



RELI

Regional Education
Learning Initiative

Mapping the Girls' Education Ecosystem in East Africa

Insights from a Regional Landscape Analysis



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Abbreviations and Acronyms

| | |
|-------|---|
| AGEE | Achieving Gender Equality in Education Framework |
| ASALs | Arid and Semi-Arid Lands |
| CBO | Community-Based Organization |
| EA | East Africa |
| EGER | Evidence for Gender and Education Resource |
| FCDO | Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office |
| FGM | Female Genital Mutilation |
| FSG | Foundational Strategy Group (author of the Water of Systems Change framework) |
| GEC | Girls Education Challenge |
| GERAP | Girls Education RELI Africa Program |
| GIRL | Girl Innovation, Research, and Learning Center |
| GPE | Global Partnership for Education |
| INGO | International Non-Governmental Organization |
| LMIC | Low- and Middle-Income Countries |
| M&E | Monitoring and Evaluation |
| MHM | Menstrual Hygiene Management |
| NGO | Non-Governmental Organization |
| RELI | Regional Education Learning Initiative Africa |
| SRGBV | School-Related Gender-Based Violence |
| SRH | Sexual and Reproductive Health |
| STEM | Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics |
| SWOT | Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats |
| ToC | Theory of Change |

Executive Summary

The Regional Education Learning Initiative (RELI) Africa through the Girls Education RELI Africa Program (GERAP), commissioned the GIRL Centre to conduct a mapping of the policy, practice, and funding landscape for girls' education across Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. The study employed a rigorous, mixed-methods comparative case study approach across Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya. The overarching aim was to move beyond fragmented, project-based impact to drive systemic transformation in girls' education. The comprehensive methodology included a detailed stakeholder mapping of 155 organizations, a systematic analysis of 75 girls' education interventions and indicators, a review of 30 key gender and education policies and a data inventory of 130 gender and empowerment funders across EA.

While the region has achieved significant progress in primary school access and enrollment, the analysis reveals that this advancement masks deep, persistent challenges at the secondary and upper secondary levels. Sustained educational progress for adolescent girls is critically stalled by interconnected barriers: high rates of adolescent pregnancy and child marriage, systemic School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV), and fundamental quality deficits, including a lack of gender-responsive teaching. Furthermore, girls from marginalized communities—such as those in pastoralist, breakoff islands, fishing communities, indigenous minority groups - such as the Batwa, and poor urban settings—face an intersectional disadvantage where poverty, location, and gender norms cumulatively magnify their exclusion.

Some of the most effective interventions in the East African ecosystem are demonstrably multi-dimensional, moving beyond single-issue fixes to address barriers at the school, household, and community levels simultaneously. The most successful models, such as Holistic Residential Schools (Kakenya's Dream in Kenya, SEGA Girls School in Morogoro, Tanzania), offer comprehensive protection and quality education, achieving near-perfect completion rates and virtually eliminating child marriage among participants. Equally effective are integrated multi-sectoral packages like the Adolescent Girls Initiative-Kenya (AGI-K), which proves that addressing structural poverty through mechanisms like Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs) is essential to maintain attendance and ensure continuous exposure to critical life skills, health, and violence prevention content. Conversely, standalone interventions—such as providing sanitary products, coaching and mentorship, or life skills training without enhanced pedagogy, and holistic empowerment and system transformation—are necessary for well-being but are insufficient to drive meaningful academic outcomes.

Despite the clear evidence on effective practice, a persistent implementation gap exists, where strong regional policy intent fails to translate into effective action on the ground. A strong consensus exists among all three nations on high-level priorities—mandating school re-entry for pregnant girls and promoting STEM participation—but national policies often suffer from a governance deficit. This deficit includes poor enforcement, weak oversight from Ministries of Education, and a critical shortage of gender-disaggregated data needed to track real progress. While national strategies differ (Tanzania prioritizing free education, Kenya focusing on MHM, and Uganda emphasizing Gender Responsive Budgeting), the challenge

remains ensuring these high-level mandates translate into tangible change in the classroom and community.

Achieving durable, systemic transformation hinges on shifting the deeply held mental models and patriarchal norms—the implicit layer of the system that dictates how girls' education is valued. The path forward requires adopting an Ecosystem Model of Scaling Social Impact. This mandates that RELI Africa pivot from aggregating isolated project successes to a coordinated movement: leveraging the deep community trust of Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) for local change, combining this with the technical rigor of INGOs, and aligning with the systemic reach of government to influence policy. Crucially, the Learning Agenda must shift from documenting outputs to rigorously proving impact using longitudinal, mixed-methods research, and policy development must become a bottom-up, collaborative process to foster true ownership and sustainability.

1. Introduction

Background

Girls' education continues to improve over the years. Since 2015, global efforts have led to 50 million more girls being enrolled in school, with 5 million more completing each level of education from primary to upper secondary education (UNESCO, 2024). Despite this progress, millions of girls remain out of school globally, with a majority struggling to progress or complete higher-level schooling. While many countries have achieved gender parity at primary level, there remain huge inconsistencies at secondary and upper secondary levels, mainly due to interconnected barriers such as early marriage, poverty, adolescent pregnancy and structural inequalities in school infrastructure and learning quality (UNICEF, 2022). In many Low and Middle-Income (LMIC) countries, girls are still more likely than boys to never have enrolled or drop out of school before completing secondary school (Parity - UNESCO, 2016). These trends reinforce the urgency of enhancing targeted efforts to support girls' education beyond primary school levels.

The East Africa (EA) region reflects these global patterns but with sharper regional inequalities and slower progress, especially at secondary school levels. Large proportions of girls in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania aged 15-19 do not transition or complete secondary education (Delprato & Farieta, 2024). Adolescent fertility rates in these countries remain high within the region, contributing to dropout and limiting re-entry opportunities especially for girls (UNESCO, 2023). Learning assessments also reveal substantial gender-specific deficits as many girls who remain in school lag on key educational milestones compared to boys. These patterns underscore the need for targeted interventions that address both access and learning while responding to the gendered challenges that shape girls' educational trajectories across the East Africa region.

Girls Education RELI Africa Program (GERAP) Program

The GERAP program was designed to drive sustainable, systemic transformation in girls' education by addressing root causes and embedding solutions within policies, institutions, and communities. In 2022, Jaslika Consulting was commissioned by the Wellspring Foundation to conduct research to identify the barriers to girls' education in the three East African countries, where RELI Africa operates (Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda). The study was launched in 2024. In addition to identifying the barriers to girls' education, the research report highlighted the urgent need to, a) amplify girls' voices in decision-making, b) strengthen multi-sectoral collaboration to drive systemic change, and c) include marginalized groups in interventions that address gender inequality. The 2024 study, which produced a report titled, *creating impact at the local level for girls: learning from girls' education interventions in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, 2023*, **provided** the evidence base for the design of the Girls Education RELI Africa Program (GERAP).

Building on the 2024 study, GERAP tasked the Population Council's GIRL Centre with conducting the 2025 follow-up study, titled *Mapping the Girls' Education Ecosystem in East Africa, 2025*. This current research is designed to provide support for the next stages of the GERAP program, which are:

- Refining the GERAP strategy and Theory of Change (ToC).
- Developing evidence-based and scalable girls' education solutions across East Africa.
- Establishing a GERAP research and learning agenda.
- Strengthening multi-sectoral national and regional collaboration across the education, health, and economic empowerment sectors by engaging the girls' education ecosystem.
- Building the capacity of GERAP and RELI Africa members through peer learning, knowledge exchange, and evidence-driven programming and advocacy.

The current study employed a rigorous, mixed-methods comparative case study approach across Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya. The overarching aim was to move beyond fragmented, project-based impact to drive systemic transformation in girls' education.

The comprehensive methodology included a detailed stakeholder mapping of 155 organizations, a systematic analysis of 75 girls' education interventions and indicators, a review of 30 key gender and education policies and a data inventory of 130 gender and empowerment funders across EA. Data classification was standardized using global frameworks like the Evidence for Gender Education Resource (EGER) and UNESCO's Achieving Gender Equality in Education (AGEE) framework to ensure robust cross-country comparison. The analysis was driven by key questions on program effectiveness, policy-practice gaps, and organizational capacity for systemic scale, culminating in the application of the FSG *Water of Systems Change framework* to evaluate the potential for long-term, collective impact in the region.

The stakeholder identification utilized a strategic blended approach, combining top-down searches focusing on major girls' education institutional funders to capture large, established programs, with a bottom-up, network-led mapping to ensure the inclusion of essential, often-overlooked Community-Based Organizations (CBOs). This generated a dynamic ecosystem view, categorized by capacity for systemic scale.

The final analytical approach involved a synthesis of findings across four key themes: The Challenge (evidence of girls' education barriers), The Practice (stakeholder mapping and girls' intervention models), The Policies (Government Priorities), and The System (funding and ecosystem analysis for system transformation). This synthesis served to diagnose prevalent barriers, articulate effective strategies, and offer actionable recommendations for achieving sustainable, system-level change in adolescent girls' education.

The core of the analysis was the interventions indicator analysis, which aimed to pinpoint effective, multi-dimensional program models. The impact of these models on learning outcomes and gender norms was then evaluated using a three-tiered EGER-based rating system: Most Effective, Promising, and Needs More Research.

The report is structured as follows:

- Section 1: Introduction
- Section 2: Research methodology
- Section 3: The Challenge: Data on Girls' Education Barriers
- Section 4: Practice: Stakeholder Mapping, Intervention Models and Indicator Mapping
- Section 5: The Policies: Government Priorities

- Section 6: The System: The FSG water of systems change framework
- Section 7: Key Implications and Recommendations
- Section 8: RELI Africa's Learning Strategy
- Section 9: References
- Section 10: Annex: Additional Data Tables

2. Research Methodology

Study Design

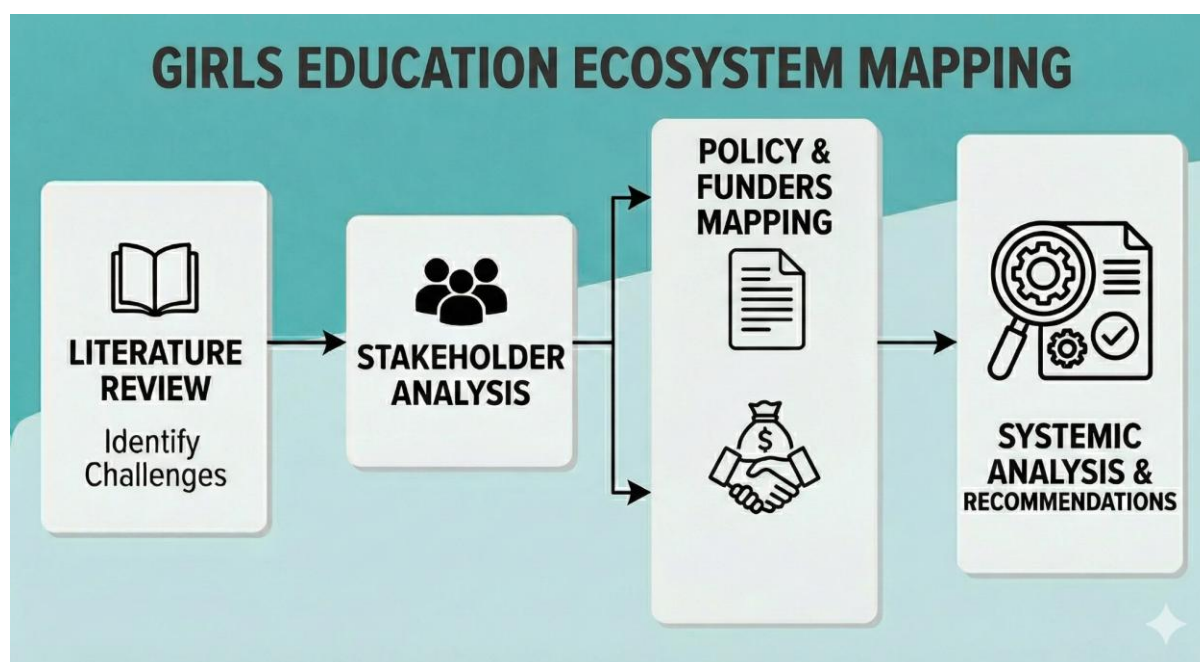


Figure 1: Girls' Education Ecosystem Mapping Study Design

The study employed a rigorous, mixed-methods comparative case study approach, focusing on three East African countries: Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya. The methodology was comprehensive, incorporating a detailed stakeholder mapping of 155 organizations, an analysis of 75 girls' education interventions and indicators, and a systematic policy review of 30 key policies.

The core analysis involved classifying data and identifying stakeholders. Data classification utilized rigorous secondary analysis and integrated standardized frameworks like EGER and UNESCO AGEE. Stakeholder identification used a blended top-down (major funders like GPE, GEC) and bottom-up (grassroots CBOs) approach to map the ecosystem. The subsequent analysis focused on assessing program effectiveness, identifying policy-practice gaps, and using systemic frameworks (like FSG Water of Systems Change) to evaluate organizational capacity for system transformation. The overarching aim was to achieve systemic, not fragmented, impact.

Stakeholder Mapping

The primary objective of this mapping exercise was to move beyond conventional project lists and create a dynamic, ecosystem-based view of the stakeholders driving girls' education and gender equality outcomes in East Africa. A total of 155 organizations across the three countries were mapped to identify their capacity for systemic scale and to understand emerging trends in multi-dimensional program design. The geographic focus was centered on Uganda and Tanzania, leveraging a separate, existing comprehensive mapping of actors by the EGER program in Kenya as a foundational baseline.

A standardized data collection framework was developed to ensure cross-country data comparability. Key fields included Organization Name, Type (CBO, NGO, INGO), Project Scope (National/County/ District), Gender Intervention Theme, Target Group, Age, and Education Level. Organizational affiliation with regional networks (like RELI Africa) was tracked. The Source of Information was recorded for transparency. A blended approach, combining top-down and bottom-up methods, was used to ensure maximum coverage and mitigate bias towards large organizations. Initial efforts focused on grantees and partners of major global donors (Co-Impact, GPE, GEC/FCDO) to identify large-scale, established programs, typically run by INGOs or large National NGOs. To include less visible Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), the methodology mapped organizations through trusted local networks and thematic collectives (e.g., Girls Not Brides, Girls Education Collective TZ, Amplify Girls). This successfully identified grassroots organizations in Uganda and Tanzania often missed by conventional research.

Findings were triangulated and externally validated by sharing the list with GERAP members.

Girls' Interventions & Indicator Mapping

A systematic methodology was used to map, classify, and analyze 75 girls' education interventions across Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. Data collection involved identifying and locating recent interventions via online searches (websites and reports). Key indicators were extracted and classified (e.g., attendance, teacher training, literacy, cash transfers, SRH, digital learning), alongside contextual details (target age, coverage, outcome relevance), creating an MS Excel database.

The comprehensive data collection framework moves beyond traditional quantitative parity, grounded in established global research. It integrates insights from the Population Council's gender barriers to education review and the Evidence for Gender and Education Resource (EGER) roadmap and Kenya practice analysis. Leveraging the UNESCO Achieving Gender Equality in Education (AGEE) framework enhances the analysis, guiding the inclusion of indicators for Participation, Resources, and Outcomes, extending to longitudinal economic impact for holistic, long-term value.

| Parameter Category | Focus | EGER / AGEE Dimension |
|------------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| Project Scope | Country, Funder, Program Duration | Systems (Governance, Resources) |
| Vulnerability & Equity | Geographical Zone (ASAL, Refugee, Pastoralist, Urban, Rural) | Access , Equity , System |
| Intervention Themes | Participation, Learning Outcomes, Safety(Violence), SRHR, Well-Being, Knowledge/Skills, Values, Economic Empowerment, Resilience, Digital Inclusion, Child Labor, Adolescent Childbearing, Child Marriage, Male Engagement | Participation, Resources, Outcomes |
| Impact Measurement | Reported Impact Indicators Vs. Actual Measured Indicators | Outcomes (Beyond Schooling) |

Gender and Education Policy Mapping

A standardized data collection framework was developed to systematically capture and classify 30 girls' education policies, strategies and guidelines highlighting the policy identity - country, policy title and year and document type; policy intent - policy objectives and strategies; and policy linkage and relevance to GERAP. Data extraction was done using Artificial Intelligence, specifically Notebook LM.

Funders Inventory

The funder inventory of 130 funders was developed using a dual strategy combining primary data generation with the strategic leverage of existing long-list resources. The core of the primary strategy involved designing a detailed data collection framework intended to systematically identify and categorize each donor. This framework captured essential variables, including Funder Name, Funder Type (e.g., multilateral, grassroots), specific country/countries funded within East Africa, thematic focus, funding amount, and granting cycles. Data for this framework was gathered organically and iteratively during the primary mapping of girls' education interventions, allowing for the identification and initial recording of funding organizations directly associated with on-the-ground practice. The second strategy involved leveraging the established expertise of organizations that maintain extensive longlists of education and gender funders, such as the Girls Not Brides and Segal Family Foundation networks, to rapidly expand the inventory's breadth and ensure the inclusion of specialized grassroots donors.

Analytical Approach

The stakeholder mapping analysis assessed capacity for scale and systemic change across four areas: Program Design Trends (high-impact, multi-sectoral programming); Funding Distinctions (linking organization type to funding risk/capacity); Ecosystem Model Insights (capacity/knowledge/funding flow between CBOs, NGOs, INGOs); and Stakeholder Competitive Advantage (formal SWOT analysis, e.g., INGO rigor vs. CBO trust).

