

KEEPING GIRLS IN SCHOOL IN WEST AFRICA: WHAT BEST PRACTICES CAN PROMOTE THEIR EMPOWERMENT AND EQUALITY?

October 9th, 2025

INTRODUCTION

This dialogue forms part of a series of three virtual dialogues organised in 2025, focusing on the lessons that the West African region can learn from international experiences regarding girls' access to education, as well as on the reforms needed to ensure their long-term retention in the school system. Following an initial dialogue held in March 2025 and a second in August 2025, the third dialogue, organised on 9 October 2025, focused on retaining girls in school in West Africa and on best practices aimed at strengthening their empowerment and promoting equality.

Held on the eve of International Day of the Girl, celebrated annually on 11 October, this dialogue forms part of the momentum surrounding this day dedicated to recognising girls' potential and promoting their fundamental human rights. Established by the United Nations General Assembly in 2011, the International Day of the Girl aims to draw attention to the inequalities, violence and systemic challenges faced by girls, including access to education, protection against forced marriage and discrimination, as well as improving their health and well-being.

According to UNICEF, around 12 million girls are married before the age of 18 every year worldwide. More than 130 million girls worldwide are not in school, according to UNESCO. Around 200 million girls and women have undergone female genital mutilation in 30 countries across Africa, the Middle East and Asia, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO). Adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence: one in three girls worldwide has experienced physical or sexual violence in her lifetime. In many countries, girls are under-represented in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), limiting their career and economic prospects.

All over the world, girls are taking action to tackle today's greatest challenges. They are organising within their communities, fighting for climate justice, demanding an end to violence and reimagining their future. Girls are demanding recognition not only for the challenges they face, but also for who they are and the solutions they provide. Yet, all too often, their voices go unheard, their actions ignored, and their needs and rights sidelined.

In West Africa, despite significant progress in girls' access to education, many challenges remain. Early marriage and pregnancy, household poverty, gender stereotypes, a lack of appropriate infrastructure (sanitary facilities, digital infrastructure), and security crises continue to threaten girls' enrolment and retention in school. International Day of the Girl (11 October) provides an opportunity to highlight the urgent need to strengthen policies and initiatives that enable girls not only to access education, but above all to remain in school and succeed.

This discussion highlighted the challenges and solutions for keeping girls in school in West Africa, emphasising its central role in women's empowerment and the reduction of gender inequalities.

The aim of this virtual dialogue was therefore to:

- Analyse the main barriers to keeping girls in education;
- Share inspiring experiences and initiatives at regional and international level;
- Identify concrete courses of action for governments, civil society, communities and technical and financial partners;
- Contribute to advocacy efforts surrounding International Day of the Girl.

Note: QUICKs are short documents produced following WATHI's virtual roundtable discussions. They set out the main findings and recommendations for action, and are intended to inform public debate, collective action and policy decisions.

THE SPEAKER

Dr Aicha Awa Ba, Founder of Bantare Impact Group | Consultant and researcher in international development, gender expert, child protection specialist.

