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# A More Equitable World: The Social and Economic Benefits of Investing in Girls' Education

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**A More Equitable World: The Social and Economic Benefits of Investing in Girls' Education**

Norway Dolan

Winston School of Education and Social Policy, Merrimack College

2022

GIRLS' ACCESS TO EDUCATION

MERRIMACK COLLEGE

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CAPSTONE TITLE: A More Equitable World: The Social and Economic Benefits of Investing  
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AUTHOR: Norway Dolan

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### **Abstract**

Education is a human right, although many children are not afforded this opportunity. Across the world, there are millions of children who are not in school and may not ever be able to complete their education. Specifically in the region of Sub-Saharan Africa, innumerable children are unable to go to school due to many barriers that prevent educational access; girls are especially impacted by these barriers, some of which include poverty, menstruation, and conflict. The rate of children who are displaced from school increases with age, encountering more challenges to educational attainment as they move through the levels in school. The cultural expectations for gender alone is one of the significant challenges contributing to displacement of girls from school. However, there are several benefits to educational attainment, for individuals, families, and society. The benefits are particularly true for girls and investing in their education is crucial to advancing gender equity as well. Social and economic prosperity, linked to the educational achievement of women and girls, can only be realized through policies that address significant barriers to girls' educational access.

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## **A More Equitable World: The Social and Economic Benefits of Investing in Girls' Education**

### **Introduction**

All around the world, girls face barriers that make educational attainment extremely difficult, and are even denied access to education. Some of the factors that limit educational access and attainment globally include gender inequality, early pregnancies and marriage (child brides), menstruation, poverty, the COVID-19 pandemic, and conflict. Gender alone can hinder access to education, with girls being less likely than boys to complete secondary schooling globally. However, there are significant social and economic benefits, both on an individual and global scale, when girls are able to complete school. The region across the world that faces the most difficulty in education attainment for girls is Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). The reasons for investing in girls' education are clear; “educating girls saves lives and builds stronger families, communities and economies”. Additionally, “With an education, girls will understand their rights, have a greater sense [of] what is needed to support health and wellbeing, and they will have greater opportunities to be employed in a fulfilling way and achieve their full potential” (Theirworld, 2021).

Education as a basic human right was established as such in 1948 by the United Nations General Assembly in The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, n.d.). Under Article 16, the document states that everyone has the right to education (United Nations, n.d.). Although everyone around the world is entitled to education, it does not mean that this is a reality. Girls in Sub-Saharan Africa are the most left out of school around the world, and there are many significant factors that affect their access to education.

Globally, there are 58 million children of primary school age that are out-of-school. According to the literature, the term used to refer to these youth are ‘out- of- school’ children:



The calculation method for the out-of-school rate has evolved over time. Before 2005, the primary out-of-school rate was derived from the primary net enrolment rate, i.e. the proportion of the population of primary school age enrolled in primary education. Under this approach, only children of primary school age in primary education were considered in school. This meant that primary-age children in secondary education were counted as part of the out-of-school population (UNESCO, 2019).

Now, according to the new methodology adapted in 2005, “children of primary school age are counted as being in school when they are participating either in primary or secondary education” (UNESCO, 2019). In addition to this alarming statistic regarding primary age students, 63 million children of lower secondary school age are out-of-school (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015). This is according to the most recent data available of out-of-school children and adolescents from 2012.