The girls' interventions mapping & indicator analysis provided a holistic view from problem to solution via four themes: The Challenge (data on barriers to girls' education); The Practice (effective, multi-dimensional program models); and The System (analyzing East African programming against the Ecosystem Model for strategic system-level entry points). An Indicator Analysis gauged intervention performance based on structured metrics.

The gender and education policy analysis focused on three critical policy areas: overarching gender and development, specific gender and education, and policies addressing key gender-related barriers (e.g., early pregnancy, child marriage). The goal was to understand policy hierarchy, intent, and practical implications across ministries and surface gaps/contradictions/cross-country learnings among the three countries.

3. The Challenge: Data on Barriers to Girls' Education

The exploration of the girls' interventions ecosystem, including policies and funding landscape, allows us to see a consistent picture of the persistent education and non-education barriers that girls in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania - together called East Africa (EA) in subsequent sections - face. This is despite continued policy and program investments in the three countries. This section will present insights gained from reviewing the current interventions in EA.

We present descriptive statistics on girls' education across Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania from key participation indicators that reflect both access and progression through the education system as reported in the most recent national data from the three countries. The graphs depict geographic inequalities between urban and rural areas and by sex. Together, these indicators offer a comprehensive snapshot of the opportunities and barriers facing girls in the three countries.

Adolescent Girls Age & Vulnerability

Adolescent girls and young women have diverse experiences, with needs that vary based on age and vulnerability. National or regional data often masks the factors that predispose some girls to greater vulnerability. For example, in Kenya, both girls and boys from the poorest households are less likely to complete primary school than their wealthier counterparts (Lopez-Lalinde et al., 2024). Poor girls, in particular, face challenges in completing upper secondary school (Booth, R., 2022; Lalinde et al., 2024).

Girls from specific geographical areas—such as Kenya's North-Eastern regions, pastoralist communities in Tanzania, or very rural communities in Uganda—are consistently at a disadvantage. The geographical location of a girl is significant, as it determines her experiences based on the systemic norms and cultures of her community. A girl's experiences are shaped by intersecting factors and overlapping identities, including:

- Socio-economic factors: Poverty
- Geographical factors: Location
- Household factors: Head of household, single-parent homes, child-headed homes, having a sick parent, and caregiving responsibilities
- Other factors: Ethnicity and disability

The mapping of girls' education interventions identified three main categories of barriers:

- Education-specific barriers
- Non-education-related barriers
- Systems and policy-level barriers

Education Barriers

Significant investments from governments, donors, and the private sector over the last few decades have undeniably driven substantial improvements in girls' educational access across

East Africa. Despite these concerted efforts and the progress made towards gender parity in primary school enrollment, persistent and troubling enrollment gaps remain. These disparities affect both girls and boys but are particularly pronounced among marginalized groups. For instance, pastoralist communities face unique challenges related to mobility and cultural norms that impact school attendance. Similarly, children residing in remote rural counties and the economically disadvantaged in poor urban settings often encounter significant structural and economic barriers that prevent them from accessing or continuing their education (Lopez-Lalinde et al., 2024).

It is critically important to understand that the barriers to education for girls are not isolated but are, instead, profoundly intersectional. A girl's experience is not shaped by a single disadvantage but is the cumulative effect of her overlapping identities, such as being a girl and belonging to a pastoralist group and living in a remote area. This compounding effect of overlapping disadvantages—including poverty, geographical isolation, disability, ethnicity, and gender—magnifies the obstacles she faces, making the pathway to and through education significantly more difficult than for her non-marginalized peers. Addressing these challenges effectively requires strategies that acknowledge and respond to this complex web of disadvantages.

The following comprehensive section will detail the specific, multi-layered barriers that profoundly impact girls' educational journey. This includes an examination of obstacles to access (getting into school), challenges to retention (staying in school) and participation (meaningful engagement in the learning process), issues related to the quality of education they receive once enrolled (e.g., unqualified teachers, lack of resources, gender bias in curriculum), and, finally, a review of the deep-seated institutional-level systemic challenges (e.g., inadequate school infrastructure, weak policy implementation, financial constraints on the education system) that collectively undermine girls' learning and long-term educational success.

Access, Retention, Transition & Completion

Enrollment in primary education has increased significantly for both girls and boys, reaching high levels nationally. In Kenya, national primary access rates are as high as 98%. However, regional disparities persist across 10 counties where primary access rates are below 90%, and these rates fall below 40% in the four Arid and Semi-Arid Counties: Garissa, Mandera, Turkana, and Wajir (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Comparable trends are evident in Tanzania and Uganda.

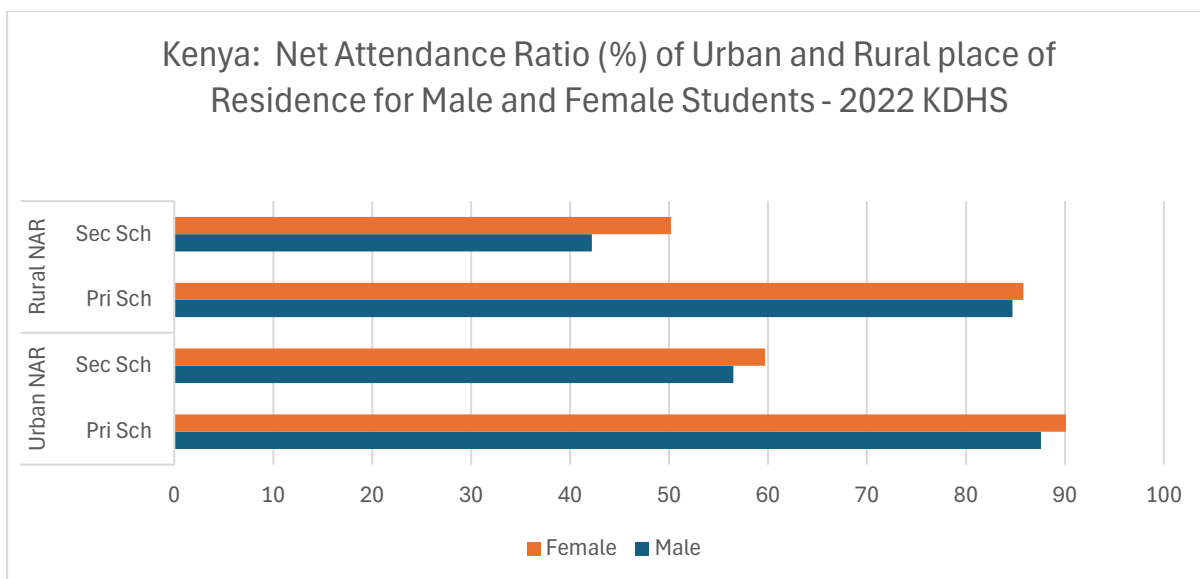


Table 2: Kenya - Net Attendance Ratio - Urban to rural areas, Source KDHS, 2022

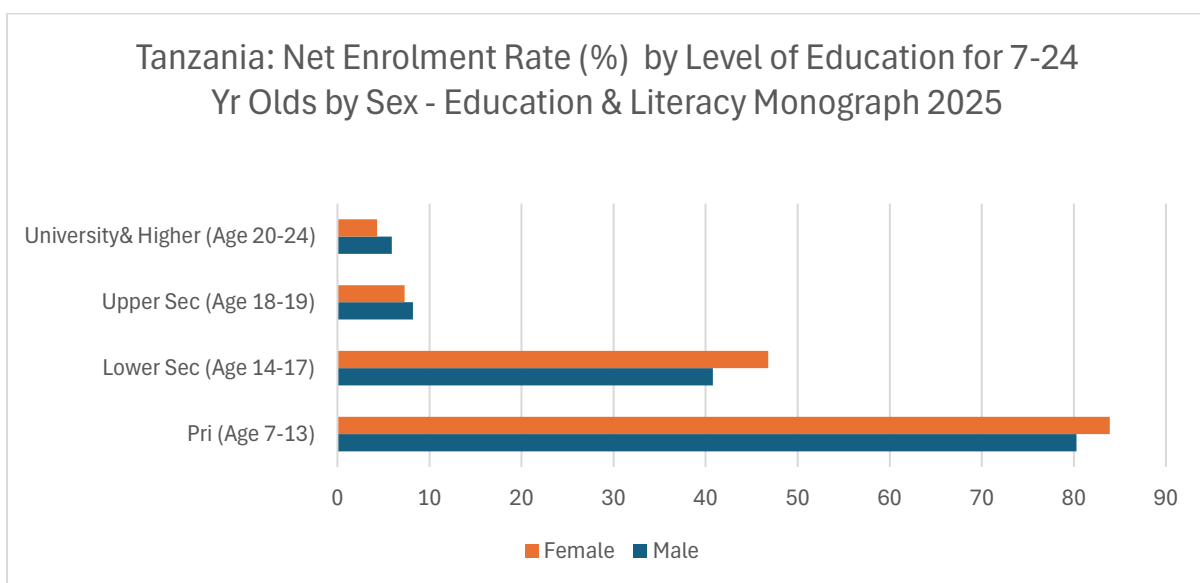


Table 3: Tanzania, Net Enrollment Rate by % and level of education for 7 - 24-year-olds by sex, Source, Education and Literacy Monograph 2025

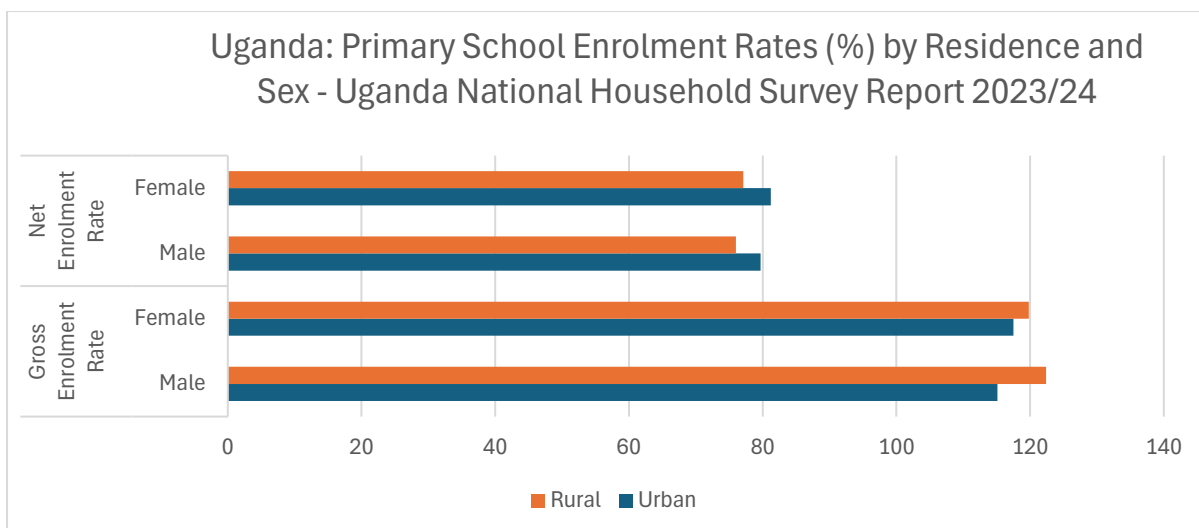


Table 4: Uganda, Primary School Enrollment Rate (%) by residence and sex, Source, Uganda National Household Survey Report, 2023/2024

While a greater number of girls are enrolled in the lower levels of education, specifically pre-primary and primary school, a significant dropout rate emerges, resulting in fewer girls completing primary school. This pattern continues toward higher educational levels. In Tanzania, despite extended years in the school system, girls attain the equivalent of only four years of learning (Booth, R., 2022). Similarly, in Kenya, a notable disparity exists in secondary completion rates, with girls significantly trailing their male counterparts (Booth, R., 2022).



Table 5: World Development Indicators in World Bank Database, Source: World Bank

In Kenya, national level data shows that girls complete primary and lower secondary levels at higher rates than boys, but this shifts at upper secondary where learning progression stalls and they start to fall behind (Booth, R, 2022).

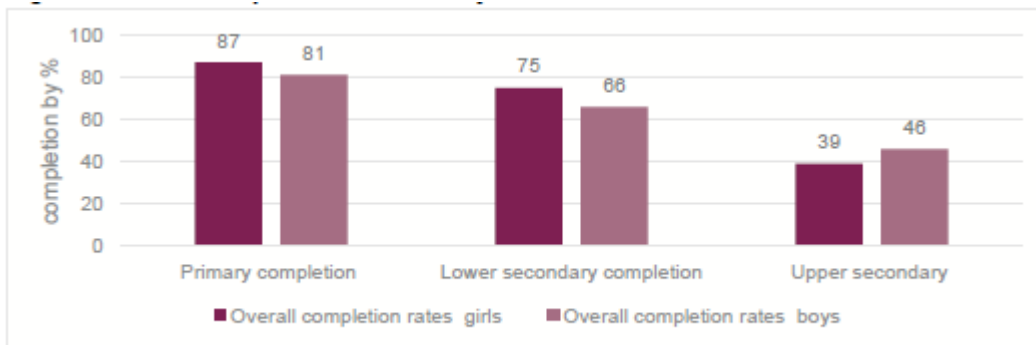


Table 6: Higher primary and lower secondary school completion rates for girls in Kenya, Source: [WIDE Education Inequalities](#)

Quality of Education - Learning Outcome

Despite a slight increase in literacy rates among poor girls in Kenya, learning levels overall remain very low, according to the EGER Kenya data and evidence synthesis (Lopez-Lalinde et al., 2024). Uganda and Tanzania experience similar trends as shown in the tables below. Children from the poorest households continue to be significantly disadvantaged compared to their wealthier peers. Notably, few existing programs focused on improving learning incorporate a literacy component, whether delivered inside or outside the classroom.

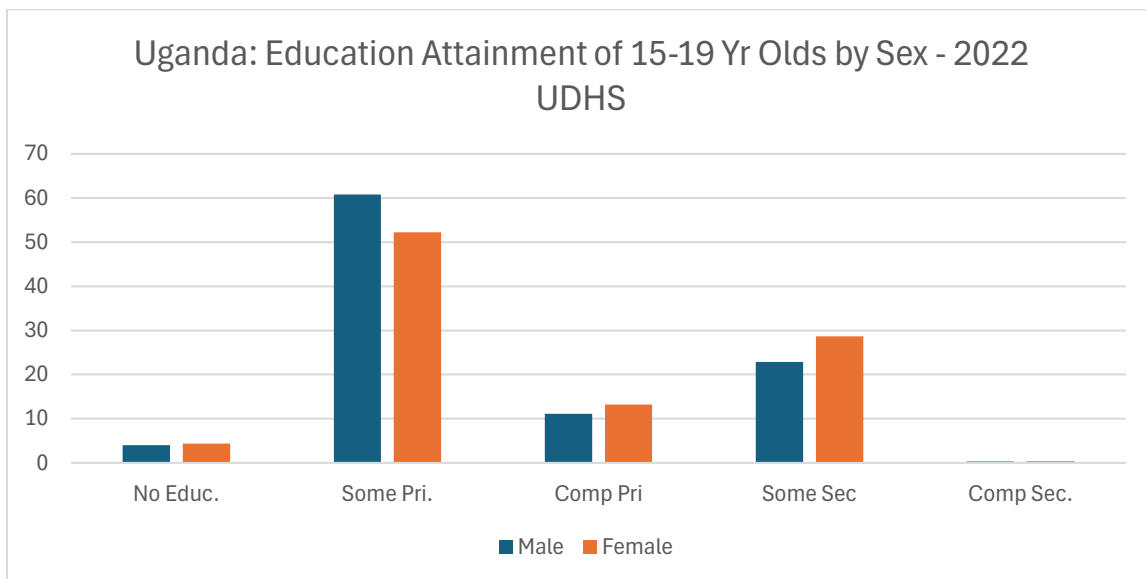


Table 7: Uganda - Education Attainment of 15 – 16-year-olds by sex, 2022, Source UDHS

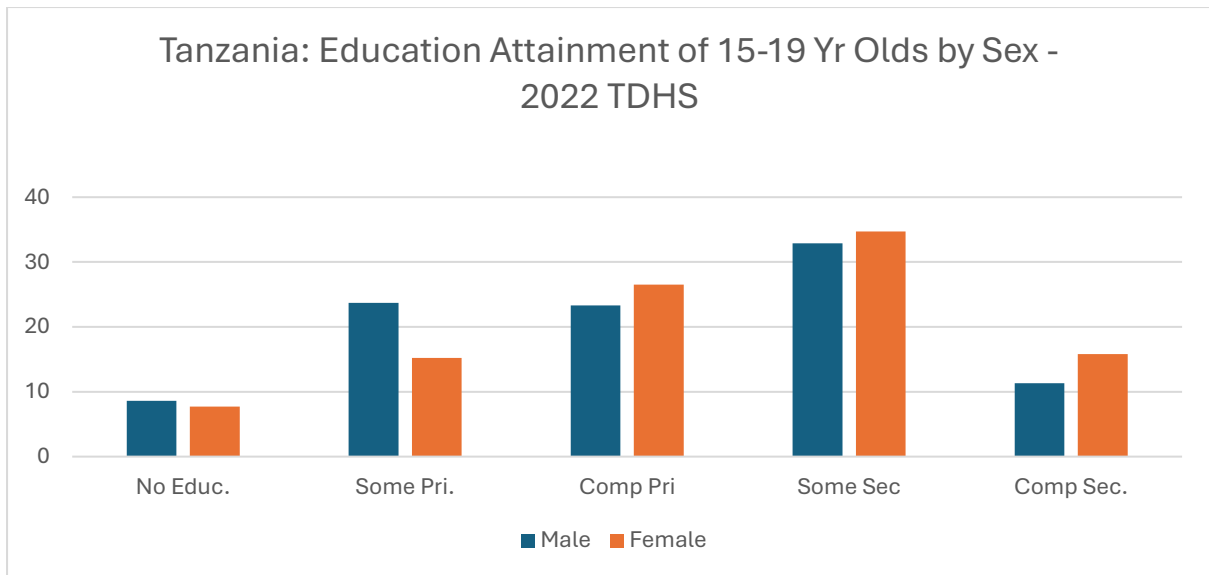


Table 8: Tanzania - Education Attainment of 15 - 16-year-olds by sex, source, TDHS, 2022.