KEY FINDINGS

- Despite the progress made in improving girls' access to education in West Africa, retention in school, particularly at secondary level, remains fragile. Policies focused on school enrolment have borne fruit, but they have not been accompanied by sufficient social and structural changes to ensure that girls remain in school in the long term. Child marriage, the weight of social norms and gender roles that prioritise girls' reproductive roles, as well as the burden of domestic and reproductive work continue to severely limit the pursuit of education, particularly during adolescence. It has been noted, for example in Niger, that the median age at marriage for women with no education is 15.6 years. It is 16.7 years for those who have attended at least primary school and reaches 21.1 years for those with at least a secondary or higher level of education. There is therefore a very strong correlation between child marriage and girls' ability to continue and complete their education, at least up to secondary level.
- According to figures from 2020, it was found that only a small minority of girls complete secondary education: around 70% manage to access primary education, compared with just 36% who complete secondary education. We can cite the example of Burkina Faso, where the Ministry of National Education published a study noting that parents favoured boys when it came to investing in school expenses. This study highlighted the existence of a deeply unequal educational environment, with only 47% of teachers at primary level being women and barely 17% at secondary level. This directly raises the question of representation and the ability of girls to identify with adult women who could serve as role models for success. This aspect is extremely important and, unfortunately, has not been sufficiently explored, particularly with regard to the impact of female role models in education or other sectors on girls' prospects for economic, professional or academic growth.
- Niger and Burkina Faso are frequently mentioned in discussions because they are countries where research has thoroughly examined the issue of keeping girls in school. They are also contexts that are highly revealing of the challenges associated with child marriage and, more broadly, with the protection of girls. A study conducted in Niger a few years ago highlighted a certain perception of girls' education, categorising it into three dimensions. Firstly, formal education, with which we are familiar, provided in so-called 'traditional' schools most often those of French inspiration. Secondly, family education, which encompasses all the skills passed on to girls so that they are able to run a household, look after children and be seen as 'good wives'. Finally, religious education, the importance of which continues to grow, for both boys and girls. This trend has also been observed in Senegal. Across the entire spectrum of Arab-Islamic education, there has indeed been a significant increase in girls' enrolment, particularly in Franco-Arab schools. Compared to formal education, family and religious education are often seen as competing rather than complementary, which undermines the legitimacy of formal schooling and reduces families' investment in the prolonged schooling of adolescent girls.
- These factors are compounded by persistent economic pressures linked to the direct costs that households must bear for their children's education. In Côte d'Ivoire, where the government is trialling free schooling, there are numerous indirect costs that determine whether a child attends school: transport, meals, uniforms, school supplies, accommodation and, in particular, the distance between

home and school. All these factors continue to exclude many children; not just girls, although they remain the most affected. We can also mention contexts of multiple crises (armed conflict, food insecurity, climate shocks and political instability), which disproportionately affect girls' enrolment.