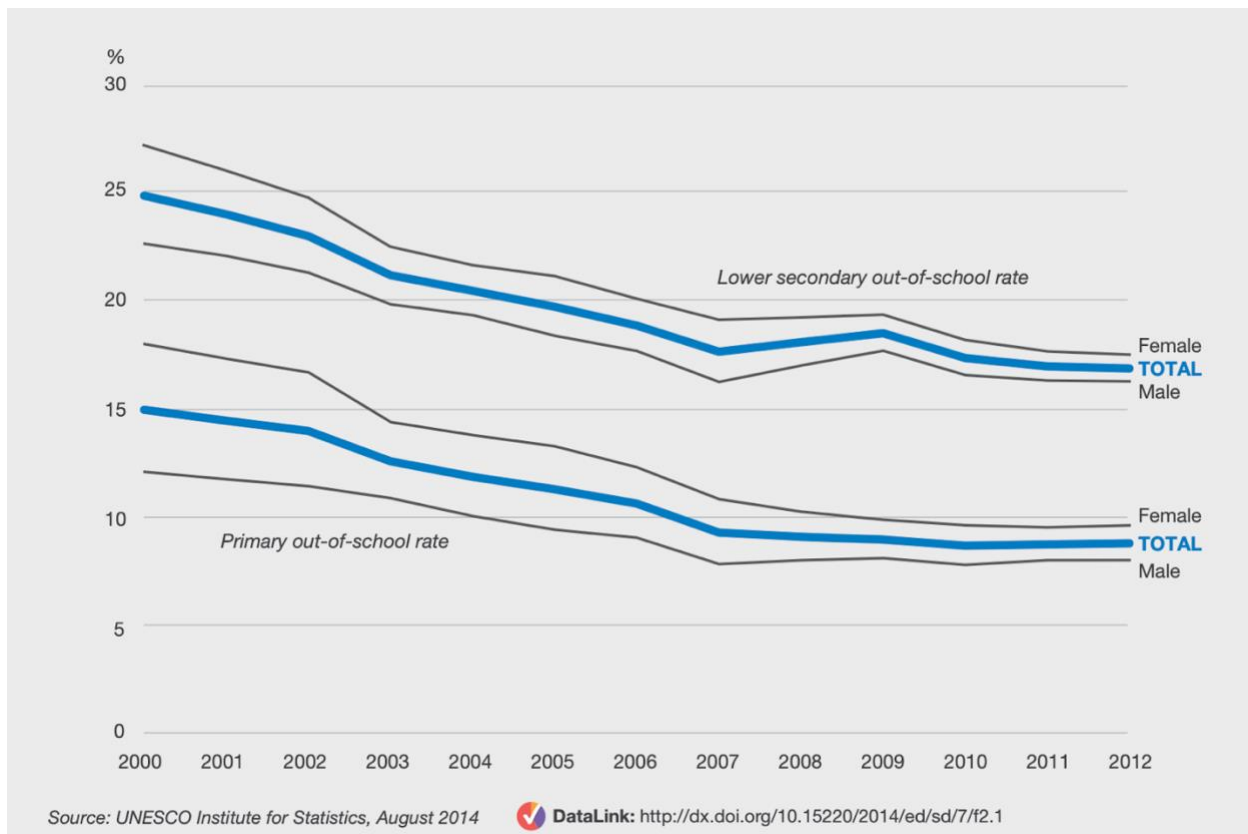
Though there was a decline in global out-of-school rates between the years 2000 and 2012, this decrease has slowed in years since. Figure 1 visually depicts these rates. It can be observed that the global out-of-school rate has remained rather stagnant in the years from 2007-2012. According to UNESCO Institute for Statistics, this is largely due to rapid population growth in Sub-Saharan Africa:

In most regions, the school-age population has fallen or remained stable since 2000. In sub-Saharan Africa, however, the soaring school-age population makes it more difficult to reduce the number of out-of-school children and adolescents. Nevertheless, countries in the region have managed to enrol [*sic*] millions of additional children in primary and lower secondary education over the past two decades (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015, p. 17).

Even though enrollment in schools may be increasing, this still leaves out millions of children from attending or staying in school.

### Figure 1

*Global out-of-school rate for children of primary and lower secondary school age 2000- 2012*