Educator Capacity & Support

Programs that offer pedagogical support and materials, such as applications and books focused on digital literacy and numeracy, are shown to be effective in improving girls' learning outcomes, according to the EGER Kenya report. This provision of materials is most effective when combined with teacher training and integrated into the curriculum by educators (Lopez-Lalinde et al., 2024).

However, a previous review of gender and education programs in Kenya aimed at improving learning revealed that few implemented teacher-focused approaches, despite evidence supporting this as the most effective method for enhancing the quality of learning. A similar comprehensive mapping of Girls Education Interventions would give additional insights for Uganda and Tanzania. Nonetheless, the consistent with this, the current mapping identified only one of 75 programs, Dignitas, that works with school leaders as agents of change to support gender-responsive teaching and learning and ultimately improve learning outcomes for girls.

Institutional Level Systemic barriers to girls' learning

A foundational element for the educational success of all students, particularly girls, is a safe and inclusive school environment. Girls require safe, clean, and accessible facilities, including washrooms and areas for the disposal of Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) products. Furthermore, Edtech solutions are needed to bridge accessibility and inclusion gaps for marginalized students (IDRC, 2024). Current interventions in East Africa aimed at supporting the school environment include gendered toilets, incinerators for MHM products, and digital devices for all.

A second systemic challenge at the school level in East Africa is the lack of a standardized, gender-responsive curriculum. While each Ministry of Education in the region integrates a gender-responsive curriculum within the national education framework, numerous partners also implement their own gender-responsive content delivered through school-level girl empowerment groups. Examples include CAMFED - Tanzania's "My Better World" at the Secondary School Level, FAWE's "Tuseme Curriculum" implemented across East Africa, and

Zana Africa's "*Nia Yetu Curriculum*" in Kenya. Currently, none of the education systems have adopted a single, standardized, inclusive, and gender-responsive curriculum that consistently challenges traditional norms and stereotypes across all learning materials, lesson plans, and other school-level policies.

Non-Educational Barriers

The following section examines the significant, interconnected non-education barriers that impede girls' access to and completion of schooling. These complex challenges, which often lead to high dropout rates and poor academic performance, are organized into four main categories: Safety, Socio-Cultural Norms, Health, and Agency. The section details how factors such as school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV), deeply entrenched social beliefs, health vulnerabilities like adolescent childbearing, and limited empowerment collectively undermine progress in girls' education across the region.

Safety and School-Related Gender Based Violence

School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) is a serious issue that negatively affects students' health, wellbeing, academic performance, and can lead to increased drop-out rates (IDRC, 2024). Evidence from Eastern Africa (EA) suggests a gap in understanding the direct relationship between SRGBV interventions and girls' education outcomes, as this has not been robustly evaluated (Lopez-Lalinde et al., 2024).

SRGBV manifests in various ways. The most common forms of SRGBV include verbal abuse, intimidation by both teachers and students; physical violence including corporal punishment, bullying and fights; sexual violence such as sexual harassment, unwanted advances, exploitation and abuse of power to coerce students and rape and sexual assault (UNGEI, 2025). SRGBV is sustained by multiple interacting factors (UNGEI, 2025). Discriminatory gender norms and a culture of silence or victim-blaming in the community normalize the violence. School-level factors enable it, including lack of infrastructure (e.g., no gender-segregated washrooms) and inadequate policies for reporting (IDRC, 2024; UNGEI, 2025). Furthermore, the power imbalance between teachers/staff and students, often coupled with a lack of training for teachers, allows perpetrators to exploit vulnerabilities and commit physical, psychological, or sexual violence (IDRC, 2024; UNGEI, 2025).

Interventions currently address physical safety concerns related to unsafe travel paths and long distances to school, often by providing bicycles. However, in-school safety is compromised by a lack of gender-segregated washrooms, limited play areas, and the absence of perimeter fences (IDRC, 2024). Perpetrators of SRGBV include teachers (IDRC, 2024) and fellow students (MLSPK, 2019).

Significant challenges exist in the reporting and resolution of SRGBV. A culture of silence and victim-shaming often prevents incidents from being reported, and unreported incidents can have severe consequences, such as unwanted pregnancy, forcing girls to leave school. Furthermore, some communities opt for community-based resolution models instead of involving the legal system. This practice can protect perpetrators or result in the victim being forced into marriage with the aggressor.

Social Economic Factors & Cultural Norms and Mindsets

Poverty

The decision-making process within households regarding the education of children is heavily influenced by prevailing socio-economic factors. Poverty, deeply ingrained gender norms, and the perceived economic or social value of educating girls—or lack thereof—are intrinsically linked to how scarce resources are allocated within a family (Booth, R., 2022). In the context of financial hardship, the resource limitations significantly escalate the *opportunity cost* of a girl's education. This is because a girl's labor is often deemed more valuable for immediate domestic responsibilities, such as fetching water, caring for younger siblings, or supporting income-generating activities. Consequently, her educational pursuit is often deprioritized. Furthermore, even when girls are enrolled in school, the burden of household duties severely restricts the time they have available for essential academic activities, particularly homework and private study, thus undermining their educational outcomes.

Child Marriage in East Africa

East African countries have made considerable strides in establishing robust legal frameworks against child marriage, yet the persistence of the practice highlights the gap between law and implementation.

- **Kenya:** Child marriage is unequivocally prohibited. The foundational legal documents include the Constitution (2010), The Children's Act (2022), and the Marriage Act (2014), all setting the minimum legal age for marriage at 18 without exception.
- **Uganda:** While the overarching legal framework mandates the minimum marriage age at 18, its effectiveness is complicated by the presence of conflicting customary and Islamic marriage laws. These parallel legal systems introduce ambiguity and often provide loopholes or exceptions that permit early marriage, particularly in local communities.
- **Tanzania:** Following a landmark legal challenge successfully spearheaded by Rebecca Gyumi, founder of the *Msichana Initiative*, the highest court declared child marriage unconstitutional, thereby legally establishing the minimum marriage age at 18. Despite this judicial victory, the legislative body (Parliament) has not yet formally amended the outdated Marriage Act of 1971, which controversially still allows girls to marry as young as 14 with parental or judicial consent.

Despite these legal provisions and the efforts to enforce them, child marriage remains a concerning issue across East Africa (EA) countries. Recent evidence from EGER Kenya, however, shows encouraging signs of progress, indicating reduced rates of child marriage across many counties. Nevertheless, a critical minority of 10 counties still report persistently high rates, with prevalence at or above 25% (Lopez-Lalinde et al., 2024).

Child Marriage Interventions

A significant number of programmatic interventions across East Africa are focused on tackling child marriage and associated adolescent childbearing, often employing strategies centered on community mobilization and education. A compelling body of evidence strongly supports the protective role of education, especially secondary education. In all three countries—Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania—the strategic intervention of keeping girls in boarding school models for secondary education has demonstrated a remarkable impact, achieving a 100% reduction in child marriage among participants, implemented by organizations like Kakenya's

dream in Kenya, SEGA girls in Tanzania and PEAS in Uganda. This success is primarily attributed to the high completion rates observed within these structured secondary school environments. Further supporting this connection, existing data from Ethiopia provides quantitative evidence: each additional year of secondary education a girl completes is correlated with a 5.4% reduction in the risk of marrying before the age of 18 and a 6% reduction in the risk of adolescent childbearing (Booth, R., 2022).

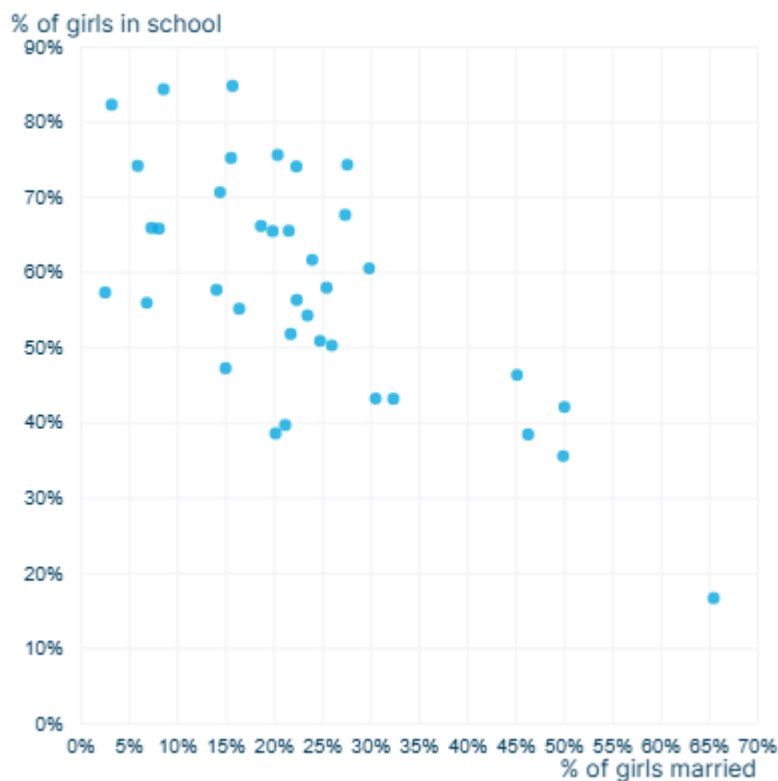


Figure 2: Scatter plot showing the correlation between school enrollment and marriage rates, source Population Council Atlas

However, a critical gap in the regional evidence base remains. While interventions are effective in reducing child marriage, there is currently insufficient evidence that robustly demonstrates the causal impact of a reduction in child marriage on *improving* girls' subsequent education outcomes specifically within the East African context (Lopez-Lalinde et al., 2024). This highlights the necessity for more targeted research, particularly studies focused on evaluating the long-term educational impact and success of the distinctive secondary school models present in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania.

Female Genital Mutilation and Cutting (FGM/C)

Female Genital Mutilation and Cutting (FGM/C) is a deeply rooted socio-cultural norm that also constitutes a serious public health crisis. The immediate health complications arising from FGM/C, such as pain, infection, and physical trauma, can make learning difficult and directly impede consistent school attendance in the short term. In the longer term, the practice reinforces and institutionalizes gendered expectations, often directly linking the girl to child marriage and prescribing specific domestic and reproductive roles within the household structure (Booth, R., 2022).

East Africa accounts for a significant share of global FGM cases, with nearly 50 million girls and young women from the region estimated to have undergone FGM (UNICEF, 2022). About 15% of women aged 15-19 have undergone FGM in Kenya, with higher rates in North Eastern, Somali, Samburu, Maasai ethnic groups (KDHS, 2022). In Tanzania, a lesser 8% of women aged 15-49 have undergone FGM, with even lower rates among adolescent girls at 4.9% (Adam & Charles, 2024). In Uganda, FGM is relatively rare at the national level (0.3%), with higher prevalence in communities such as Pokot and Sabinu where the practice persists despite national bans. (UDHS, 2022).

Regionally, there is a powerful and concerning correlation between lack of education and the prevalence of FGM/C: 54% of women who report having undergone FGM/C have no formal education, starkly contrasting with only 19% of women who have attained some level of secondary education (Booth, R., 2022). This correlation underscores the potential of education as a key factor in challenging and ultimately eradicating this harmful practice.

Health and Vulnerabilities

In East Africa (EA), interventions addressing adolescent childbearing primarily adopt a Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) framework. This approach is based on the premise that adolescents lack adequate information and comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) to grasp the risks of early sexual debut, and they face barriers to accessing youth-friendly health services for contraception and information to prevent unwanted pregnancies.

Although CSE is technically part of the national education curriculum in EA, integrated through science lessons, its delivery is often limited to reproduction and abstinence-only messages (IDRC 2024). This neglects crucial topics like consent, gender norms, and contraception. This restricted approach is mainly due to resistance from religious groups and parents, as well as dependence on teacher delivery, suggesting a lack of political will and socio-cultural barriers to effective SRHR education. Furthermore, while school re-entry policies exist in the three EA countries, their impact is obscured by a lack of disaggregated data on return rates. Moreover, parenting teens returning to school often lack the necessary supportive mechanisms at both household and school levels for childcare and catching up on missed lessons. Other vulnerabilities for adolescent girls include disability, conflict/refugee status, and high HIV prevalence.

The following table presents data on education, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), and child marriage in East Africa (EA), sourced from the Population Council's Adolescent Atlas for Action.

| Adolescents | Theme | Indicator | Percentage |
|-------------|---|--|---|
| 15 - 19 | Education No primary school completion | Illiterate Respondent cannot read a whole sentence | KE - 10.51% TZ - 19.88% UG - 33.7% |
| 15 - 19 | Sexual and reproductive health & rights | High Risk Sex Recently engaged in any high-risk sex (no-condom use in the last three instances of intercourse / having more than one sexual partner in the last 12 months | KE -9.9 % TZ - 0% - Kaskazini & Kusini Pemba & 30.6% in Lindi UG - 10.88% |
| | | Early Sexual Debut Sexual debut before age 15 Respondent has had first sexual intercourse before age 15 | KE - 9.78% TZ - 12.78% UG - 10.18% |
| | | Has STI Respondent reports having STI/ STI symptoms in the past 12 months | KE - 2.27% TZ - No data UG - 8.69% |
| | | Ever given birth Respondent has ever given birth | KE - 14.69% (33% -Narok) TZ - 20.98 (40% - Dodoma) UG - 19.38 (26% - Teso)% |
| | | Unmet need for family planning Respondent has an unmet need for contraception for spacing or limiting | KE - 7 % (0% - Wajir & Turkana; 14% -Transzoia) TZ - 10.77 (25% - Kusini Pemba ; 88% - Mara) UG - 11.26 (3.5 % - Kigezi; 16% - Teso)% |
| | Gender Norms and Agency | Indicators regarding attitudes about gender and household dynamics around gender roles Considers wife beating justified | KE - 45% (- 87% - Marsabit; 21% -Isiolo) TZ - 59% UG - 58% (31% % - Bunyoro; 84% - Karamoja)% |
| | Harmful Practices | Adolescent risks driven by culture Currently Married or living in union Respondent is currently married | KE - 45% (- 87% - Marsabit; 21% -Isiolo) TZ - 23% (5% - Mjini Magharibi; 44% - Dodoma) UG - 20% (13% % - Kampala; 28% - Bukedi) |

Table 9: A sample of East Africa data on gender and education indicators, source: Population Council, Adolescent Atlas for Action

Agency and Empowerment

Interventions in East Africa (EA) often use girl's agency and participation in decision-making to increase their influence and advance policies and budgets that address gender inequality and accountability. However, in socially conservative contexts, such as the Arid and Semi-Arid Lands of EA, women's and girls' participation in decision-making is restricted (Booth, R., 2022).

Programs like CAMFED’s learner guides, which utilize program alumnae as mentors, are effective in building girls’ confidence and agency to speak out and take on leadership roles, thereby shifting community norms about the value of girls’ education. Despite these efforts, a direct correlation between improved girls’ confidence and leadership skills and better learning outcomes has yet to be definitively proven. Amplify Girls is currently piloting tools to help monitor girls’ agency and confidence in EA.

It is important to note that the EGER Roadmap on Girls Education (Psaki et al., 2021) emphasizes that standalone after-school mentorship and life skills programs are insufficient to improve girls’ learning outcomes without complementary interventions focused on enhancing pedagogy and teacher training.

System and Policy Level barriers

The systemic challenges undermining girls’ educational attainment extend well beyond socio-cultural norms to include deep-seated institutional and workforce failures within the education system. The first critical barrier is a dramatic deficit in the female teaching workforce and school leadership, which significantly impacts girls’ sense of belonging and academic ambition. Reports highlight a stark reduction in the number of female teachers when transitioning from primary to secondary and higher education, a gap that is critically pronounced in STEM subjects (López-Lalinde et al., 2024). This absence drastically reduces the availability of essential role models and mentors. Furthermore, the shortage of female educators is acutely felt in marginalized settings such as conflict zones and pastoralist communities (Booth, 2022); their presence is vital for creating a protective, inclusive environment, and their absence can actively deter girls from pursuing education.

This systemic leadership vacuum is a global concern, with research by the UNICEF Innocenti initiative on Women in Learning Leadership (WILL) finding that increasing the representation of women in school leadership is a promising path towards improving learning outcomes (Bergmann et al., 2022).

The second primary challenge involves severe governance issues centered on policy implementation, data deficits, and program fragmentation. While countries possess comprehensive gender-sensitive laws—including statutes against Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV/SRGBV) and child marriage—research shows that the existence of policy often fails to translate into effective action on the ground, creating a persistent policy-practice gap (IDRC, 2024). This governance deficit is compounded by poor administrative practices, notably the lack of gender-disaggregated data on critical issues like truancy and dropout rates, which prevents policymakers from designing and funding truly gender-responsive interventions, especially those related to school re-entry (López-Lalinde et al., 2024). Finally, the effectiveness of promising grassroots programs is curtailed by their limited scale: effective girls’ education models suffer from fragmentation and duplication, often failing to achieve sustainable national impact due to a lack of coordinated collective action (Jaslika, 2024) and weak oversight from Ministries of Education.

