



## BRIEFING NOTE

# Barriers affecting girls' education in Rwanda

FEBRUARY 2021

Rwanda has made great strides in achieving equitable education for girls, having attained and surpassed gender parity in primary education. The country also has a number of national political commitments to eliminating discrimination against girls and women in education. However, girls in Rwanda – particularly those of adolescent age – continue to face barriers to achieving their full potential. This has implications not only for individual girls and communities, but will continue to be felt at societal and economic levels if left unaddressed. Moreover, the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic threaten to reverse the gains made to date and to exacerbate existing inequalities.

## Ongoing disparities

**While gender parity has been achieved in primary education, there are ongoing disparities in secondary and tertiary education, leading to gendered wage and employment gaps.** For example, despite the fact that girls perform better than boys in National Examinations at primary level, they typically perform worse in secondary-level examinations. Performance at secondary level National Examinations can impede girls' engagement in later studies: this is reflected in the reappearance of the gender gap in enrolment at tertiary level. Moreover, adolescent girls are more likely to drop out of secondary education than their male counterparts. This is significant in a context where women typically command lower wages than men (the average salary of male employees in Rwanda is approximately 1.5 times higher than that of females).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, unemployment rates are higher among young females (16-30 years old) than among their young male counterparts (22% and 17% respectively).

**Girls are underrepresented in STEM subjects and have lower ICT literacy than their male counterparts.** While the numbers of girls studying STEM subjects – critical to a technology-led economy – has increased in recent years, it has not kept pace with the rapid increase in number of boys. The total number of girls studying STEM at upper secondary was 65,450 in 2019, relative to 80,867 boys.<sup>2</sup> At tertiary level, only 32% of STEM students were female – and in public institutions, this figure was only 27%.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, girls lag behind in terms of digital literacy: data from 2018 indicates that only 9.7% of female youth (aged 15 to 24) were computer literate, compared to 11.4% of male youth.<sup>4</sup>

**Girls' enrolment in TVET subjects – especially those with higher earning potential – is disproportionately low.** As of 2018, only 42.8% of TVET students were female, and at tertiary level, the gap widens, with only four females to every ten males.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the selection of TVET courses remain indicative of persistent gender norms: in 2019, 80% of students enrolled in TVET courses for arts and crafts, beauty and aesthetics were female, compared to less than 20% enrolled in construction, building services, manufacturing, mining and transportation.<sup>6</sup>

## What are the barriers?

**Girls in Rwanda face normative, infrastructural, and governance-related barriers to achieving full gender parity in education.**

**Prevailing socio-cultural norms place burdens on girls that can negatively impact on their school attendance and performance.** Because of the ways in which gender norms dictate the division of labour in Rwanda, girls – especially those of adolescent age – will often be expected to perform household duties like cleaning the family compound, caring for younger siblings, and fetching water, leaving little room for learning.<sup>7</sup> Subsequent poor performance in class can potentially impact the morale of girl students, contributing to dropout. This likely to have been exacerbated during the COVID-19 school closures as girls may have taken on more domestic tasks. Social norms also mean that girls are more likely

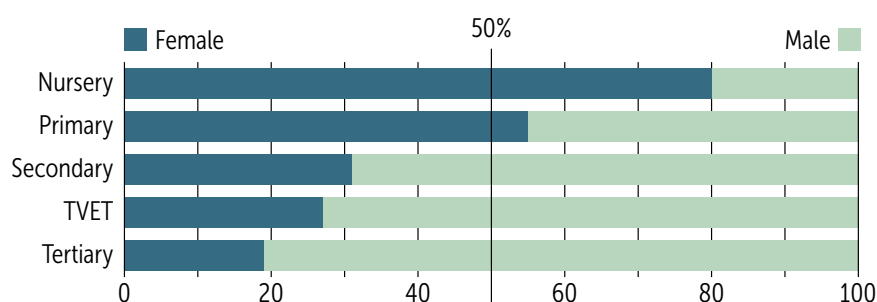
<sup>1</sup> NISR (2020), Labor Force Survey, available at: <https://www.statistics.gov.rw/datasource/labour-force-survey-2020>. <sup>2</sup> MINEDUC (2020), 2019 Education Statistics. <sup>3</sup> MINEDUC (2020), 2019 Education Statistics. <sup>4</sup> NISR (2019), Annual Statistical Yearbook 2019, available at: <https://www.statistics.gov.rw/publication/statistical-yearbook-2019>. <sup>5</sup> MINEDUC (2020), 2019 Education Statistics. <sup>6</sup> MINEDUC (2020), 2019 Education Statistics. <sup>7</sup> Plan International (2019), Left Out, Left Behind: Adolescent Girls' Secondary Education in Crises, available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/left-out-left-behind-adolescent-girls-secondary-education-crises>.

to abandon schooling, or to eschew higher education opportunities due to unexpected family circumstances (such as the death of a family member), marriage or childbearing.<sup>8</sup> The importance placed on marriage can also undermine the degree of support girls receive from their parents, teachers, and communities for their studies, negatively impacting their aspirations and academic achievements. Indeed, private secondary schools, boys outnumbered girls, indicating that parents and caregivers were more willing to pay for education for boys than for girls.<sup>9</sup>