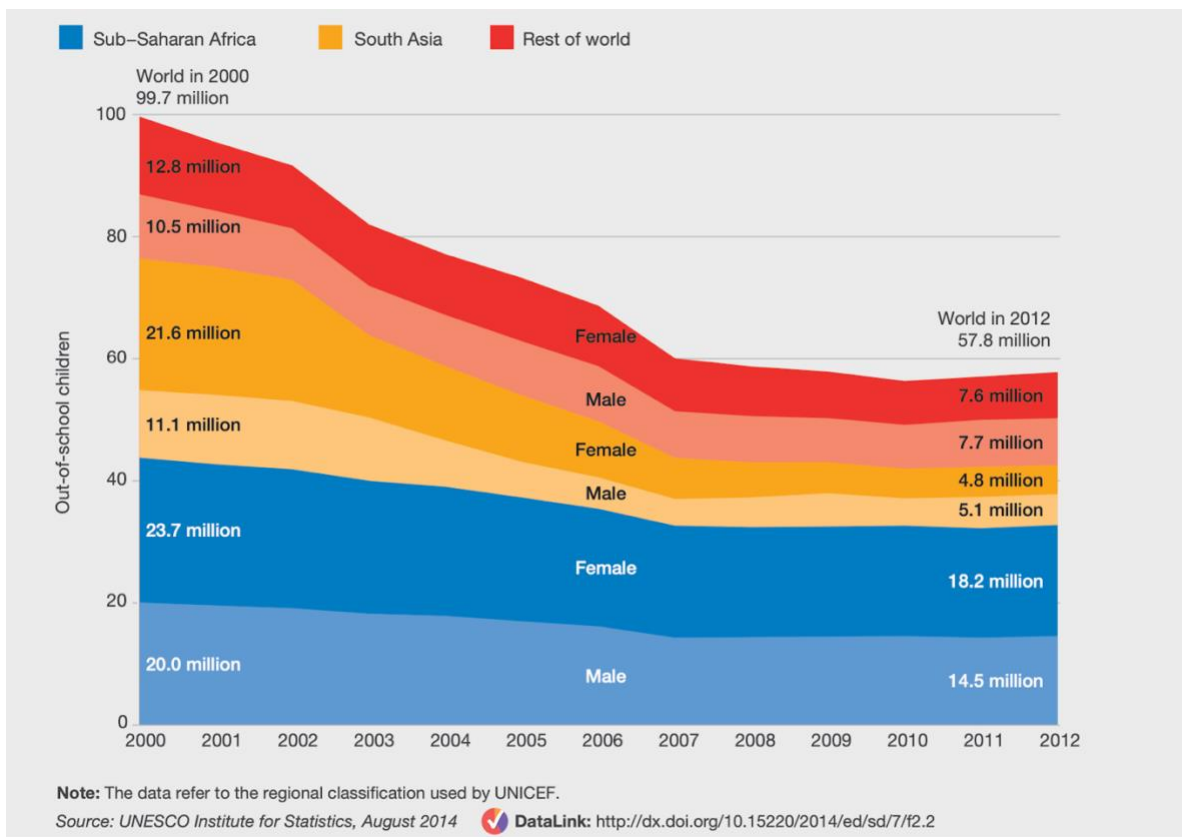
According to Figure 1, the primary out-of-school rate has remained around 9% and the secondary out-of-school rate has remained around 17%. “The gap between the out-of-school rates of girls and boys has narrowed steadily since 2000, but even this trend has slowed in recent years” (UNESCO Institute for Statistic, 2015, p. 18). It can be seen from Figure 1 that more girls are out-of-school than boys, for both primary age and lower secondary age.

Gender is a significant factor to keep in mind when looking at the number of children displaced from school worldwide. “Globally, girls still account for 53% of out-of-school children of primary school age” (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015, p. 56). UNESCO

Institute for Statistics (2015) states that, “Girls’ enrolment [*sic*] rates tend to fall when they reach lower secondary school age, which coincides with puberty, and tumble even further when they reach upper secondary school age” (p. 56). Figure 2 shows that in the year 2000, there were almost 100 million primary age children out of school. According to the data available from 2012, there were 57.8 million children of primary age out of school around the world. In 2012, Sub-Saharan Africa accounted for 32.7 million out-of-school children. Of the almost 58 million out-of-school children around the world of primary school age, “23% attended school in the past but left; 34% are likely to enter school in the future; and 43% are likely to never enter school” (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015, p. 18). These numbers have since increased, with data from 2018 available in Figure 3.