4. The Practice: Girls' Education Landscape

The civil society actors in EA play a critical role in advancing gender equality through a diverse range of Community Based Organizations (CBOs), National Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) and International NGOs, network organizations, the government as an implementing partner, all supported by domestic and international funders.

Stakeholder Mapping Key Findings

The study identified and mapped 155 organizations in East Africa, as detailed in table 10 below. The mapping revealed a trend where a significant portion of the 71 NGOs identified functioned essentially as CBOs, having secured legal NGO registration primarily to access international funding. Similarly, most of the 40 mapped CBOs operated under an umbrella collective, such as Girls Not Brides or Amplify Girls, with some belonging to multiple networks. This collective membership was a strategic decision. Although most identified funders, from the funder directly supported grassroots organizations, being part of a movement of grassroots organizations and relying on collective accountability, trust, and referrals was a significant factor in securing funding, often based on recommendations from existing partners for achieving collective impact.

| Categories | Country | | | Totals |
|------------|---------|--------|----------|--------|
| | Kenya | Uganda | Tanzania | |
| INGO | 13 | 3 | 11 | 27 |
| NGO | 26 | 24 | 21 | 71 |
| CBO | 6 | 23 | 11 | 40 |
| Government | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Research | 1 | 0 | 2 | 3 |
| Donor | 4 | 0 | 2 | 6 |
| Network | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| FBO | 0 | 1 | 4 | 5 |
| Totals | 51 | 51 | 53 | 155 |

Table 10: Describes the diverse characteristics of girls' education actors.

Unique role of different organization types

The unique roles of the different actors allow them to leverage their competitive advantage. The programming, capacity, funding and visibility for both categories varied. While NGOs focused on large-scale advocacy and policy engagement with a larger national scope, CBOs

worked on grass-root level service delivery and had a narrower geographical area of focus. A key finding was that organizational characteristics and not registration should guide engagement as the needs vary. See the tables below for more specific distinctions.

| Type | Organization | Program Characteristics | Technical Expertise |
|-------------|--|---|---|
| CBO/ NGO | Empowered Girls TZ Solidarity for Her Education and Empowerment Org (SHEEO – TZ); Rural Development(UG); The Bright Hostel (TZ); Msichana Initiative; SHOFCO (KE); Give Hope (UG); Dignitas (KE) / PWC/ KINAPPA/ | Founder at the center of the org Run single component programs Theory of Change and M&E not mentioned Short project cycles – 1 year and below Part of collective action Localized to one or a few areas Program Design unclear Work with sub-national level authorities | Under-resourced but doing transformational work Limited Visibility & Communication Growing attention to support grassroot Orgs Tailored programs addressing local needs but not based on data or evidence |
| NGO | Plan International – KE/TZ/UG Save the Children – KE/TZ/UG Kakenya’s Dream; Windle Trust ; CAMFED (TZ) Educate (UG) | Locally registered in the country Run more complex programs – often with a research element or strong M&E Medium term project cycles Working in more than three or four counties Works with national MoE/ TSC / Counties | Advanced data analytics Digital fundraising platforms Robust Social media communication strategies Formal governance structures Embedded in national level policy advocacy |
| INGO | Girl Effect Amplify Girls UNICEF/ UNGEI/ UNDP Education Development Trust Plan International IRC / ICRW | Global Scope Headquartered outside of Africa Longitudinal Project cycles Engaged in national and global level policy and education sector planning | Rigorous research elements Robust and regular accountability through audits and financial reviews Leverage existing government relationships for scale |

Table 11: Organizations differences by type

Network Organizations

The ecosystem of actors relies on strategic national level networks or collectives for legal, policy and systems change. Networks and coalitions are essential for collective action and policy influence on girls' education and rights in both countries.

- Policy Advocacy and Influence: Organizations use collective action for policy advocacy and enable evidence-based legislative and policy reform.
- Ending Child Marriage: The Girls Not Brides National Partnerships exemplify cross-country collaboration working in all the three EA countries. Common goals include raising

the legal age of marriage to 18, closing legal loopholes, and ensuring strategy development and funding.

| Theme | Organization | Country | Achievement |
|-------------------------------|--|------------|--|
| Policy Advocacy & Influence | RELI (70) ; TENMET (200); Elimu Yetu Coalition (KE) (140) WilDaF (TZ) | KE, UG, TZ | Education & Training Policy (2014) |
| Child Marriage | Tanzania Ending Child Marriage Network (TECMN) (70); Girls Not Bride (in each country) | KE, UG, TZ | Marriage Act (TZ); Re-entry Policy (TZ) National Strategy to End Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancies (UG) National Sexuality Education Framework (UG) |
| SRHR/ Adolescent Childbearing | Tanzania Youth & Adolescent Reproductive Health (TAYARH) | TZ | Training Youth Youth friendly health services National FP costed plan |
| Disability | Kyaka United Youth Deaf Association | UG | Collective action |
| FGM + GBV | NAFGEM(TZ) | TZ | The Law of the Child Act (2009) |
| Girls & Women's Rights | NAWOU (UG) FIDA (KE) | UG, KE | The Land Act (1998) |

Table 12: Showing the different Networks and Coalitions and their policy and legal impact

Girls' Interventions & Indicators Mapping

To understand the current operational landscape, the study intensively mapped 75 girls' education interventions across East Africa, with an equal distribution in Kenya (25), Uganda (25), and Tanzania (25). A rigorous analysis was applied to these interventions using the Evidence for Gender and Education Resource (EGER) framework to rate their effectiveness ((Population Council, 2024; López-Lalinde et al., 2024).

The analysis revealed that the most effective interventions address barriers at three distinct levels:

- Shared Barriers (affecting both boys and girls, such as poor pedagogy),
- Pronounced Barriers (affecting girls disproportionately, such as infrastructure), and

- Specific Barriers (unique to girls, such as pregnancy and harmful norms) (Unterhalter et al., 2018, Psaki et al., 2021).

What Works to Improve Learning

Addressing educational disadvantages requires interventions that tackle both the immediate (school-level) and systemic (community and policy-level) barriers. Evidence suggests that shifting resources to focus specifically on how delivery supports learning is critical. The most effective mechanisms include (PC, 2021):

- At the Girl Level: Building reading skills combined with content on gender rights and power.
- At the Teacher Level: Gender Responsive Pedagogy (GRP) training paired with improved general pedagogy, specifically competency grouping (differentiated instruction).
- At the Household/School Level: Increasing access through scholarships and cash transfers, alongside school feeding programs that target both the home and school environments for the poorest households.

Delivery Platforms

The mapping surfaced critical distinctions between delivery platforms and drivers of success (Psaki et al. 2021)

- Safe Spaces & Life Skills: These are essential delivery platforms for content like literacy and negotiation skills, but they are not direct drivers of academic success on their own (Austrian et al., 2020).
- SRHR & Menstrual Health: Standalone provision of menstrual products or abstinence-only SRHR curricula does not consistently improve academic outcomes (literacy/numeracy). While valuable for well-being, they must be integrated into broader learning interventions to drive educational gains.
- Norms Change: Effective norms change requires a dual approach: empowering girls through gender clubs to build their agency and decision making while simultaneously partnering with community organizations through community conversations and planning to focus on enhancing the value of girls such as in AGI_K to delay marriage/childbearing and prevent violence or through integrating SRGBV modules into the secondary school curriculum, and collaborating with teachers unions as done by the Ministry of Education in Uganda.

Holistic Program Design

- Effective programming requires multisectoral, multi-dimensional, and multi-level interventions (Austrian et al., 2020).
- Targeting: Interventions must target critical prevention windows, such as early adolescence and the transition from primary to secondary school.
- Economic Linkages: Education gains must translate to economic independence. Successful models integrate skills development, vocational qualifications, and access to financial services.
- Longitudinal Tracking: Understanding impact requires tracking girls' post-intervention. For example, the Adolescent Girls Initiative-Kenya (AGI-K) measured girls two to four years post-intervention and is currently measuring 10-year impacts on 10–

14-year-olds, providing vital data on sustained life-altering changes (Austrian et al., 2020; UN Women, 2020).

Spotlighting Effective Intervention Models:

Intersectional Secondary Residential Models

These models provide holistic protection and education for high-risk girls

SEGA Girls School - Tanzania

Target: Bright, high-risk girls.

Model: Full scholarship + Life Skills Empowerment.

Impact: 99% pursue higher education; 75% attend university (vs. 3% national avg); 95% delay marriage until age 22 (Nurturing

Kakenya's Dream - Kenya

Target: Girls in marginalized settings (Maasai)

Model: Boarding School + Health + SRH Clinics Economic Empowerment

Impact: 100% free from FGM and Child Marriage; 100% primary to secondary transition (Kakenya's Dream, 2022).

PEAS Schools - Uganda

Target: Systemic Scale via Public - Private Partnerships

Model: Uses a Senior Woman Teacher role for protection / Mentorship

Impact: 51% female enrollment (vs. 12% national avg); schools consistently outperform national exam results (EPRC, 2016).

Multidimensional & Scalable Approaches

These models focus on intersectionality and ecosystem integration. These examples show that the barriers faced by girls cannot be solved by single-component intervention.

- **Adolescent Girls Initiative Kenya (AGI-K):** A rigorous model focusing on delaying childbearing and marriage for early adolescents (11–15). It combines health (life skills/safe spaces), violence prevention, education (cash transfers), and wealth creation (financial literacy). Its strength lies in its implementation research and longitudinal follow-up to prove long-term efficacy (Austrian et al., 2020). The AGI-K model in Kenya is foundational for understanding the necessity of integrated intervention packages. Its education component is explicitly tied to a Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) requiring 80% attendance. The purpose of the CCT was two-fold: it directly addresses poverty, a primary financial barrier to retention, and functions as an operational entry point to ensure girls are continuously exposed to the critical non-

financial components, such as culturally relevant sexual and reproductive health education and community violence prevention dialogues. By securing sustained attendance through CCTs, AGI-K provides the necessary platform for the "plus" interventions (health, wealth creation) to drive the ultimate long-term impact: delaying childbearing and reducing adolescent pregnancy. This methodology affirms that structural poverty barriers must be addressed financially to enable sustained exposure to educational and human capital gains. The rigorous evaluation demonstrated sustained impacts on school enrollment—even two and four years after the two-year program concluded, particularly for girls who were out of school at baseline.

- **CAMFED (Tanzania):** Focuses on the transition to economic independence. It utilizes financial support, peer mentorship, and enterprise support. Crucially, it tracks the **multiplier effect**—measuring the number of community-led interventions initiated by program alumni—and scales research directly with the government (CAMFED, 2022). Termed the "Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education," the program tracks success not merely by secondary school completion but by progression to a secure and productive young adulthood. This is quantified through Intermediate Outcome 2 (IO2), which measures indicators such as young women's access to financial services for start-up capital, receipt of "social interest" loans, and attainment of vocational BTEC qualifications. In contexts where poverty and low economic opportunity drive educational withdrawal, this strategy confirms that impact measurement must extend beyond the academic sphere. By demonstrating quantifiable economic returns, CAMFED justifies the long-term social investment required to break the cycle of poverty and exclusion.
- **Viva/ CRANE GEC project - Uganda -** The Viva/CRANE project in Uganda began by establishing 22 Creative Learning Centres (CLCs) to provide accelerated, inclusive, non-formal education to high-risk out-of-school girls, successfully transitioning 93% of graduates back into mainstream schooling. Building on this, the project focused on reforming Special Educational Needs (SEN) support by training Learning Support Teachers (LSTs) and developing an effective assessment tool. This innovation achieved high-level recognition: the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) committed to adopting the assessment tool nationally and replicating the specialized centers across Uganda. This commitment to policy adoption and scaling serves as verifiable evidence that NGO innovations can be successfully absorbed into national service delivery systems (Viva & CRANE, 2023).

Funding Landscape for Girls Education in East Africa

The donor inventory for the study identified 130 funders. The majority (70%) were international grassroots funders supporting grassroots organizations. Large-scale multi-lateral and bilateral funders, along with those heavily investing in system change or addressing economic and socio-cultural barriers to girls' education, accounted for 17%. A significant finding was the sector's reliance on international resources, evidenced by the fact that only 4% of the funders were locally led grassroots organizations. Finally, private sector funders made up about 5%, indicating a growing opportunity for local private actors to contribute to girls' education.

Finally, all identified funders were classified into four strategic categories—Large-Scale Multilateral (e.g., World Bank, GPE, UN agencies), Large-Scale Bilateral (country-to-country), Large-Scale System Change (e.g., CIFF, BMGF), and Grassroots Funders. This categorization proved essential for the analysis, as detailed metrics such as specific funded amounts and granting cycles were not consistently available across all organizations, necessitating a classification based on the funder's stated mission and investment scale.

The global funding environment for girls' education in East Africa is undergoing a significant strategic pivot. Major funders are now moving away from isolated, project-centric initiatives to prioritize investments that foster systemic transformation and expand successful, locally tailored programs to scale. Key funders, including the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), the FCDO's Girls' Education Challenge (GEC), the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), and the Co-Impact Gender Fund, are strategically aligning their resources. Their focus is broadening to tackle not only barriers to access but also the fundamental structural and economic inequalities that impede educational success. These large-scale funders primarily allocate resources to governments, INGOs, and certain NGOs. Their core strategy is to finance the expansion of proven, research-backed interventions—such as the PEAS Uganda model, the Senior Woman Teacher initiative, AGI-K's cash transfer model, or holistic life skills curricula—by integrating them into national policies, thereby benefiting thousands of learners.

Other foundations, such as Segal and Amplify Change, are dedicated to supporting grassroots organizations, providing grants ranging from \$10,000 to \$100,000 for local innovations. The impact and scope of these grassroots organizations are substantial, as the resources often directly benefit the girls they serve. For example, Amplify Change supports over 124 organizations in East Africa with Sexual and Reproductive Health programs, while the Segal Foundation aids 135 organizations in the region implementing programs focused on gender equality and quality education.

Domestic Financing, Fiscal Pressure, and Household Burden

The single largest source of education funding in East Africa remains the national governments and, critically, individual households. While Kenya and Tanzania have historically committed significant percentages of their national budgets to education (often meeting or exceeding the UNESCO-recommended 20% benchmark (UNESCO, 2015), Uganda significantly lags behind. Furthermore, fiscal pressures from high debt servicing, austerity measures, and global economic shocks pose a continuous threat to sustained investment, often leading to cuts in essential non-wage recurrent budgets. Currently, Kenya receives more than 310 million dollars from World Bank, GPE and LEGO foundation through the 2022 - 2026 Kenya Primary Education Equity in Learning (KPEEL) program to run a scholarship fund called *Elimu scholarship*, implemented by the Ministry of Education, Jomo Kenyatta Foundation with support of the Equity Group Foundation (Mutua, 2025). One of KPEEL's main goals is to improve the retention of marginalized girls in upper primary education to curb school dropout.

Crucially, the cost burden for basic education remains high for households through fees, uniforms, and materials, disproportionately impacting marginalized girls whose families face opportunity costs. This dynamic places a premium on targeted external funding (from

organizations like GPE) that specifically incentivizes governments to protect and increase their domestic spending on basic education, ensuring the sustainability of policies like free primary education (Action Aid, 2024).

The Drive for Systemic Scaling and Government Ownership

The most visible strategic shift comes from the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), whose core mandate focuses on system transformation through country-led reform [GPE, 2025]. GPE funding is designed to be highly aligned with national Education Sector Plans, ensuring sustainability and government ownership. Currently, GPE key mechanisms like the GPE Girls' Education Accelerator explicitly fund targeted interventions for highly marginalized girls but are required to *build on* existing system-level grants, directly promoting the scaling of proven programs through national systems. This approach, which often involves public-private partnerships (as seen in Kenya), ensures that successful educational practices are embedded into the Ministry of Education's architecture, guaranteeing impact at national scale rather than within isolated pilot projects. Since 2021, GPE has supported 124 million girls globally in accessing better education (Frigenti, 2025).

Intersectional Focus: Linking Education to Economic and Social Health

Two major trends define the priorities of other leading funders: addressing the health and social crises points in a girl's life and leveraging economic empowerment. The FCDO Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) was the largest global fund dedicated to girls between 2012 - 2024, transforming 1,6 million marginalized girls. GEC has heavily invested in rigorous evidence gathering across East Africa, confirming that poverty remains the primary barrier to retention and transition [FCDO, 2022]. Between 2022 and 2025, GEC funded 7 projects in Kenya, reaching 380, 169 girls; 2 projects in Tanzania reaching 95, 070 girls and four projects in Uganda, reaching 55, 356 girls in marginalized settings. Consequently, GEC projects in the region have concentrated on critical transition points (e.g., primary to secondary, and secondary to TVET/livelihoods), using multi-pronged approaches like stipends, safe learning spaces, and skills development to overcome financial, distance, and safety barriers.

Simultaneously, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) has pivoted to an intersectional approach that links educational outcomes to Adolescent and Youth Learning, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), and Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) [BMGF, 2025]. BMGF's recent financial pilots in Kenya, for example, directly tackle the structural barriers that women face in accessing capital and digital services, recognizing that educational achievement cannot be sustained without corresponding economic agency outside the school gates.

