**INSTITUTE OF STATISTICAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RESEARCH (ISSER)**

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# POLICY BRIEF

# Removing Barriers to Girls' Education in Ghana

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite significant progress in expanding access to education for girls in Ghana, several challenges continue to hinder their regular attendance, completion, and progression through the educational system. Cultural norms, poverty, and gender-based violence remain persistent barriers (Adomako et al., 2023). This brief reviews successful policies and programmes that have supported girls' education to date, and outlines strategies to strengthen and sustain these gains while addressing the remaining obstacles.

## INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental human right and a key driver of development. However, in Ghana, many girls still face structural and socio-cultural barriers that limit their ability to fully benefit from educational opportunities. Cultural expectations often assign girls disproportionate domestic responsibilities, contributing to higher dropout rates (Lonchar, 2022). Additionally, early pregnancy and child marriage significantly disrupt girls' education and reinforce traditional gender roles (Forsgren et al., 2019).

Addressing these challenges is urgent, as research shows that educating girls yields broad socio-economic benefits, including poverty reduction, improved child and maternal health, and increased economic productivity (Fontanella et al., 2020).

## METHODOLOGY

This analysis draws on a synthesis of data and evidence from relevant national and international literature, as well as policy documents and programme reports from agencies such as UNICEF, the Ghana Education Service (GES), and the World Bank. It also includes programme-level insights from field evaluations, with a focus on interventions designed to improve girls' access, retention, and success in education.

# FINDINGS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

## 1. Effective Policies and Programmes

*Girls' Education Unit (GEU):* Established in 1997, the GEU has spearheaded efforts to increase female enrolment, retention, and performance, particularly in STEM-related subjects (GES, 2002).

*Capitation Grant Scheme (2005):* By abolishing school fees, the scheme led to a notable increase in enrolment (Osei-Owusu et al., 2020).

*School Feeding Programme:* This initiative significantly improved enrolment, retention and completion rates among girls, particularly those in impoverished areas (Addaney, 2016).

*School Re-entry Policy (2018):* This policy outlines measures to prevent teenage pregnancy and supports the reintegration of girls into school following childbirth. It prohibits the expulsion of pregnant girls from both public and private schools, allowing them to continue their education unless a health condition prevents their regular attendance. Figure 1 shows progress in basic school completion rates for boys and girls.

*Figure 1: Basic school completion ratio, 2016-21(%)*
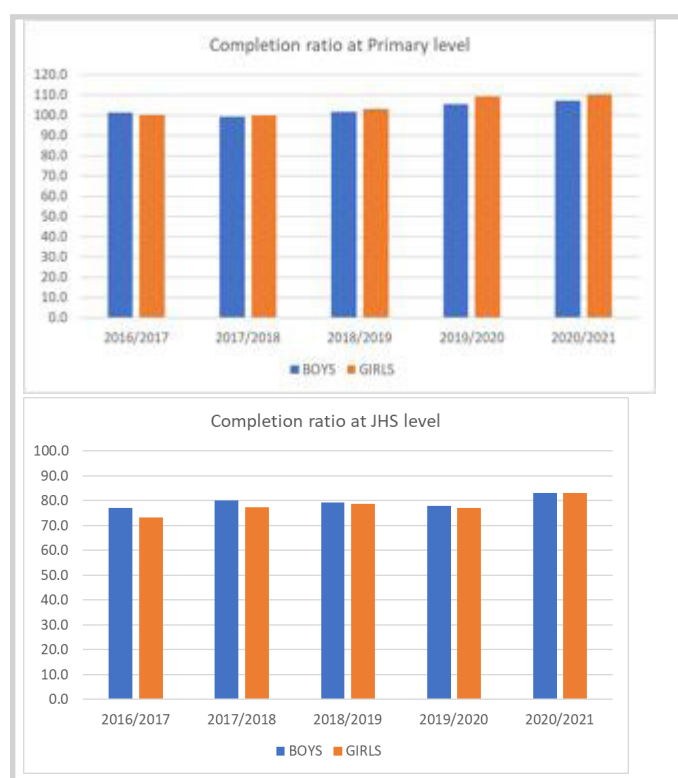


*Free Senior High School Policy (2017):* This policy has expanded access to secondary education, particularly for girls from low-income households (Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2018). Figures 2 and 3 show progress in enrolment and gender parity following its implementation.