## Figure 2

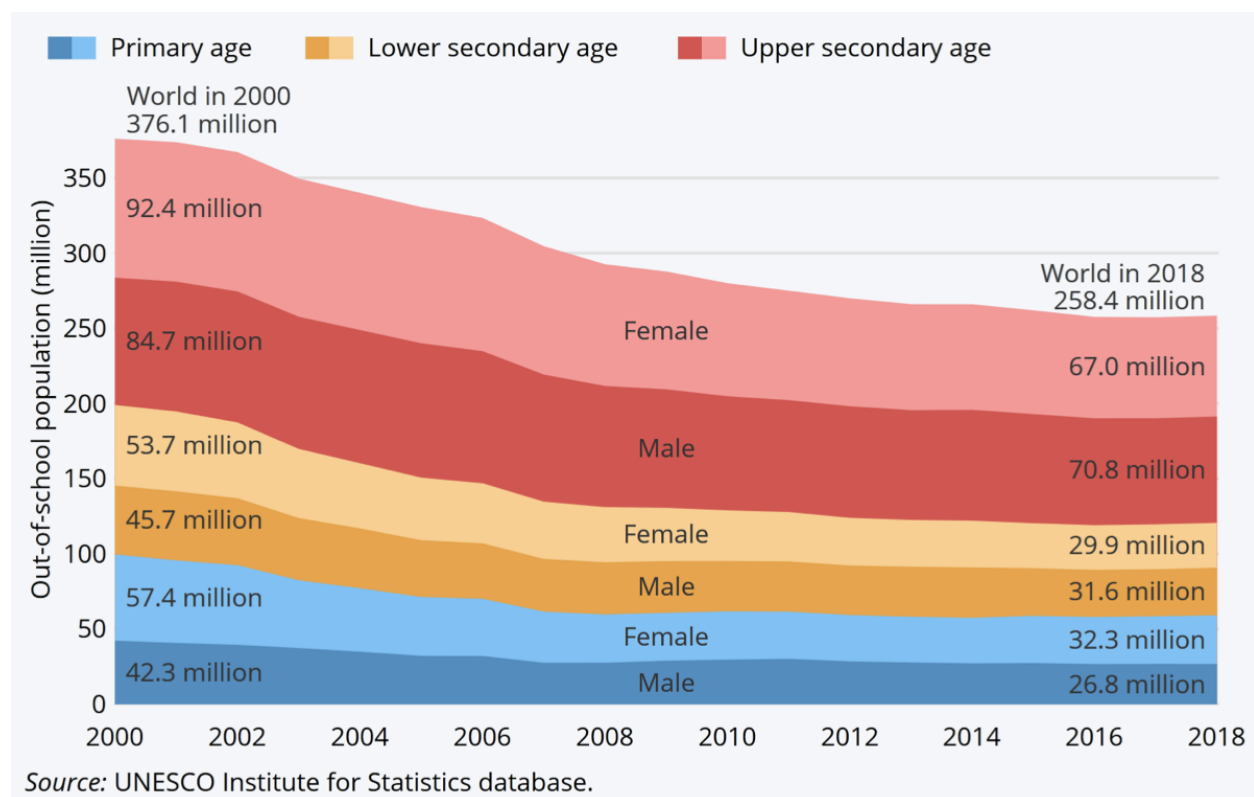
*Out-of-school children of primary school age by region and sex, 2000-2012*



An updated chart, Figure 3, shows more recent statistics, up until the year 2018. It can be seen that the number of out-of-school children has increased since 2012, and that there are 59.1 million children of primary school age that are out-of-school, 32.3 million of which are girls. Important to note is that Figure 2 shows out-of-school children of primary age and Figure 3 shows out-of-school children of primary age, lower secondary age, and upper secondary age.

### Figure 3

*Global number of out-of-school children, adolescents, and youths, 2000-2018*



According to evidence from the Global Initiative on Out-of-School Children, it is observed that girls are more likely than boys to enter school later, dropping out of school before completing basic education, or not being able to attend school in the first place (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015). According to UNESCO:

we do not yet fully understand the interplay between decisions around child marriage, the withdrawal of girls from school and perceptions of the value of girls' education. There is now a clear need for data—both quantitative and qualitative—that drill down to look more closely at the precise impact of gender norms on the likelihood of being out of school” (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015, p.65).

Many of these barriers need to be addressed in order to improve access to quality education for girls in this region.

All in all, with the numbers of out-of-school children, particularly girls, directly in contrast to the acknowledgement that education is a basic human right, policies are needed to close this extraordinary access gap to education in Sub-Saharan Africa.