Flexible, Long-Term Capital for Locally Led Solutions

A third, highly influential shift is the rise of flexible, long-term funding for locally rooted organizations, spearheaded by the Co-Impact Gender Fund [Co-Impact, 2025]. Co-impact brings funders and local change makers together to rethink systems, and not just symptoms. This fund is explicitly designed to support system change initiatives that are predominantly women-led and capable of scaling impact in health, education, and economic opportunity. By committing large-scale, flexible grants over extended periods, Co-Impact provides the necessary capital for partners—such as those addressing SRHR interventions in Kenyan schools—to refine and scale their evidence-informed models to truly national levels. This

model reinforces the idea that policy change is insufficient without effective local institutions to drive implementation, representing a powerful endorsement of both local expertise and the need for patient capital to achieve systemic transformation.

Grassroots Funding and the Difference in Scale

While the large institutional funds focus on macro-level systemic reform, the funding ecosystem is balanced by a crucial cohort of grassroots foundations that address local, highly contextualized impact. Grants from GPE or FCDO, often structured as multi-million-dollar tranches (e.g., \$1M+ USD) aligned with national policy, typically go to large International NGOs (INGOs) or established national NGOs due to stringent compliance and scale requirements [FCDO, 2025]. This contrasts sharply with funders like the Segal Family Foundation, the Girls Opportunity Alliance, Circle of Sisterhood, and Amplify Change. These foundations provide smaller grants, often ranging from \$10,000 to \$100,000, directly to local NGOs, grassroots movements, and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) [Segal, 2025]. This localized funding stream bypasses the institutional overhead of large agencies, ensuring capital reaches the deepest level of community practice where localized advocacy (e.g., against child marriage in specific villages) and innovative programming can first take root.

The Role of Trust, Partnerships, and Unrestricted Capital

The distinct value of this grassroots funding lies in its flexibility, trust-based model, and recognition of local expertise. Funders such as Segal, Elma, and others prioritize long-term, trusting relationships with local leaders, often providing unrestricted capital rather than rigid project-specific funds [Segal, 2025]. This approach is vital for girls' education, as CBOs and local activists frequently deal with emergent, intersectional crises (e.g., immediate safe shelter, supporting a girl's re-entry post-pregnancy, or local trauma counseling). This flexible capital enables rapid adaptation to shifting community dynamics. Furthermore, these smaller grants are the engine for partnerships and collaboration with local leaders, validating new ideas and models—the "practice" component—which, if proven successful, can eventually be incorporated and scaled by the national policy frameworks funded by the larger institutional donors.

5. Girls' Education Policies Mapping

The educational policy priorities for adolescent girls across Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda reflect a clear regional consensus centered on addressing the core barriers to gender equity in education, while each nation also applies its own unique emphasis based on specific socio-economic needs. Across all three countries, the foundational commitment is to ensure retention, transition, and completion, especially by mitigating the impact of health and social cultural impact on female students. This is most vividly demonstrated by the shared, mandatory priority across the entire region for the re-entry and re-integration of teenage mothers and pregnant girls back into school, acknowledging teenage pregnancy as the principal driver of school dropout. Furthermore, there is a unified effort to combat School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV), create safe learning environments, and eliminate harmful cultural norms like child marriage and FGM. Finally, all three nations recognize the

critical need to promote parity in the labour market by actively encouraging and supporting girls' participation in Technical and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields.

Despite this shared regional agenda, each country has implemented distinct strategic priorities tailored to its context. Kenya exhibits a highly granular focus, uniquely prioritizing the explicit provision of Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) materials as a key retention strategy, and addressing Intersectional Disadvantage by targeting resource allocation specifically to marginalized groups (ASALs, urban poor). Tanzania's approach is defined by its sweeping guarantee of Access and Equity through free education at primary and secondary levels, alongside a policy shift toward a new skills-based curriculum to ensure graduates meet labor market demands. Uganda, conversely, focuses heavily on systemic implementation, prioritizing gender-responsive planning and budgeting, the use of gender-disaggregated data for policy tracking, and the crucial element of training teachers in gender responsive methodologies to overcome internal school stigma.

Building upon the shared priorities and subtle differences outlined above, the following section provides a comprehensive breakdown of the policy landscape in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. For each country, the analysis will be structured around three critical policy areas: first, the overarching Gender and Development Policies that set the national framework; second, the specific Gender and Education Policies that guide the sector; and finally, the dedicated policies designed to actively address the most significant gender-related barriers to education, such as early pregnancy, child marriage, and school violence.

Tanzania

Gender and Development Policies

While Tanzania lacks a dedicated Gender Education and Training policy, its commitment to addressing education and training challenges is comprehensively outlined in two key national documents: the National Gender and Women Development Policy (2023) and the Education and Training Policy (2014, revised in 2023).

These policies establish objectives for:

- Improving girls' access, retention, and participation in school.
- Protecting students from school-related gender-based violence.
- Ensuring equal opportunities, particularly in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and innovation.

Furthermore, these two policies are reinforced by broader national development policies and specific policies designed to counteract gender-related obstacles to girls' education, such as harmful cultural practices as outlined below.

National Gender and Women Development Policy, 2023

Tanzania demonstrates a strong commitment to gender equality and empowerment through established policies that guide programming, planning, and resource allocation across government ministries. The cornerstone of this commitment is the *Sera ya Taifa ya Jinsia na*

Maendeleo ya Wanawake ya Mwaka wa 2023 (National Gender and Women Development Policy, 2023). Published in October 2023 by the Ministry of Community Development, Gender, Women and Special Groups, this document updates the previous 2000 policy. The revision was essential to address modern and evolving challenges, including climate change, technological advancements, disease outbreaks, and new gender issues.

A twenty-year policy gap is evident. The 2023 policy outlines twelve priorities, with three directly impacting adolescent girls' education: gender, education and training; gender-based violence; and gender, technology, and innovation.

The aims for gender, education, and training are:

1. Address School Dropout: Combat school leaving due to early pregnancy and child marriage, and ensure alternative educational paths.
2. Promote STEM: Increase girls' participation in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics.
3. Eliminate Education Barriers: Tackle cultural (domestic work burden), structural (poor infrastructure), and social obstacles to quality education, especially in STEM.
4. Shift Negative Attitudes: Conduct community outreach to change societal views limiting women's and girls' educational opportunities.
5. Integrate Gender Equality: Systematically embed gender equality into all educational policies, plans, programs, and curricula.

The policy is backed by the [UN Tanzania's Gender Equality Strategy \(2022-2027\)](#), which seeks to integrate gender, environment, and poverty issues into national planning, promoting equal access to opportunities and education for girls and boys.

National policies supporting gender equality and girls' education include:

- [Tanzania Development Vision \(TDV, 2025\)](#): Identifies Gender Equality and Women Empowerment (GEWE) as a core objective, aiming to eliminate Gender-Based Violence and resolve tertiary-level gender disparities, especially low female participation in STEM.
- [The National 5-Year Development Plan \(2022-2026\)](#): Implements TDV 2025, focusing on gender mainstreaming by tackling inequality and violence, addressing skills gaps through education and training, ensuring school safety (including girl-specific boarding), and establishing child protection desks in primary and secondary schools.
- [National Economic Empowerment Council's \(NEEC\) Gender Mainstreaming Guidelines](#): Offer implicit national support for women's empowerment and gender equality.

Education Policies in Tanzania

Tanzania actively promotes girls' education through several national policies, despite lacking a dedicated gender and education policy. The [Education and Training Policy \(2014, revised 2023\)](#), championed by the President. Samia Suluhu is central to this effort, focusing on:

- Promoting Equal Opportunities by eliminating barriers like gender and disability discrimination.
- Enhancing Participation in Higher Education and STEM to correct gender imbalance in technical, vocational, and higher education.
- Addressing Drop-out and Life Challenges through strategies like reintegration guidelines for girls who dropped out due to social or health issues (including GBV).
- Integrating Gender into the curriculum at all levels.

Furthermore, a significant policy change adopted in [2021 \(Education Circular No. 2\)](#) guarantees girls the right to re-enter school after dropping out for any reason, specifically including pregnancy or child marriage.

Policies that address Gender-related barriers to education

Tanzania has established legal protection, institutionalized safe learning environments and attempted to address deep-rooted social cultural barriers to protect girls from gender related barriers to education. The [Sexual Offences Provisions Act \(SOSPA\), passed in 1998](#), criminalized FGM on girls under the age of 18 years. The Act also explicitly defines a girl and a boy as anyone under the age of 18 years requiring protection against sexual offences under the law. It also acknowledges the full range of harm caused by sexual offences including physical, mental and psychological suffering. The Act legally supports the reduction of gender-based violence which often leads to teenage pregnancy thereby removing a critical barrier that prevents girls from completing their education cycles.

The [National Female Genital Mutilation Strategy and Implementation Plan \(2019 - 2022\)](#) and the [National Plan of Action to End Violence Against Women and Children \(2024 - 2029\)](#) both recognize FGM as a gender based violence practice and seek to reduce its prevalence through strategies that empower women and girls against social-cultural forces that perpetuate violence and present a barrier to education.

Tanzania's Girls Education Priorities

Tanzania takes a multi-faceted approach to advancing gender equality and empowering women and girls to achieve educational access, attainment, and economic independence.

- Access and Equity in Education. Government initiatives including free education at primary and secondary level facilitate access to education by girls.
- Right to Re-entry - Through re-entry policies and guidelines, the government allows students who dropped out of school for various reasons including pregnancy and child marriage to return to school, underscoring gender equity in education.
- Safe Learning Environment - Government strategies in policies and guidelines focus on creating safe schools and integrating gender equality in curricula, including establishing child protection desks and gender desks in all primary, secondary and higher learning institutions.
- Targeted STEM Promotion - The policies recognize that girls and women participation in STEM is low and promote inclusion of more girls and women in STEM through establishing girls' science schools in 26 regions, providing specific Mama Samia

Scholarship funds for women in STEM & promoting digital literacy through African Girls Can Code Initiative.

- Shift to Skills-based curricula - the policy advocates for shift towards skills-based education - integrating competence, knowledge, ethics, attitudes and aligning graduates to demands in the labor market.
- Combating socio-cultural norms and patriarchy that undermine girls and women participation in education and economy, including FGM, child marriage, unpaid care and domestic work, value for educating girls, stigma faced by adolescent mothers and gender-based violence.

Uganda

Gender and Development Policies

The [Uganda Gender Policy \(UGP, 2007\)](#), is the foundational national document that establishes the government's commitment to achieving gender equality and women's empowerment by ensuring gender mainstreaming across all sectors. It was developed and is overseen by the Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development (MGLSD). It was preceded by the [National Gender Policy \(NGP, 1997\)](#). The timeframe for the implementation of the UGP is 10 years (2007 - 2017).

There is a notable absence of the subsequent 2017 - 2027 gender policy presenting a policy window for RELI Africa to advocate for girls' education evidence-based strategies inclusion in a subsequent policy. The current 2007 policy promotes girls' education through increased access citing Universal Primary Education (UPE) programs, affirmative action to access higher education institutions; the policy also cites gender disparities in literacy as a policy objective and proposes mainstreaming of gender in education syllabus across all levels of education. The policy promotes girls' leadership in schools and interventions that protect girls from child marriage, teenage pregnancy and GBV under the gender rights. It also promotes SRHR programs, eradication of child labour and exploitation of the girl child. The policy however does not mention FGM.

Gender and Education Policies

The current [Gender in Education Policy II \(GEP II 2016\)](#), was preceded by the [2009 GEP I](#). The [GEP II](#) differs from the previous policies in scope, institutionalization, financial mandate and timeframe. The GEP II timeframe was longer at - 2016 - 2030 - 15 years with a policy evaluation in 2025, and a final evaluation in 2030 in preparation for its review.

Beyond Access

While GEP 2009 achieved gender parity in primary enrollment, GEP II focuses critically on output and retention gaps (e.g., transition, completion, and performance index), where girls still severely lag behind boys in post-primary and higher education.

Statutory Financial Mandate

The GEP II is strongly linked to the [Public Finance Management Act \(2015\)](#). This is a significant institutional leap, requiring all implementing bodies to ensure that budgets conform to the gender and equity budgeting clause.

Institutionalization

It addresses failures in implementing previous policies by focusing on strengthening structures, such as the Gender Unit, the Gender Education Technical Working Group (GETWG), and proposing the formation of District Gender Coordination Committees (a requirement of the 2009 policy that was not implemented) to ensure grassroots capacity and coordination.

GEP II Implementation Strategies

Uganda has been very progressive in advocating for girls' education with policies that illustrate a shift from recognizing the right to education through the [National Strategy for Girls Education \(NSGE, 2015 - 2019\)](#), which was a revised version of the 2004 strategy, 10 years earlier: to addressing persistent barriers to girls' education including teenage pregnancies and GBV. The NSGE policy equally had a renewed focus on quality of education, learning outcomes once girls are in school. Some of the strategies include wide dissemination of the policy, establishing coordination units, guaranteeing resource commitments, encouraging targeted research, and focusing on interventions to improve access, retention, and educational results for girls.

In addition to the NSGE, Uganda seeks to eliminate the underlying cultural, economic and institutional drivers of harm. In 2020, the Ministry of Education and Sports revised the [guidelines for the prevention and management of Teenage Pregnancy in School Settings](#). These guidelines provide the re-entry guidelines to support the return of young mothers to school after giving birth. This was in addition to the existing Ministry of Gender, Labor and Social Development (MGLSD) [National Strategy to End Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy \(2022/23 - 26/27\)](#), this was a revision of the previous strategy from 8 years earlier, 2014/15 - 2019/20. The strategy was developed due to the persistence of child marriage and teenage pregnancy, worsened by the prolonged school closures during the COVID pandemic. These two policies share education related strategies that reinforce the value of retention in formal schooling and reintegration of teenage mothers to school or vocational institutions as protective factors against child marriage and teenage pregnancy.

Policies that address Gender-related barriers to education

The double vulnerability of young women and girls in refugee and conflict settings is recognized by [National Action Plan III ON Women, Peace and Security \(NAPIII, 2021 - 2025\)](#), a policy developed to ensure sustained peace and security through women participation. The policy recognizes girls impacted by conflict and war, and their protection from sexual and gender-based violence. It also supports educating girls in and out of school in land rights and participation in mitigating disasters.

While the policy is not explicitly on girls' education, it supports the investment in the next generation of women leaders and scaling of young women and girls' expertise, skills and engagement in STEM particularly marginalized girls in conflict and refugee settings.

In 2010, Uganda's parliament enacted the [Female Genital Mutilation Act, 2010](#) to provide for the prohibition of FGM and address the severe forms of violence against women and girls.

Uganda Girls Education Priorities

Uganda's key girls' education priorities are structured around three main areas, access and progression, safety and retention and systemic accountability.

- Access and Lifelong progression - Having achieved national level gender parity at primary enrollment, the current priority is overcoming the persistent gender gaps in retention and transition to higher levels. Technical and Science Skills - The government seeks to address the low numbers of girls studying science-based disciplines.
- Combating Violence and Retention - the policies are heavily focused on challenges that undermine girls' ability to progress including child marriage, teenage pregnancy and violence. The government prioritizes mandatory re-entry and re-integration of teenage mothers back to school and providing life skills and SRHR information to prevent teenage pregnancies.
- Addressing Harmful Cultural Norms is also a policy priority through advocating for positive social cultural values and eliminating child marriage and FGM.
- The government is also keen on resourcing the girls' education priorities by addressing gender and equity issues in planning and budgeting and mainstreaming gender analysis and gender disaggregated data to inform policy development, research and tracking of gender indicators.
- Training teachers in gender responsive methodologies is also a priority to address stigma related to pregnant and parenting learners.

Kenya

Gender and Education Policies

The gender and education policies in Kenya are a response to gender disparities in education outcomes particularly as experienced by girls in Arid and Semi-Arid Areas, rural areas and urban informal settlements. The [Education and Training Sector Gender Policy \(2015\)](#) was preceded by the 2007 version. The review of the current Gender in Education and Training Policy is underway, having begun in 2022. The evaluation and formulation of the current policy has taken about four years. The policy intends to address the underlying factors contributing to gender inequality such as socio-cultural and religious beliefs, poverty, child labor, and gender-based violence (GBV). The goal of the review was to focus on equal rights for men and women, girls and boys, and the realization of eliminating gender and regional disparities in basic education.

The Education and Training Sector Gender Policy (2015) mandated the development and implementation of the national education re-entry guidelines for all learners which was accomplished in 2020, in partnership with UNESCO, UNFPA, Population Council and the SRHR Alliance. The guidelines, [National Guidelines for School Re-entry in early learning and basic education \(2020\)](#), provide the operational steps to support re-entry and re-integration of girls and boys who have dropped out of school. The guidelines were developed to address the significant challenge of school dropout rates particularly in ASALs, low-income areas and pockets of poverty. The policy framework mandates robust protection mechanisms: school heads are required to unconditionally readmit teenage mothers, provide counseling services, and potentially enroll them in a different school if they face acute stigma in their previous one. The policy further requires the initiation of legal action against any adult who impregnates a learner, establishing a clear intent to uphold the girl's right to education and prosecute perpetrators.

[The National Education Sector Strategic Plan, NESSP 2023 - 2027](#) is the overarching strategic plan for the Ministry of Education (MoE) in Kenya that defines the context and strategies for all education programs. It was formulated to implement the recommendations of the Presidential Working Party on Education Reform (PWPER). The strategic goal relevant to girls is to Enhance equity and inclusivity for all learners by removing systemic barriers. These include menstrual hygiene, teenage pregnancy and motherhood, WASH facilities in schools and GBV.