*Figure 2: school completion ratio-SHS, 2016-21(%)*



The Gender Parity Index (GPI) is a key and sensitive measure of progress in retaining girls in school. The GPI assesses the effectiveness of education policies and programmes in addressing gender disparities and serves as an indicator of a country's progress, or setbacks, towards achieving gender equality in education. As shown in Figure 3, Ghana has, thus far, made notable progress in implementing gender-responsive policies and programmes that promote girls' education.

*Figure 3: gender parity index, 2016-2023*
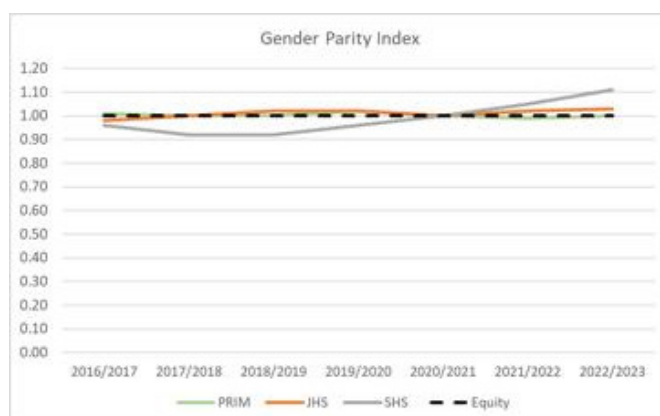
## 2. Promising Programmatic Interventions

*Sanitary Pads Distribution:* In Ghana, absenteeism from school during menstruation remains high (Asumah et al., 2023), with "period poverty" identified as a significant contributing factor to adolescent pregnancies (Bodine, 2023). A small-scale sanitary pad distribution initiative in northern Ghana has demonstrated a marked improvement in girls' school attendance and their transition to senior high school.

*Re-entry Policy:* For adolescent mothers and pregnant girls to re-enter school successfully, complementary support programmes must tackle the specific challenges they face on campus. Schools need gender-friendly washrooms, changing rooms and suitable furniture to ensure the comfort and dignity of pregnant pupils. Although the policy encompasses both reintegration and prevention, limited awareness of its preventive dimension has led some parents to misinterpret its aims, thereby reducing community support.

## 3. Implementation Challenges

*Policy obstruction:* Political transitions often disrupt educational initiatives, affecting their implementation and sustainability. These disruptions may take the form of legislative blocks, underfunding, or administrative neglect. For example, the National School Feeding Policy, finalised in 2015, has yet to be officially adopted.

*Incomplete implementation:* Policy and programme execution often falls short of expectations. Successive governments tend to alter or abandon programmes initiated by their predecessors. A case in point is the inconsistent recruitment and validation process for caterers under the school feeding programme, which changes with each administration—undermining continuity and impact.

*Lack of policy clarity:* Vague or absent implementation guidelines can create confusion. The Free SHS Policy, for instance, has no comprehensive framework to clarify what "free" entails. As a result, many parents expect the government to provide all materials and services, creating unrealistic expectations

and confusion.

# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While Ghana has made commendable strides in promoting girls' education, gaps remain in ensuring equity, quality, and consistency. Sustained investment, policy clarity, and robust community engagement are essential to ensure that every girl in Ghana has the opportunity to access and complete her education. To accelerate progress, the following recommendations are proposed:

- *Scale up sanitary pad distribution:* Implement free distribution of sanitary pads in schools to reduce absenteeism related to menstruation.

- *Promote STEM education:* Enhance initiatives that support girls' participation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) through mentorship programmes, targeted outreach, and capacity-building efforts.

- *Establish clear policy frameworks:* Develop comprehensive policy documents for existing education initiatives -- such as the Free SHS policy -- to promote clarity, improve public understanding, and strengthen accountability.

- *Strengthen community engagement:* Deepen community-based interventions aimed at changing perceptions around girls' education, with the involvement of parents, traditional leaders, and other stakeholders to build more supportive environments.

- *Improve monitoring and evaluation:* Establish robust monitoring and evaluation systems to regularly assess the effectiveness of educational policies and programmes, and to guide evidence-based adjustments where needed.

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*A full version of the content presented in this brief is available in the Ghana Social Development Outlook 2024.*