**There are persistent gender disparities between male and female school staff, and few women in leadership, leaving girls without female role models in school.** Whilst female teachers are in the majority at nursery (80%) and primary (55%) levels, they remain a minority in higher-paid secondary (31%), tertiary (19%) and TVET (27%) roles.<sup>10</sup> In school leadership positions, the presence of women is even more scarce: it appears that at primary level, just 26% of headteachers are female. Such male-dominated learning environments may fail to offer female learners role models, while the absence of women in decision-making roles is also likely to impact on the gender-responsiveness of school management decisions.

### Female teachers are in the majority at nursery and primary levels

Breakdown of staff in Rwandan schools by gender, 2019



Source: MINEDUC (2020), 2019 Education Statistics

**Despite progress, there remain infrastructural gaps which hinder girls' educational participation.** In order to reduce absenteeism amongst girls during their periods, the Government of Rwanda has invested heavily in improving the availability of WASH facilities in schools and has issued a directive that all educational establishments must have a separate girls' safe room (*icyumba cy'umukomwa*) to meet menstrual hygiene needs. However, implementation has yet to reach national coverage. As of 2019, 18% of secondary schools, 43% of primary schools and 34% of TVET schools did not have these facilities. Moreover, limited accessibility of school infrastructure can act as an additional barrier for girls and young women with disabilities.

**Girls with disabilities continue to face serious challenges to accessing education.** The number of girls with disabilities enrolled at school appears to be lower relative to the number of girls with disabilities within the general population. At upper secondary level, only 0.3% of girls enrolled have a disability, although the percentage of girls aged 15-19 with a disability is thought to be around 2.9%. Meanwhile, only 41 young women (relative to 69 young men) with disabilities studied at tertiary level, according to latest data. Social and cultural norms can prevent girls with disabilities accessing and staying in education because they are seen as less

<sup>8</sup> Laterite (2019), Factors and drivers of dropout and repetition in Rwandan schools, Policy Brief, available at: <https://4det8y3z1n391t76me8rfynx-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Dropout-and-Repetition-Policy-Brief.pdf>.  
<sup>9</sup> MINEDUC (2020), 2019 Education Statistics. <sup>10</sup> MINEDUC (2020), 2019 Education Statistics.

likely to be able to succeed or due to fears for their safety. Limited availability and analysis of data on girls and women with disabilities, as well as challenges in identification of disability, limits the understanding of their experience and how it can be improved. Data analysis is often limited to enrolment and therefore the experience girls with disabilities in terms of retention, attendance and learning outcomes is not easily known. In addition, distance to school, a lack of accessible infrastructure, and inappropriate teaching methodologies and attitudes also constitute major barriers to girls and young women with disabilities.

**Policies to promote girls' education have faced implementation gaps, compounded by a lack of disaggregated data.** Districts have not been effectively involved in the implementation of the previous Girls' Education Policy, meaning that directed actions to promote girls' education have not received sufficient standalone budgeting. There is also a lack of clarity on the roles and responsibilities for girls' education within district development plans and coordination committees. This has been compounded by a lack of systematic age-, gender- and disability-disaggregated data to inform gender-responsive pedagogy and other gender-transformative policy actions. Collectively, this has left an implementation gap in translating policy to practice.

## Why investing in girls' education makes economic sense

**Investing in girls' education results in immense economic benefits for these girls and their families as well for society at large.**

**Access to high-quality, equitable education has the potential to transform individual girls' lives and provide economic empowerment.** Increasing the opportunities available to girls through their education increases their future earning potential and may improve their quality of life – as well as that of any children they have. Such economic empowerment also enables women to meaningfully participate in decision-making, including exercising their sexual and reproductive rights. Global research has shown that furthering girls' education can delay engagement in both sexual relations and marital arrangements, potentially reducing the number of adolescent pregnancies.

**Gender parity in education has social and economic impacts at national level.** As girls and women are increasingly valued for their socio-economic and political contributions, education can enable them to break cycles of intergenerational poverty and trauma. Widening opportunities available to girls may also help to reduce youth unemployment and drive economic growth. Better attendance, performance and completion of secondary and tertiary education can open up a diversity of choices to girls and young women, helping them to make inroads into professional careers with better wages and working conditions. Women's equal participation in the workforce is critical to Rwanda's wider ambition to become a middle-income country.

**Rwanda aspires to develop a knowledge-based, technology-led economy, which will require a highly skilled, digitally literate workforce of both men and women.** The government education system must therefore be capable of producing skilled female graduates with the requisite skills, knowledge and attitudes to succeed in these emerging sectors. STEM subject choices, market-driven TVET courses, and digital literacy will therefore require a special focus on ensuring equal access for women and girls to help drive such economic change.

<sup>11</sup> NISR (2012), Rwanda Population and Housing Census.