Gender and education policies provide high-level directives to support girls in;

- School Retention through the implementation of re-entry policies for all who drop out of schools.
- Increasing access and equity to the marginalized learners in ASALs, rural poor and urban informal settlements through increasing the number of boarding schools and improving the learning facilities.
- Safety and Security - through prevention of GBV by promoting life skills knowledge to handle GBV and linkages with rescue and referral centers for GBV cases.
- Empowerment and Achievement through gender responsive budgeting for essential materials including Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) products.
- Nurturing and Mentoring - include strategies such as role modelling programs for girls and women.
- STEM participation - increase female enrollment in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) courses by implementing affirmative action in TVET admissions.

Interministerial Policies - Health and Education

[The Kenya School Health Policy \(2009\)](#) is a collaboration between the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health which posits that schools are ideal settings to implement health programs and improved health enhances cognitive development, concentration, participation and retention. The policy mandates equipping learners with sustainable skills and competences, including age appropriate SRHR information to support smooth transition through adolescence; prevent pregnancy and provide support to ensure return to school. In addition, one of the policy objectives includes safeguarding learners against GBV and harmful practices like FGM and child marriage. Many of these issues are also addressed in other genders and education policies.

The policy also proposes provision of MHM products and availability of WASH infrastructure, which is completed in this by [The Provision of Sanitary Towels Bill, 2024](#) and the [Kenya Menstrual Hygiene Management Policy \(MHM Policy, 2019 - 2030\)](#). The MHM Policy was developed under the leadership of the Ministry of Health(MoH), in a multisectoral and consultative process where the Ministry of Education and the Environmental Sanitation and Hygiene Inter-Agency Coordinating Committee were also involved. The policy aims to enhance the MHM status of women and girls, recognize MHM as a human right, and address the inadequate access to menstrual products, services, and facilities that limit girls' rights to education and health.

Policies and legislation that address Gender Related Barriers

Similar to Uganda and Tanzania, Kenya has enacted several Acts and Laws that seek to protect girls and women from sexual related offences, Female Genital Mutilation and child marriage. These laws including the [Sexual Offences Act \(2006\)](#), [Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation \(FGM Act, 2011\)](#) and [The Marriage Act \(2014\)](#), collectively establish a robust legal framework to prevent violence and promote equality and full participation of all people in education and national development. FGM, an inhibitive cultural practice, is often linked to child marriage and early childbearing, which are noted as major reasons for learners dropping out of school and compromising their decent economic opportunities.

Kenya Girls Education Priorities

The comprehensive policies and strategies deployed by the Kenyan government represent a strong, multi-sectoral commitment to ensuring the right to education for all adolescent girls. These efforts prioritize breaking down the systemic, socio-cultural, and economic barriers that commonly lead to high school dropout rates, violence, and underrepresentation in critical fields like STEM.

- Retention, Transition, and Completion. The foundational priority is centered on ensuring girls remain in the education system through all levels and achieve 100% transition rate. This involves actively combating school dropout rates with special attention and targeted resources directed towards vulnerable regions, specifically the Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASALs), as well as poor rural areas and urban informal settlements.
- Eliminating Socio-Cultural and Health Barriers. A major focus is placed on removing the biological and societal obstacles that disproportionately hinder girls' attendance and retention. This includes formalizing and enforcing the unconditional re-entry pathway for pregnant girls and young mothers and ensuring access to affordable and sufficient sanitary towels and adequate sanitation facilities to address major causes of absenteeism. Finally, efforts are intensified to eliminate harmful cultural practices, specifically FGM and child marriage both of which actively prevent girls from continuing their education.
- Creating a Safe and Protective Learning Environment. The focus is on safeguarding girls' physical and psychological well-being, by eliminating all forms of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV). This aims to prevent dropouts and ensure girls are safe from abuse perpetrated by teachers, peers, or community members.
- Achieving Gender Equity in Technical and STEM Fields. The objective is to actively bridge the gender gap by addressing the under-representation of girls and women in STEM and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). Policies seek to challenge stereotypes and promote female participation in these critical sectors. Critical economic fields.
- Addressing intersectional disadvantage, the final priority ensures that policies recognize and address the compounding disadvantages faced by certain learners. It focuses on reducing disparities for girls from marginalized groups, acknowledging that various factors—such as gender, poverty, disability, and geographic location

(especially ASAL regions and urban informal settlements)—do not act in isolation but intersect to create mutually reinforcing and severe barriers to education.

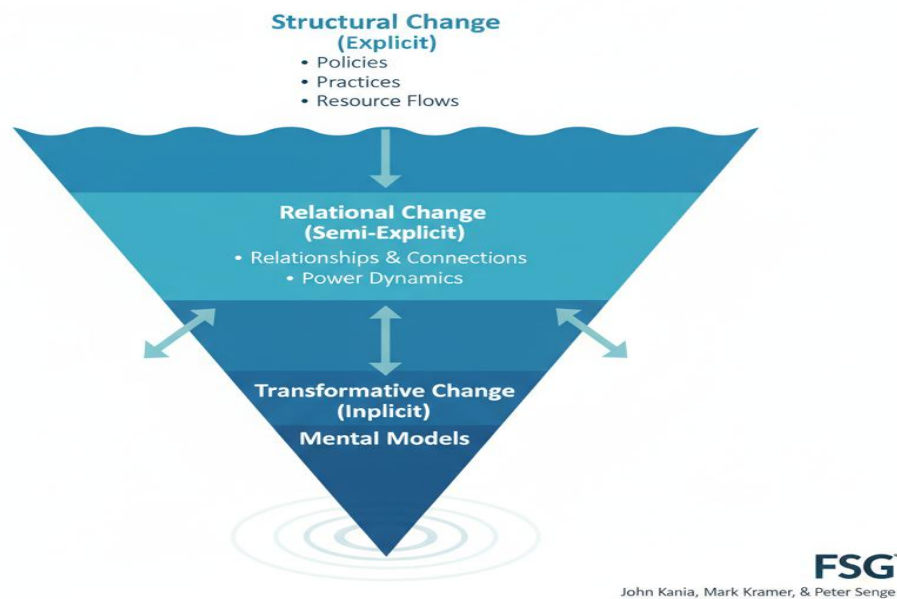
| Type | Tanzania | Kenya | Uganda |
|---------------------------|---|---|--|
| Differences in Strategies | <p>Targeted STEM Investment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mama Samia Scholarships For women in STEM - Dedicated Girls Science Schools <p>Curriculum Shift</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prioritizing Skill based curricula - Aligning with labor market | <p>Menstrual Hygiene Management - Foundational Priority - Policies for free & quality MHM products</p> <p>Intersectional Disadvantages - ASAL, Urban informal settlements, poverty and disability</p> <p>Multi-agency Coordination - MoE, MoH, Police</p> | <p>Teacher Training</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gender Responsive Methodologies |
| Strategy for Stigma | <p>Teacher Training in gender-responsive methodologies</p> | <p>Guidance, Counseling, and Psychosocial Support and accountability for GBV</p> <p>Mandatory MHM/Sanitary Towel Provision and School Feeding Programs as core strategies.</p> | <p>Teacher Training in gender-responsive methodologies</p> |
| Vulnerable Focus | <p>Combating unpaid care and domestic work.</p> <p>Integrates gender equality in curricula.</p> | <p>Explicit priority on ASAL regions, urban informal settlements, and intersectional disadvantage.</p> | <p>General focus on persistence of gender gaps.</p> <p>Provides Life skills and SRHR info to prevent pregnancy.</p> <p>Strategies for girls in refugee and conflict settings</p> |

Table 13: Showing the different strategies for girls' education policies in East Africa

6. Systems Change Analysis

To achieve durable, widespread improvement in girls' education outcomes, change makers must look beyond immediate, visible symptoms and address the fundamental conditions that hold complex social problems in place. True systemic transformation requires moving beyond a "service delivery" mindset—fixing the visible part of the iceberg—to shifting the water below the surface. See the Water of Systems Change framework below.

The Water of Systems Change



Shifting the Conditions that Hold Problems in Place

Figure 3: Image showing the Water of Systems Change, Source, Kania and Senge, 2018 (FSG)

According to the above framework developed by FSG, a social impact firm, effective systems change requires simultaneous work across three distinct levels: structural, relational, and transformative (Kania, Kramer, & Senge, 2018).

While many interventions focus on the tangible, structural elements of a crisis, sustainable impact demands a primary focus on influencing relational dynamics and, most critically, shifting the deeply held mental models that ultimately shape societal conditions.

The Waters of Systems Change

Kania, Kramer, and Senge (2018) posit that while structural changes—such as explicit policies, resource flows, and everyday practices—are necessary and the most visible tangible elements of change are often temporary if addressed in isolation. For example, reallocating funding for girls' schooling (a structural change) may not yield lasting results if the underlying community sentiments remain hostile toward female empowerment.

Sustainable change requires diving deeper into the "semi-explicit" relational level, analyzing connection, power dynamics, and how organizations and community members interact. Yet,

the deepest, least visible, and most powerful level is the "transformative" tier of mental models. These are the deeply rooted beliefs, assumptions, and narratives that dictate behaviors and shape all other conditions.

In the context of girls' education, structural barriers are often held in place by deep-seated patriarchal mindsets that devalue girls' education, dictate restrictive gender roles, and normalize harmful practices such as gender-based violence and transactional sex for economic gain. If these foundational mental models remain unchallenged, structural and relational interventions will inevitably face severe limitations in their effectiveness and longevity.

While several organizations and interventions focus on the transformative tier of mental models, scalable transformation at this level has been slow, even where policies, practices and resource flows have been invested.

Implications for RELI Africa

The FSG framework has significant implications for RELI Africa and the member organizations. Currently, many grassroots NGOs within the RELI network face distinct scale limitations. They are often highly effective at the relational level locally, building strong trust within communities and reaching the most marginalized girls. However, their impact is constrained at the structural level by limited integration with government systems and a reliance on restrictive, project-based funding models that stifle long-term sustainability (Jaslika, 2024).

Applying the "Water of Systems Change" framework suggests that for RELI Africa to maximize its impact, it must pivot from a primary focus on isolated programmatic success toward collective systems influence. RELI members are currently operating under the weight of the deep-seated mental models described above—environments where girls' education is devalued and learning environments are unsafe. Therefore, RELI's collective strategy must prioritize interventions that target these transformative conditions. Instead of just advocating for more girl focused interventions and policies (structural), RELI must leverage its network power to challenge the public narratives and core beliefs that fuel practices like early marriage or prioritizing boys' education over girls'.

An Ecosystem Model of Scaling Social Impact in Girls' Education

To address the limitations of local NGOs acting alone, RELI Africa is uniquely positioned to adopt an ecosystem model of scaling social impact. Unlike traditional organizational scaling, which focuses on growing a single entity's size and budget to serve more people, an ecosystem approach focuses on "scaling impact" by leveraging networks and aligning the activities of diverse actors—NGOs, government, communities, and funders—to solve a complex problem together (Bradach & Grindle, 2014).

For RELI Africa, this means moving beyond an aggregation of individual projects toward a coordinated movement for systemic change. An ecosystem model recognizes that while a single local NGO may not have the capacity to change national policy or shift deeply rooted patriarchal norms nationwide, a coordinated coalition does. In this model, RELI acts as the connecting infrastructure, allowing member organizations to harmonize their efforts. By adopting an ecosystem approach, RELI can:

1. Scale Deep (Transformative): Collectivize efforts to shift mental models and cultural norms in communities, using shared evidence to challenge harmful narratives about girls' roles.
2. Scale Up (Structural): Use the collective voice of the network to influence government policies and resource flows in a way single NGOs cannot, advocating for the integration of community-led solutions into national systems.
3. Scale Out (Relational): Spread effective practices across the network not through replication of a single model, but through adaptation and shared learning among diverse members.

By shifting from organizational isolation to ecosystem alignment, RELI Africa can overcome the scale limitations inherent in project-based funding and address the root causes holding gender inequality in place.

RELI Ecosystem Model Example

Ecosystem Model of Scaling Social Impact

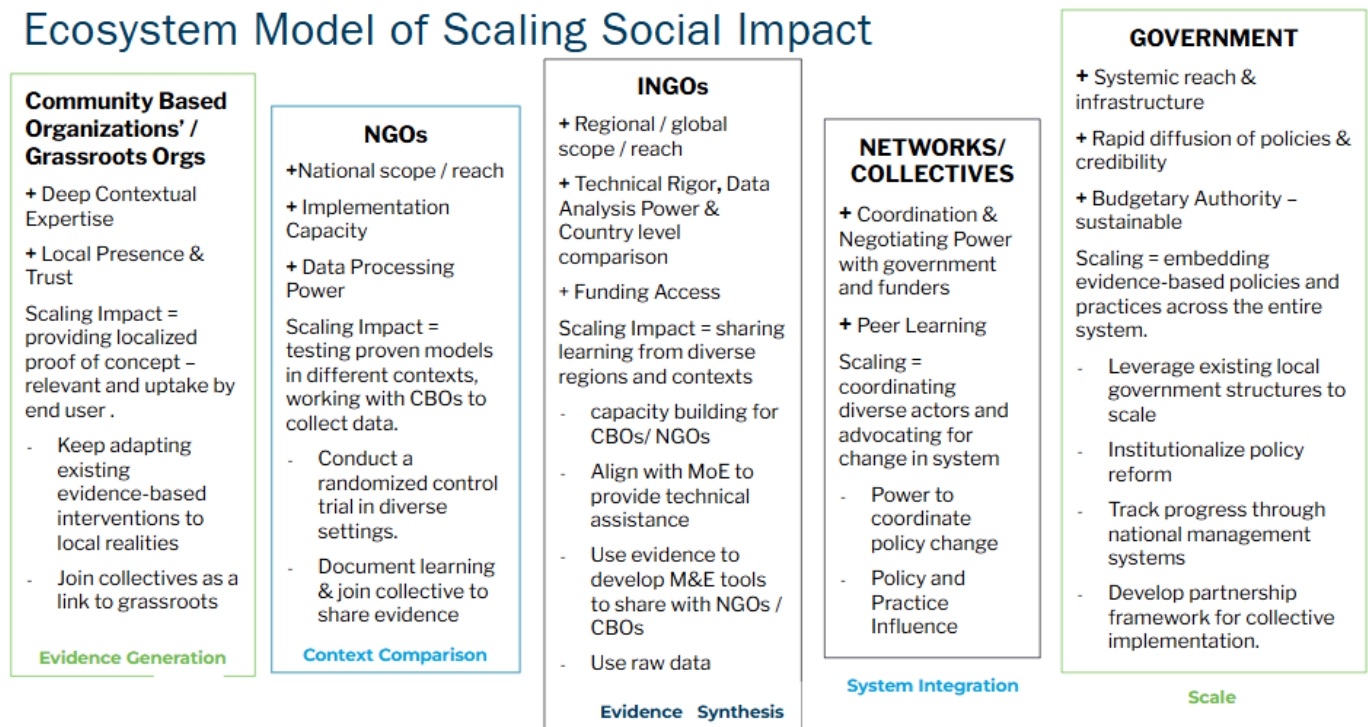


Figure 4: Image showing an ecosystem model for scaling social impact

7. Key Implications and Recommendations

The strategic landscape of girls' education in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania demonstrates a critical shift from a primary focus on basic access and enrollment, characteristic of early programs (pre-2017), toward sustained learning outcomes, successful transition to post-primary phases, and deep inclusion for marginalized groups (Girls' Education Challenge [GEC], 2022). Major international funding mechanisms, notably the UK's Girls' Education Challenge (GEC), have spearheaded this change by prioritizing transition (GEC-T, 2017–2025) and

incorporating adaptive, girl-focused, and intersectional approaches to address poverty and discriminatory social norms (Coffey, 2020).

The analysis of policy priorities across Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda reveals a strong regional consensus on the critical barriers—from early pregnancy and cultural practices to violence and under-representation in STEM—but highlights the need for a deeper, coordinated approach to intervention design and measurement (Jaslika, 2024; Unterhalter et al., 2018). The key implication is that achieving sustainable, systemic change requires explicitly unifying the efforts of evidence generation, on-the-ground practice, and policy mandates into a continuous feedback cycle (Kania et al., 2018).

Intervention efficacy is demonstrably high in programs utilizing comprehensive, multi-sectoral models. The rigorous evidence from initiatives like the Adolescent Girls Initiative-Kenya (AGI-K) confirms that addressing non-educational barriers—specifically violence prevention, health, and wealth creation—alongside schooling is paramount for achieving long-term human capital accumulation and delayed childbearing (Austrian et al., 2020). Furthermore, specialized inclusion efforts targeting girls with disabilities (GWDs), implemented by organizations such as Leonard Cheshire in both Kenya and Uganda, highlight the high-cost, high-impact necessity of tailored support and system strengthening (Leonard Cheshire, 2017; Carew et al., 2019).

The primary challenge remains achieving systemic sustainability, where proven, specialized interventions are successfully internalized and replicated by national governments. Recommendations stemming from this analysis focus on enforcing standardized M&E for non-cognitive and economic outcomes, mandating longitudinal follow-up for delayed impact validation, and strategically funding the replication of effective models (e.g., Creative Learning Centres, gender-responsive teacher coaching) within established national frameworks like Tanzania’s Secondary Education Development Program (SEDP) (World Bank, 2018) and Uganda’s Education Plus Initiative (UNAIDS, 2021).

