. In this regard, there is need to: (a) To put in place measures to eliminate or minimize the rampant and growing element of extra cost burden on parents; (b) Take into account the size of sub-counties as well as natural demarcations of islands in allocation of secondary schools; and (c) Intensify awareness in schools and communities on issues regarding dangers of early marriages and teenage pregnancies.

Introduction

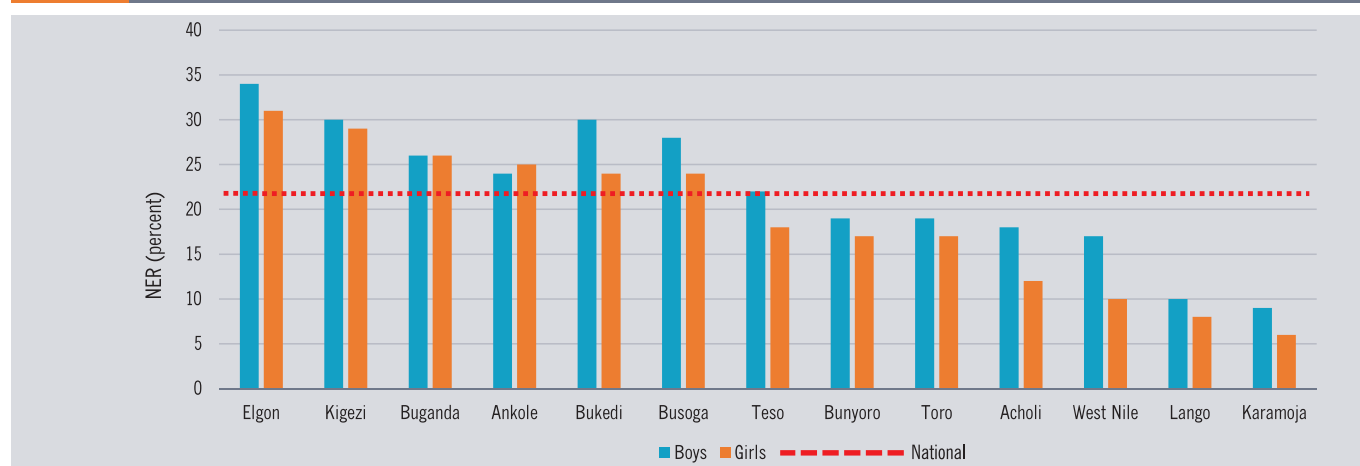
After ten years of implementing the Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme, the Government of Uganda (GoU) in 2007 initiated the Universal Secondary Education (USE) programme. The USE targeted supporting the transition of UPE graduates and addressing gender inequalities in secondary school enrolment. Over the years, a number of initiatives have been undertaken to increase enrolment in secondary schools: (a) the increasing share of government education budget to secondary education from less than 10 % in 2007 to 13.2 percent by 2018/19; (b) public-private partnerships (PPP) with existing private schools, where government transfers a subsidy of UGX 47,000 per student to private USE schools; (c) Construction of one government aided secondary school per sub-county without secondary schools; among others. These interventions have yielded positive outcomes in terms of: (a) increased number of secondary schools from 2373 in 2007 to 3000 in 2017; (b) increase in secondary school enrolment from 1.23 million in 2009/10 to 1.37 million in 2016/17; (c) increase in the proportion of sub-counties with government aided secondary school to 71 percent in 2017. Based on document review of existing literature, this brief highlights some of the factors that account for low net school enrolment of girls in secondary schools: (a) Households continue to be the main funders of secondary education; (b) Unfulfilled government goal of

one secondary school per sub-county; and (c) Early marriages and teenage pregnancy.

Despite the observed achievements, overall secondary school net enrolment have remained very low—especially those of girls. Figure 1 shows the trends in secondary school net enrolments for children aged 13-18 years for the period 2009 to 2017. *Net enrolment rate (NER) refers to the percentage of Ugandan children of school-going age accessing secondary education, and is computed as the ratio of children of the official secondary school age enrolled in secondary Education to all children (enrolled and not enrolled) of that same age category (Ministry of Education and Sports, Education abstract, 2013).* The figure shows that the net enrolment rate for girls has persistently been low compared to that of boys. The figure also shows widening gender gaps in secondary school attendance. The regional disparities (Figure 2) cannot be neglected. Some regions like Karamoja and Lango sub-regions lag behind in terms of access to secondary education with NER for girls and boys of 6 and 8 respectively, when compared to rates of Elgon, Kigezi, and Buganda.