- Digital technologies offer potential opportunities to rethink the ways in which learning and access to education take place, but their roll-out remains severely constrained by persistent structural inequalities. Unequal access to electricity, connectivity, digital equipment and basic skills limits, in West African contexts, the ability of online or distance learning solutions to effectively address the risks of girls dropping out of school, making any widespread adoption premature.
- Furthermore, technology is giving rise to new vulnerabilities that may lead to an increase in school dropout rates, particularly among girls. Cyberbullying, online violence, exposure to harmful content, screen addiction and the under-representation of female role models of academic and professional success in digital media affect school performance, self-esteem and the educational aspirations of adolescent girls, with impacts that are as yet insufficiently documented but already cause for concern.
- Gender-based violence in schools, for example, is a direct and proven factor in girls dropping out of school. It takes many forms, including sexual violence, assaults, physical harassment, and verbal and psychological abuse, and disproportionately affects adolescent girls. This violence contributes to turning schools into insecure environments, undermining their protective role and discouraging girls from continuing their education.
- The true prevalence of violence in schools remains largely underestimated due to a lack of a culture of reporting and a persistent societal taboo surrounding sexual violence. A lack of understanding of consent, among both girls and boys, combined with ambiguous social norms and the amplifying influence of social media, perpetuates the normalisation of violence and a culture of silence, reinforced by the inadequacy of legal and institutional mechanisms suited to receiving and supporting victims.
- The reduction in funding from technical and financial partners has highlighted the heavy reliance of initiatives to keep girls in school on external aid, revealing the fragility of a model that was not sustainable in the long term. This withdrawal has, however, accelerated awareness of the need for states to assume full responsibility for funding basic social services, particularly girls' education, in a context where discourse on national sovereignty is increasingly prevalent. The main risk identified is that, in the face of multiple crises, the education and protection of girls will be sidelined in favour of other priorities, even though the consequences of domestic underinvestment would be structural and long-lasting.
- Research is still not being utilised sufficiently to effectively guide policies and programmes aimed at keeping girls in school. The evidence produced is struggling to be fully incorporated into advocacy and decision-making processes, even though decision-makers are increasingly receptive to evidence-based arguments.
- There is no single model or 'champion' country for keeping girls in school in West Africa, but rather a diversity of national experiences, each presenting specific and context-specific advances. The progress observed stems from differentiated approaches, tailored to the priorities and constraints specific to each country. Some countries stand out for their targeted and innovative policies: Senegal for the importance it places on funding the education sector, Sierra Leone for the inclusion of pregnant girls and teenage mothers in schools, and Niger for the adoption of a legal framework linking girls' education to the fight against child marriage.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Go beyond policies focused on access to education by explicitly incorporating strategies to keep girls in school, particularly at secondary level. This involves addressing the underlying social determinants of school dropout, notably the burden of domestic work, as well as gender norms that devalue formal education for girls, through gender-sensitive education policies rooted in local realities.
- Strengthen the adaptation of education systems to contexts of vulnerability, taking into account persistent economic constraints and multiple crises that disproportionately affect girls' enrolment. This includes reducing the indirect costs of schooling, better coordinating the various forms of education (formal, family and religious) and consolidating the role of the school as a legitimate space for protection, social mobility and opportunities for adolescent girls.
- Promote integrated approaches based on the socio-ecological model, by simultaneously involving girls, families and communities in the design, implementation and evaluation of educational initiatives. Recognising girls as active participants and leaders in their educational journey, as well as the early involvement of parents, community and religious leaders, are essential for fostering local ownership and the sustainability of actions.
- Improve institutional frameworks and partnerships between governments and civil society organisations, by capitalising on public investment in education and existing mechanisms, particularly in crisis contexts. This involves institutionalising protective school environments, using education as a cross-cutting lever to address protection issues (child marriage, sexual and reproductive health), and going beyond access by investing sustainably in the quality of education, the school climate, infrastructure and reintegration mechanisms.
- Integrate digital technologies into education in a gradual, context-sensitive and equitable manner, prioritising the bridging of the digital divide, investment in basic infrastructure and skills development, whilst developing hybrid and alternative solutions tailored to the needs of girls most at risk of dropping out. In the same vein, it is essential to fully integrate the protection of children and adolescent girls into digital education policies, by strengthening prevention and responses to online violence, promoting responsible screen use and highlighting positive female role models of academic and professional success.
- Integrate the prevention and management of gender-based violence as a central dimension of education policies, by strengthening education on consent, challenging social norms and training school staff. At the same time, the establishment of accessible and secure reporting mechanisms, backed by protective legal frameworks, is essential to break the culture of silence and ensure that schools are safe spaces for girls.
- On the issue of funding, beyond increasing allocations, the key challenge lies in the quality, optimisation and rationalisation of expenditure, so that available resources are effectively invested in high-impact policies for girls' education. Strengthening budget advocacy, supporting a civil society capable of acting as a countervailing citizen power, and valuing local expertise appear essential to ensure that education, protection and basic social services are not relegated to secondary priorities, including in crisis contexts.
- It is recommended that regional mechanisms for sharing experiences and learning between countries be utilised, in order to capitalise on existing good practices and promote their adaptation and scaling up. Pooling lessons learnt from national policies would enable the development of more coherent regional solutions, based on shared challenges and similar sociocultural contexts, whilst avoiding one-size-fits-all approaches that are disconnected from local realities.
- Strengthen the link between research, advocacy and public policy by making research findings a key tool for guiding, evaluating and adjusting educational policies and programmes, whilst developing more inclusive and participatory research approaches. This approach will generate knowledge that is

more firmly rooted in local realities and capable of driving a sustainable transformation of educational provision to keep girls in school.

QUOTES FROM THE SPEAKER

Dr Aicha Awa Ba, Founder of Bantare Impact Group | Consultant and researcher in international development, gender expert, child protection specialist.

“Gender-based violence is not a peripheral issue in education: it lies at the very heart of girls dropping out of school.”

“When it comes to keeping girls in school in West Africa, I wouldn’t say that one country is ahead of another, but each has its own way of shining, and we live in a region that has the beauty of resembling one another in both its challenges and its best practices.”

“This wave of budget cuts has brought into sharp focus the imperative our countries must address: the mobilisation of domestic resources. Sovereignty is not just economic; it also lies in the services we provide for our citizens, particularly education.”

“Technology can open up new horizons for the school of tomorrow, but in our contexts, it also reveals new inequalities and new risks. The challenge is not just to innovate, but to protect, represent and empower girls to envisage an academic and professional future that reflects who they are.”

“We just need to know how to listen, and know when to listen and the right time is all the time. Social norms are not impossible to change if we avoid antagonism, if we engage with communities, and if we work holistically, considering the well-being and rights of girls in their entirety.”

“There is currently a disconnect between what schools are supposed to provide in terms of human capital and what families actually expect from girls’ education.”



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