Key Recommendations

Integrating Rigorous Evidence through Mixed-Methods Design

The *Creating Impact at the Local Level* report highlighted that girls' education interventions in East Africa are primarily focused on direct service delivery, addressing immediate symptoms through activities such as providing scholarships, MHM (Menstrual Hygiene Management) products, WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) facilities, and life skills training. This focus is rooted in two primary realities: the necessity to show and document immediate, concrete outcomes, and the limited resources, mandate, and time available for the more difficult, long-term work of institutional lobbying. This slower process is essential for achieving systemic change, such as revising scholarship allocation standards, guaranteeing budgetary oversight for Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) funds, and ensuring the effective enforcement of related laws and policies.

Systemic change requires moving beyond descriptive data to robust, standardized, and targeted evidence. This evidence is essential for tracking intervention impact, informing progress on policy implementation (especially government policies), and guiding future policy

revisions. While many of the mapped interventions effectively measure outputs—*What we did*, such as the number of training conducted, participants reached, girls engaged, and sanitary pads distributed, there is a gap in measuring outcomes—*What has changed*—and impact—what difference our project made. Observing this fundamental change and impact requires time.

One example includes programs that support the school re-entry guidelines which are powerful, but their true impact depends on evidence that captures both reach and quality. To achieve this, future research needs to employ a Mixed-Methods Design to effectively achieve this goal. This integrated approach will combine quantitative data, such as the number of girls who have successfully returned and transitioned, with qualitative follow-up. The qualitative data will explore the factors that supported their return and retention, the academic challenges they face post-reintegration, and the support services they require. The qualitative component is crucial for filling data gaps, particularly concerning implementation challenges and community reception. Implementing a standardized reporting template and data collection protocols across implementing partners (practice) is essential; this standardization ensures that the data collected (evidence) can be consistently analyzed by policymakers and legislators (policy), thus allowing for precise adjustments to funding and regulatory frameworks.

Designing for Sustainable Impact through Longitudinal Measurement

For interventions to shift from isolated successes to true systemic reform, their impact must be measured rigorously and longitudinally. The current policy focus on issues like safe schools and STEM equity demands metrics that track outcomes over time, not just outputs. A core implication is the necessity for Deep Dive Country-Specific Analysis to generate national-level insights that avoid one-size-fits-all programming. This analysis must be anchored by longitudinal, rigorous impact and outcome measurement, requiring future studies to be deliberately designed with defined baseline and endlines. This scientific approach ensures that policy resources are concentrated on practices demonstrably achieving positive changes in girls' lives, creating an accountability loop where evidence of impact dictates which practices are formalized and scaled up by the national policy framework.

Fostering Policy Ownership via Deeper Stakeholder Engagement

The long-term sustainability and effectiveness of gender and education policies depend on the buy-in of practitioners and the communities they serve. Policies are often developed top-down, risking disconnect from the on-the-ground realities faced by teachers, community elders, and the adolescent girls themselves. The implication is that policy development must become a collaborative, iterative process. This necessitates deeper stakeholder engagement to collaboratively determine the optimal interventions to include in the analysis, fostering ownership rather than simple compliance. Integrating iterative feedback loops is crucial for robust validation of findings, ensuring that the evidence gathered accurately reflects the experience of practice and that the resulting policy is both relevant and enforceable. This co-creation model is vital for transforming community and cultural norms, which sit at the heart of many educational barriers across the region. Similarly, there is need for more investments in understanding the policy formulation, dissemination and implementation value chain and where the disconnects limit the implementation of evidence based strategies for girls education.

8. RELI Africa's Learning Strategy

This comprehensive study represents a pivotal moment for girls' education in East Africa, moving beyond a traditional landscape analysis to a diagnostic of systemic health across Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. Through a rigorous mixed-methods approach that mapped 155 stakeholders, analyzed 75 distinct interventions, and reviewed over 30 key policies, the findings reveal a sector in transition: while significant strides have been made in enrollment and access, the region faces a persistent "implementation gap" where strong legal frameworks fail to translate into sustained learning outcomes and safe environments for the most marginalized girls.

Consequently, the path forward demands a fundamental shift from isolated interventions to an ecosystem model of scaling impact.

The analysis underscores that no single actor type can solve these complex challenges alone; rather, success lies in leveraging the unique competitive advantages of the entire ecosystem—harnessing the deep community trust of CBOs, the technical rigor of INGOs, and the systemic reach of government. This report serves as a strategic roadmap for RELI Africa to orchestrate this shift, outlining actionable steps to harmonize evidence generation, bridge the policy-practice divide, and cultivate the transformative mental models necessary to institutionalize gender equity within national education systems.

The Learning Agenda: Strengthening the Evidence Base

To drive systemic reform in girls' education, the sector must urgently pivot from counting activities to measuring fundamental societal change. Currently, monitoring often stops at verifiable outputs—such as the number of sanitary pads distributed or workshops held—which fail to capture whether a girl's life trajectory has truly shifted. The following actions outline a strategic transition toward a rigorous, impact-driven Learning Agenda. By redefining measurement frameworks, institutionalizing participatory methodologies that capture the "why" behind the numbers, and establishing a Regional Evidence Lab, RELI can generate the high-quality, mixed-methods evidence necessary to influence national policy and funding.

Redefining the Measurement Framework: From Output to Impact

RELI must standardize a measurement hierarchy across its membership. Member organizations should categorize data into three distinct tiers to ensure reporting goes beyond activity tracking.

- **Output Measures (*What we did*):** Track immediate, verifiable results (e.g., number of workshops, schools reached, materials distributed).
- **Outcome Measures (*What changed*):** Focus on medium-term results indicating behavioral or institutional change (e.g., % of teachers adopting gender-responsive pedagogy, increased retention, measurable growth in girls' confidence).
- **Impact Measures (*The ultimate difference*):** Commit to tracking long-term fundamental changes in society (e.g., shifts in social norms, reduced child marriage rates, increased economic participation).

Institutionalize Participatory Methodologies (The "Why" behind the numbers)

To capture "Impact Measures" effectively, RELI should train members on the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique. This captures shifts in power dynamics that quantitative data misses.

- Specific Indicators to Track:
 - Changes in how household chores are shared.
 - Changes in family decision-making regarding school fees.
 - Shifts in community expectations regarding early marriage.
 - Changes in a girl's ability to challenge unfairness or make decisions.
 - Changes in the acceptance of School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV).

Establish a Regional "Evidence Lab" for Mixed-Methods Research

- Commission "Deep Dive Country-Specific Analysis" with defined baselines and endlines.
- Standardize a Mixed-Methods Design. Quantitative data (enrollment numbers) must be paired with qualitative inquiry (observation and interviews) to understand the *quality* of retention and the nature of skills applied by teachers.
- Targeted Synthesis: Conduct a thematic synthesis of evidence specifically on School Related Gender Based Violence (SRGBV). There is a critical gap in understanding how SRGBV interventions impact educational outcomes; filling this will allow RELI to lobby for specific budget allocations.

Transforming Practice (Ecosystem Implementation)

True systemic transformation requires moving beyond fragmented, project-based interventions to a coordinated ecosystem approach that leverages the unique strengths of every stakeholder. This pillar focuses on operationalizing that shift by ensuring that evidence generation is radically inclusive, overcoming barriers like "time poverty" and cultural silence to center the voices of adolescent girls. By pooling resources to standardize curricula and institutionalizing deep feedback loops, RELI can transition from isolated implementation to a collective model where grassroots innovations are rigorously tested, packaged by technical partners, and scaled through national government systems.

Operationalize Inclusive Data Protocols

In conservative settings, women and girls face "time poverty" and cultural restrictions on speaking in mixed groups.

1. RELI members must design flexible protocols and avoid top-down imposition by co-creating and piloting measurement tools with target users to ensure cultural relevance before finalization.
 - Create gender-segregated spaces (safe spaces) where women and girls can speak freely without men/boys present.
 - Utilize flexible scheduling that accounts for domestic workloads.
2. Develop and Advocate for a Standardized Gender Curriculum
 - Move beyond fragmented NGO-led content by pooling resources to support a standardized Gender and Education Curriculum.
 - Mechanism (The Ecosystem Approach):
 - *Grassroots CBOs* test the content and provide local proof of concept.
 - *National NGOs* use their capacity to train system actors.
 - *INGOs* package the core evidence-based components.

- *RELI Secretariat* negotiates with Ministries of Education for national adoption in pre-service teacher training.
 - *Government Led* - Incorporate inservice teacher training through continuous professional development on the standardized curriculum .
3. Operationalize "Deeper Stakeholder Engagement" Loops
- Institutionalize feedback loops where evidence is validated by communities (teachers, elders, girls) before reaching policymakers. This fosters ownership rather than compliance and addresses the "Mental Models" (the bottom of the Water of Systems Change framework iceberg) that undervalue girls' education.
 - Work with men and boys - to support a holistic mental models shift within existing community structures.

Policy Influence & Systems Change

While robust legal frameworks for girls' education exist across East Africa, a persistent "implementation gap" often serves high-level policy intent from the operational reality in schools. This pillar targets that divide by shifting the measure of government success from administrative outputs to tangible impact. By facilitating high-level cross-country learning—leveraging Kenya's evidence models, Uganda's budgeting laws, and Tanzania's strategic policy windows—and securing resources for sub-national localization, RELI can ensure that national mandates are not just launched in capitals but are actively enforced and monitored for behavioral change in classrooms.

Advocate for "Impact" over "Output" in National Policies

When consulting on key policies (e.g., Uganda's *Gender in Education Sector Policy, Kenya's ETSGP 2025*), lobby government monitoring systems to adopt the "Outcome" and "Impact" indicators rather than relying solely on distribution statistics.

Facilitate Cross-Country Learning

Organize high-level exchanges to share specific strategic advantages:

- Kenya to Region: Share the "Evidence-Informed Policy Development" model (led by Population Council/UNESCO) to demonstrate how data drives priorities.
- Uganda to Region: Share lessons on the *Public Finance Management Act (2015)* and how Gender Responsive Budgeting can be legally enacted.
- Tanzania to Region: Share insights on leveraging "Policy Windows" during administrative transitions to push through reforms.

Bridge the Policy-Practice Gap

Shift focus from "Launch" to "Localization." Secure collective funding specifically for policy dissemination at the sub-national level.

- Advocate for Quality Assurance monitors to move beyond checking for the *presence* of policy documents to monitoring *actual implementation* and behavioral change.

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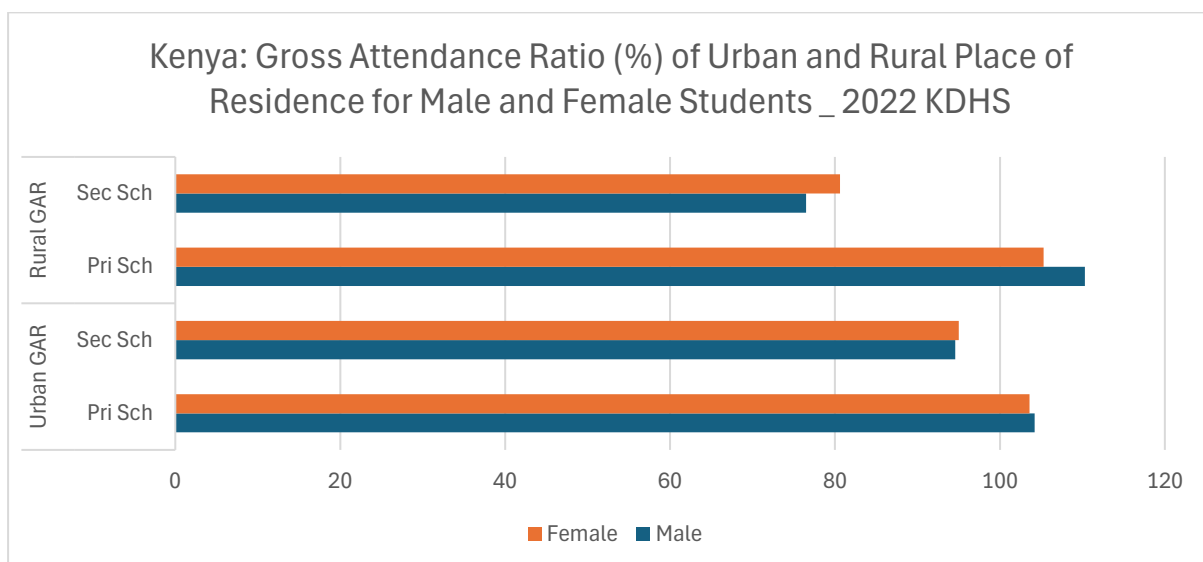
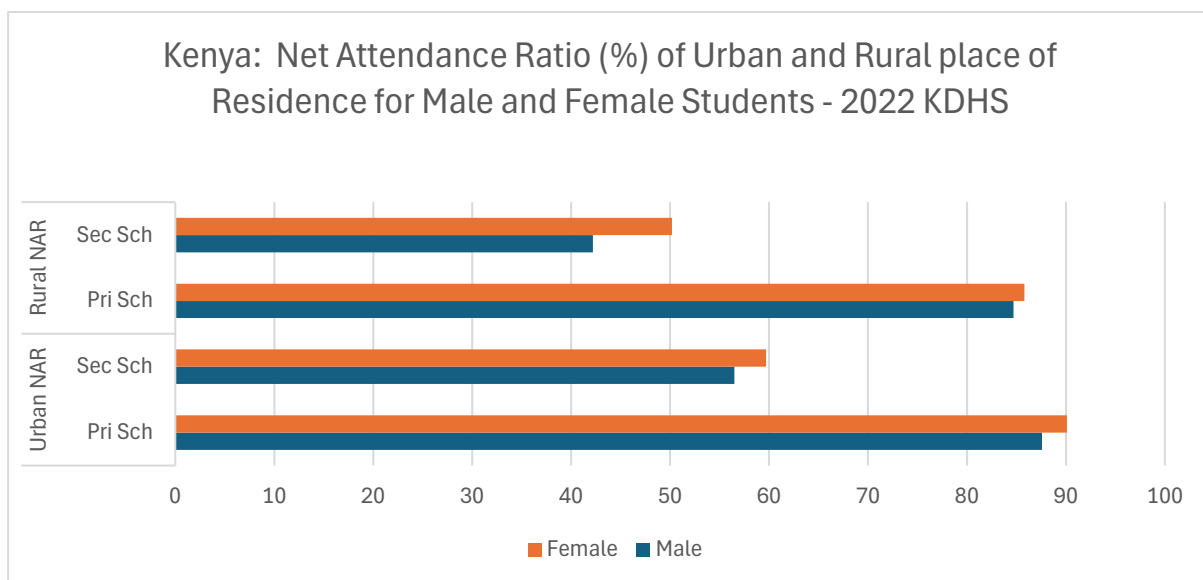
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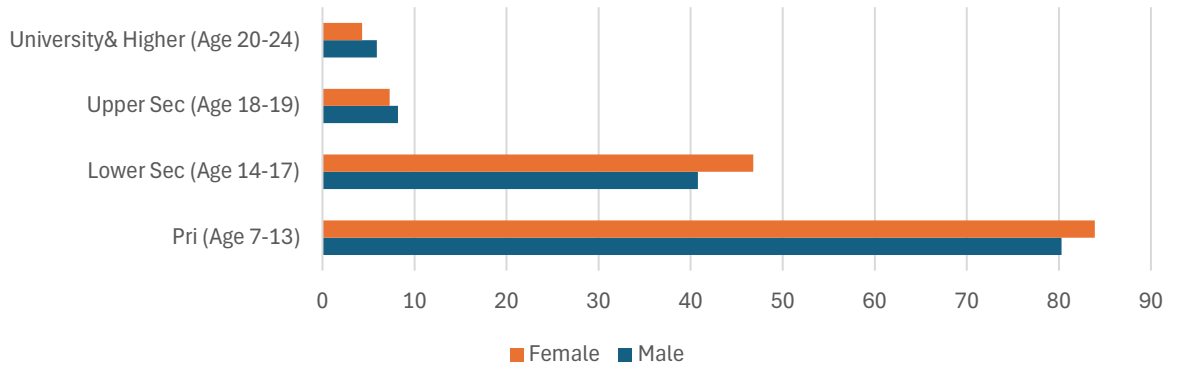
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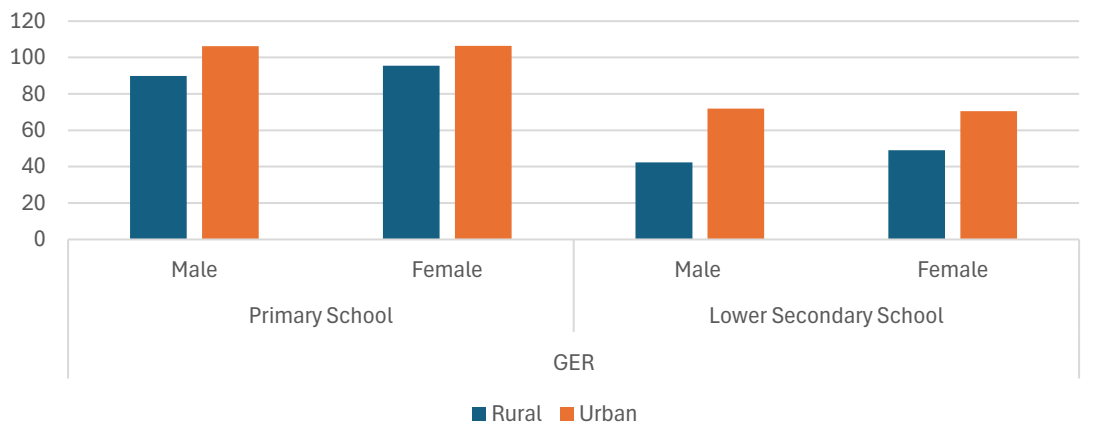
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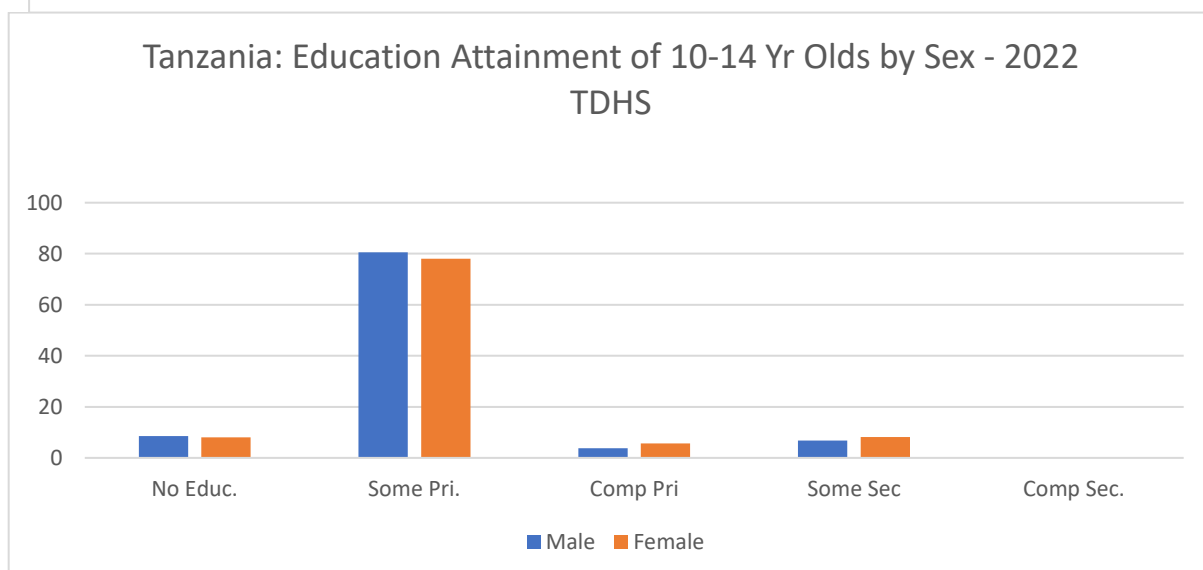
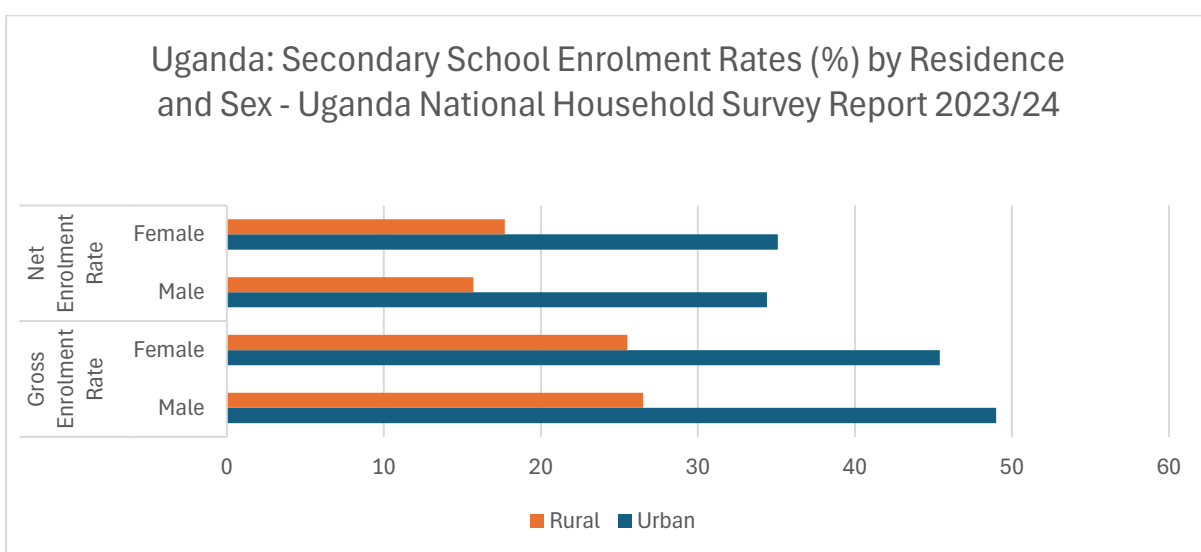
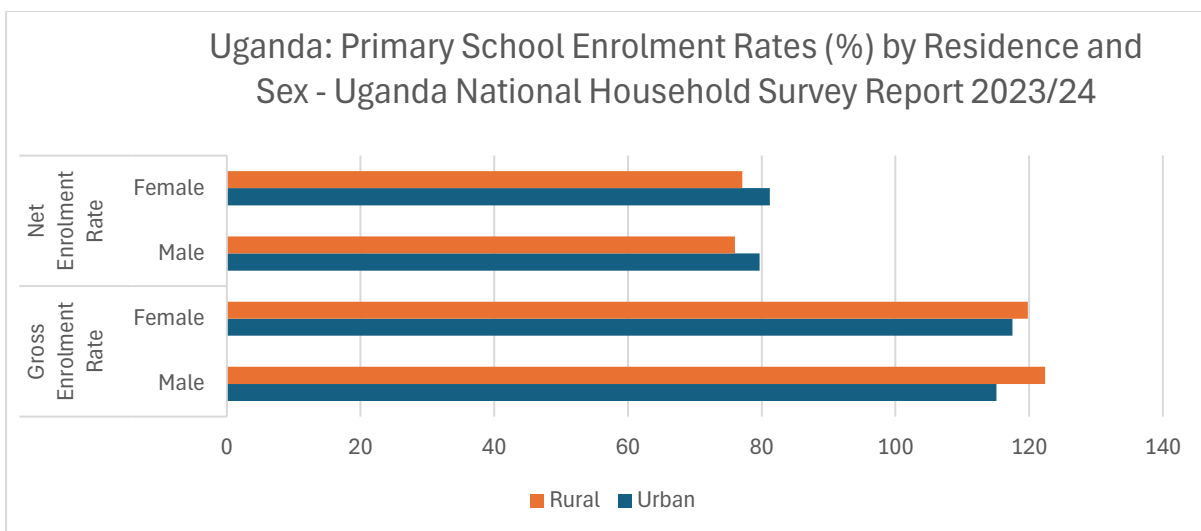