Figure 1 Persistent gender disparities in secondary school net enrolment (2009-2017)

Source: MoES Education abstracts (various series)

Figure 2 Access to secondary education skewed positively among boys in 2017

Source: MoES Education abstract (2017)

a) Parents continue to be the main funders of secondary education

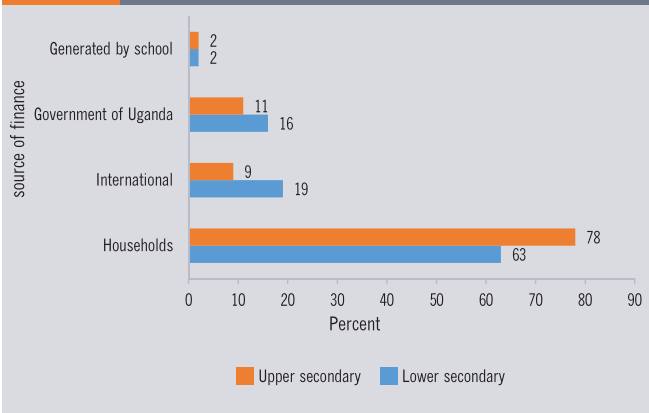
Uganda is committed to sustainable development goal (SDG) targets 4.1 and 4.5 which aims at universal secondary education; and eliminating gender disparities in education and ensuring equal access to education to the vulnerable populations by 2030. To this effect, USE was adopted with the aim of eliminating tuition fees for secondary schools as one of the mechanisms to increase enrolment. Despite the existence of USE (free education) and its associated capitation grants, the heaviest burden for paying schools dues continue to fall on the parents. Figure 3 shows that the largest contribution to lower secondary schooling comes from households (63%). This implies that the burden of financing education has shifted to households, who currently represents two thirds of total funding. Poor families who can afford even to pay very low school fees find it hard to sustain their children in school, which makes enrolment and regular attendance a challenge for girls.¹

Furthermore, not all public secondary schools are under the USE programme. With free secondary education limited to few public and private secondary schools (50%), majority of Ugandans continue to pay to access secondary education. Whether in public or in non-government schools, parents' contributions through student fees constitute a significant part of school financing and therefore a constraining factor to secondary school enrolment.² Because of the traditional preference for boys over girls and low incomes, girls are less likely to stay in secondary schools. Consequently, there is need to address the socio-economic barriers children continue to face in accessing secondary schooling in Uganda.

b) Unfulfilled government goal of one secondary school per sub-county

To ensure equitable access to secondary education, government aimed at establishing at least one secondary school per sub-county, through grant aiding of community schools and construction of seed

Figure 3 Source of Finance for education at “O” and “A” level education



Source: O'Donoghue et al. (2018)³

schools. There have been efforts by the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) through PPP arrangement. This has had a resultant effect on the number of schools under the PPP arrangement from 363 schools in 2007 (enrolling approximately 40,000 students) to over 800 schools (enrolling nearly half a million students or one-third of all students in secondary schools).⁴ However, there are a number of districts that have sub counties without a government secondary school. Over 718 sub-counties do not a government-funded school and over 216 sub-counties without any form of secondary school.⁵ This could partly be attributed to creation of new administrative units under creation of new districts since the new districts come

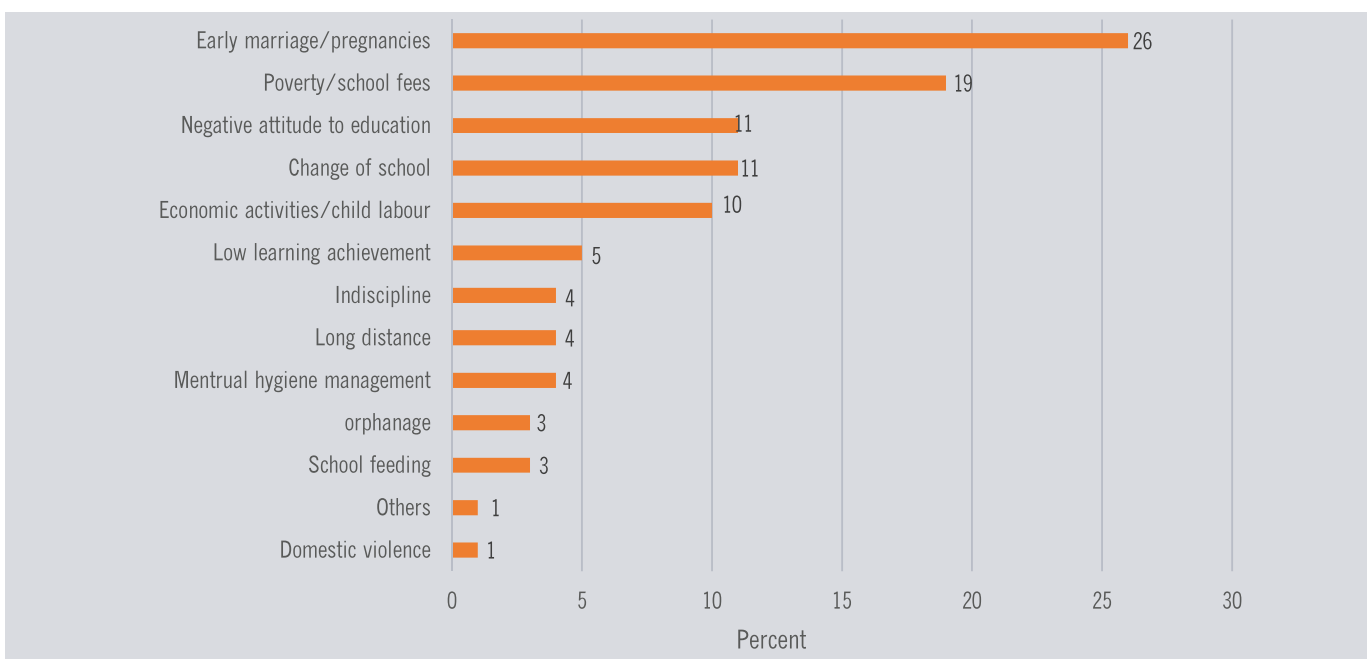
with new sub-counties, and these need a school each. This is a clear indication that MoES is still struggling to meet a more basic goal of at least one secondary school per sub-county.