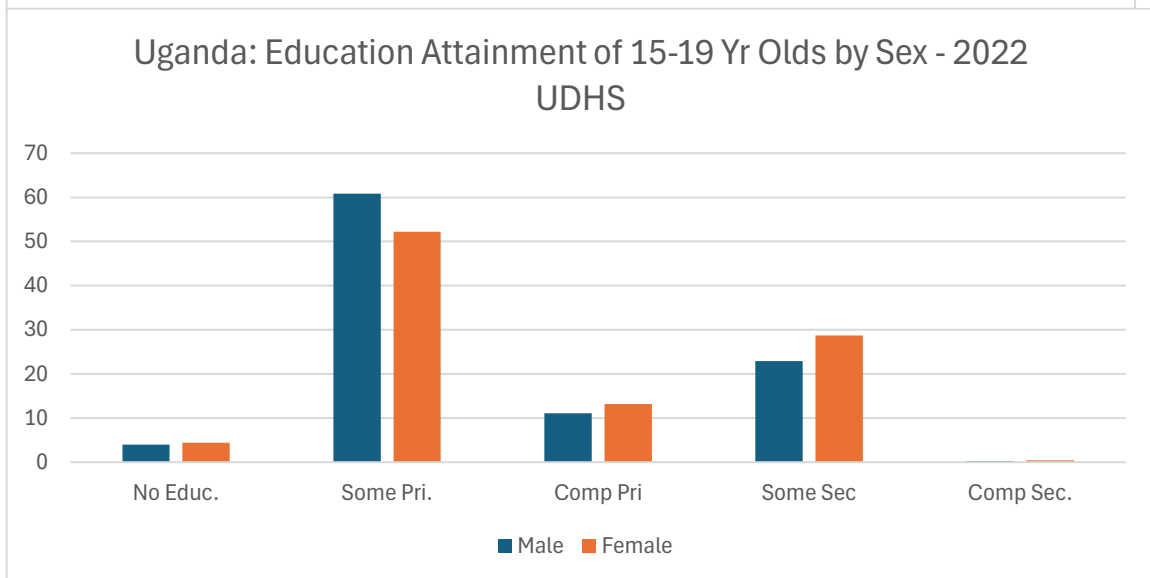
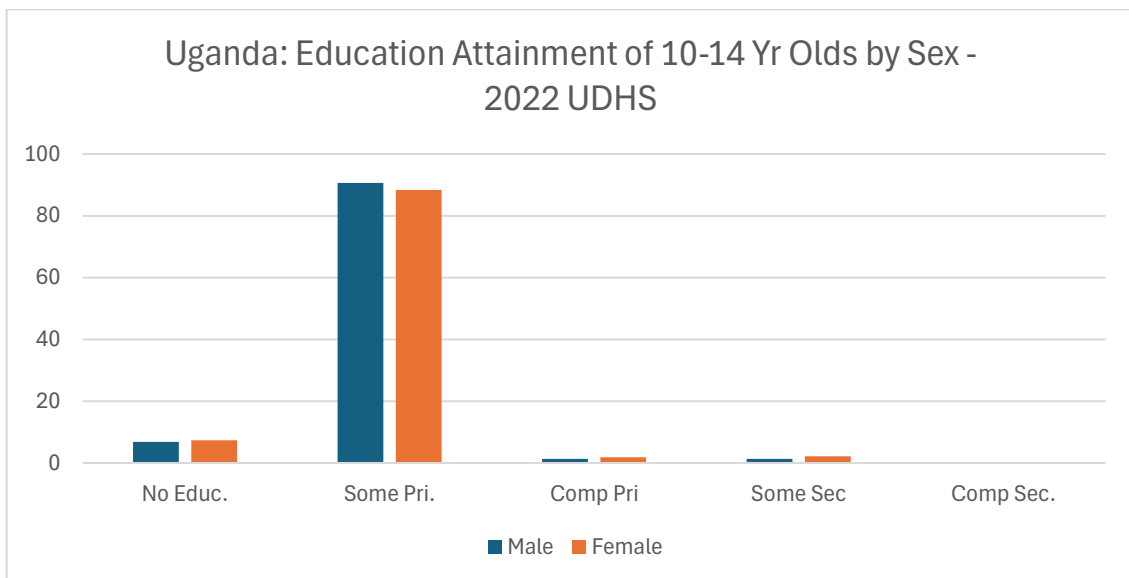
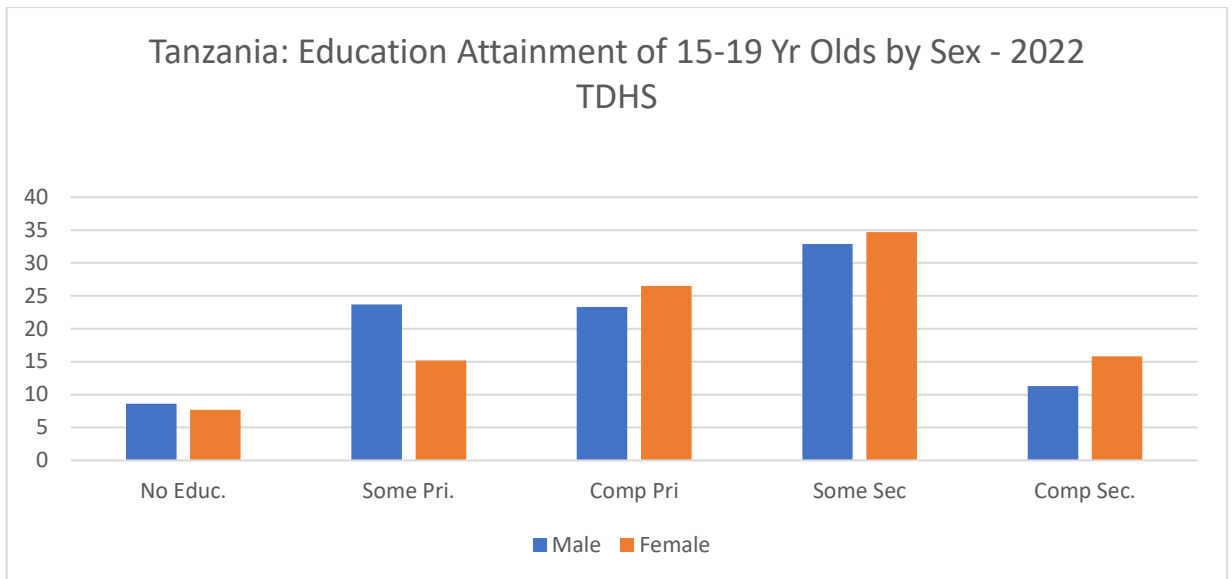
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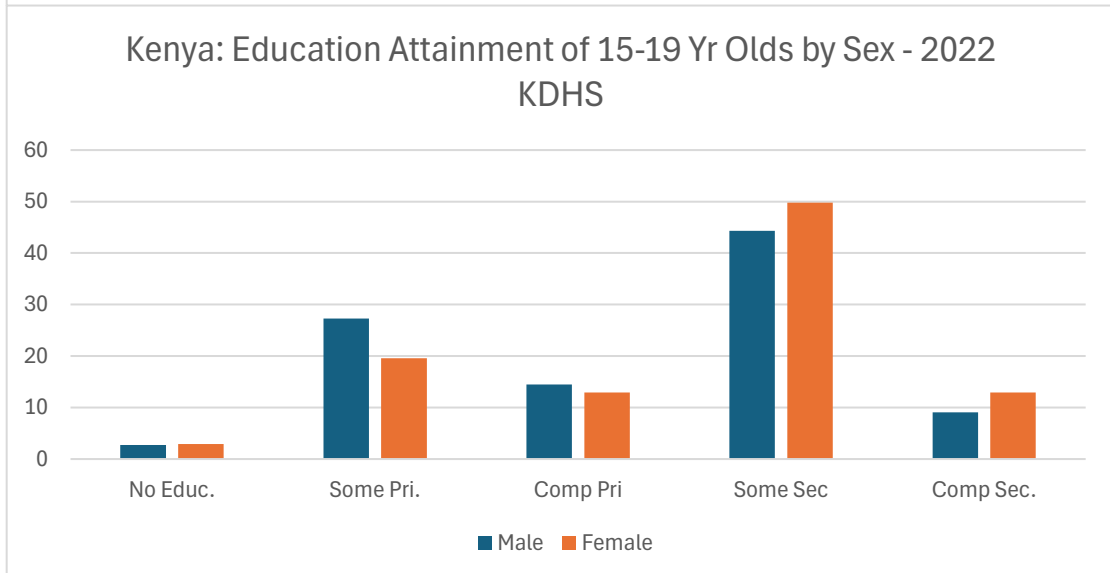
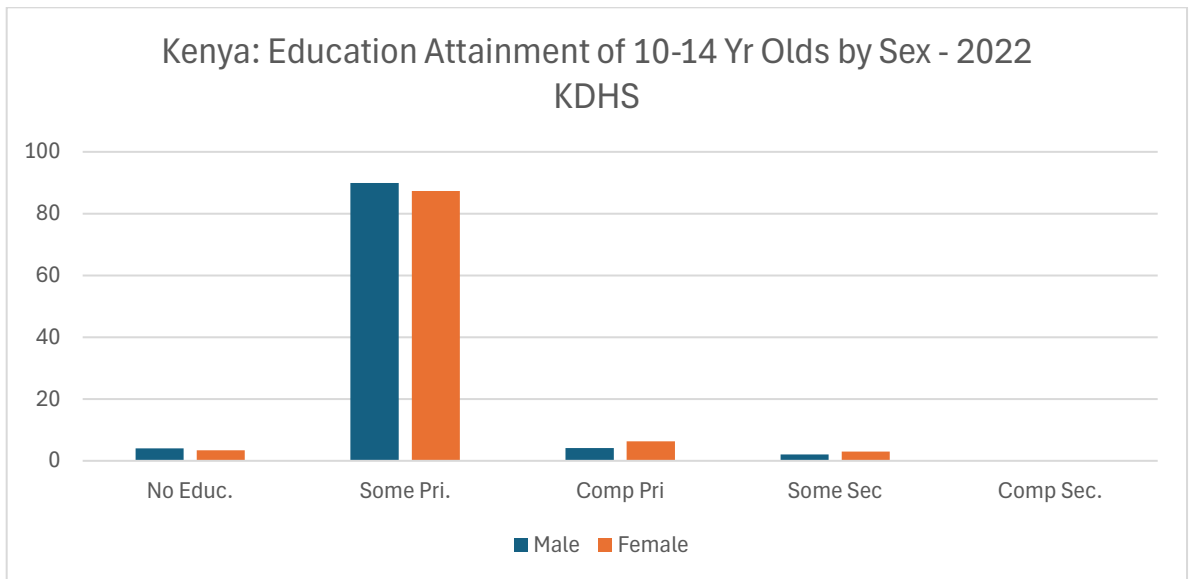


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