In addition, while the policy to establish a government secondary school sub county is commendable, some sub counties are so large that they are equivalent to some districts elsewhere, and consequently, some of the learners travel long distances to school even when a school is established in the sub county. For example there are a number of island communities that require one secondary school per island despite several islands sometimes comprising just one sub county This implies that government policy of having just one secondary school per sub-county may not sufficient. Nakapiripirit District, for example, has only two secondary schools, “Nakapiripirit Seed School and Namalu Seed”; Buvuma District has “Buvuma College” located in Buvuma Town Council, and Nairambi Seed School which opened in 2019 and only covers S.1 and S.2.⁶ Consequently, some of the learners travel long distances to school even when a school is established in the sub-county, which limits equitable access to education and eventual observed low net enrolment rates for girls.

c) Early marriages and teenage pregnancy

Early marriages increase teenage pregnancy have been cited in literature as one of the primary factors that limits the access of young girls to education. ^{7 8} According to the UDHS 2016, 15.6 percent of the girls between the ages of 15-19 had had a live birth and 5.1 percent were expecting their first child at the time of the survey.

Figure 4 Reasons for children dropping out of school at both primary and secondary levels



Source: ISER (2019).

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Teenage mothers are more likely to experience adverse pregnancy outcomes and are more constrained in their ability to pursue educational opportunities than young women who delay childbearing. In almost all schools visited during the evaluation of Uganda’s progress towards SDG 4, early marriages featured prominently among the reasons for children dropping out of school.⁹

Conclusions and policy recommendation

This brief highlights the various reasons that undermine the enrolment of girls in secondary schools. These are largely attributed to government failure to achieve its set goal of one secondary school per sub-county, increasing burden of paying school dues falling on parents; and (c) teenage pregnancy and early marriages. We recommend the following policy actions to facilitate girls’ enrolment for secondary school education:

- a) There is need by MoES to target its expansion activities not only in those sub-counties which do not have any secondary schools at all, but also in those areas where existing capacity is insufficient

to meet demand. The use of sub-county as planning units for establishment of government aided schools should be augmented with consideration of area size, population size and geographical factors. Take into account the size of sub-counties as well as natural demarcations of islands in allocation of secondary schools.

- b) Given the fact that government is responsible for ensuring that both public and private education institutions conform to the rules and regulations governing the provision of education services in Uganda, measures should be put in place to eliminate or minimize the rampant and growing element of extra cost burden on parents in form of examination fees, extra lessons fees, development fees among others in secondary schools.
- c) Awareness raising in schools and communities on issues dangers of early marriages and teenage pregnancies and importance of educating girls.

Endnotes

- 1 Linn, R. (2016). Midline Evaluation Report: PEAS Girls’ Enrolment, Attendance, Retention & Results (GEARR) Project. By Girls’ education challenge, UKAID
- 2 The World Bank (2018). Uganda Secondary Education Expansion Project (P166570). Project Information Document/ Integrated Safeguards Data Sheet (PID/ISDS)
- 3 O’Donoghue, J., Crawford, L., Makaara, J., Otieno, P., and Perakis R. (2018). A review of Uganda’s Universal secondary Education Public Private Partnership Programme. A report by UKAID

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- 5 O’Donoghue et al (2018)
- 6 ISER (2019). Status of Implementation of SDG 4 on Education: Is Uganda on Track? By Initiative for Social and Economic rights (ISER).
- 7 HDR, 2015
- 8 NPA (2020)
- 9 ISER (2019)

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Address:

Economic Policy Research Centre
51, Pool Road, Makerere University Campus,
P. O. Box 7841 Kampala, Uganda
Tel: +256414541023/4 Fax: +256414541022
Email: eprc@eprcug.org, Website: www.eprc.or.ug