## **Literature Review**

### **Education as a Basic Right**

There are many reasons why girls should be able to complete their education; the most obvious being that it is their basic right. Education as a basic human right was established as such in 1948 by the United Nations General Assembly in The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, n.d.). This document was created by representatives from across the world from different cultural and legal backgrounds. Article 26 states that everyone has the right to education, specifically:

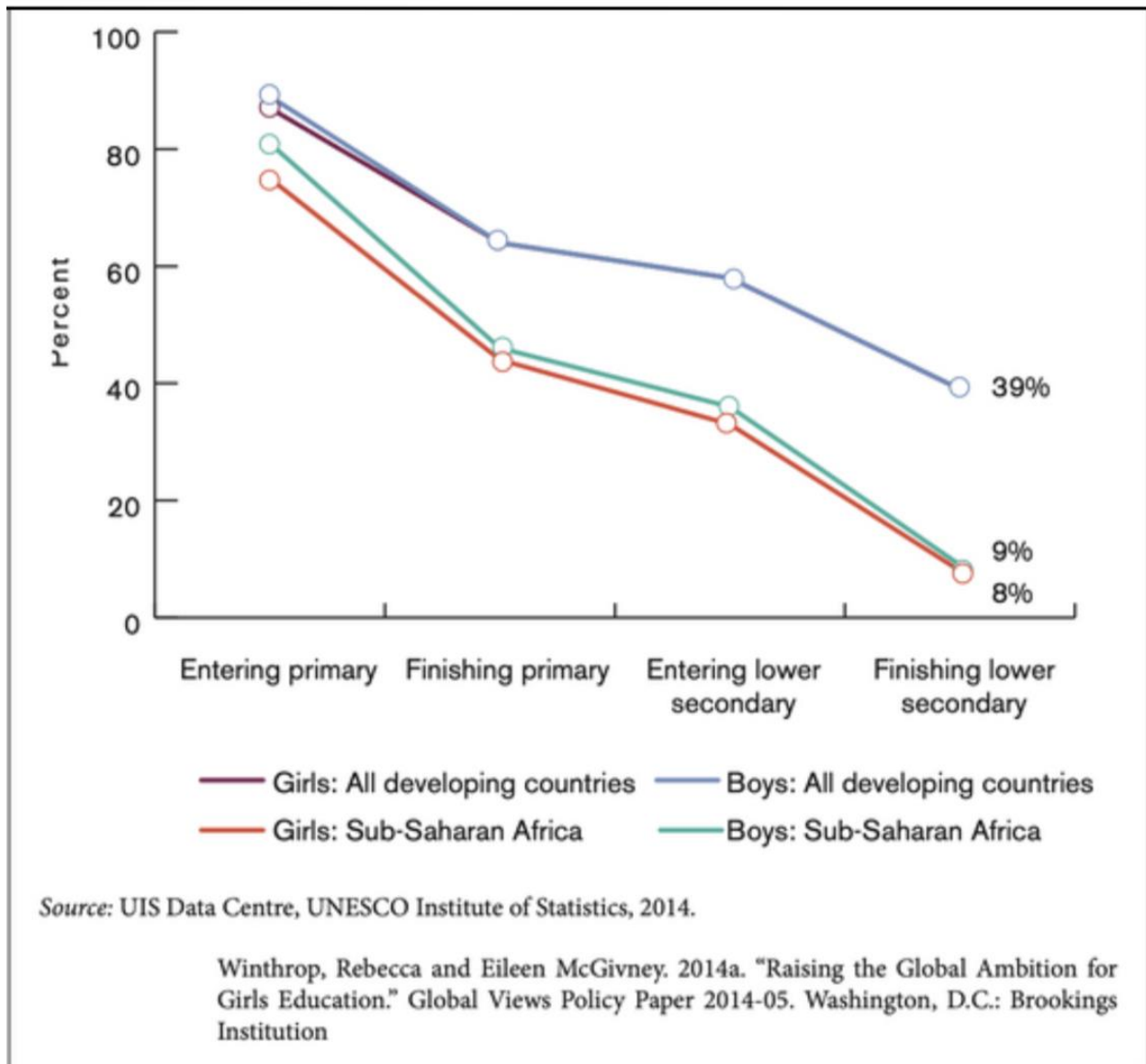
Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace (United Nations, n.d.).

According to the International Human Rights standards, “International human rights law makes clear that all children have a right to free, compulsory, primary education, free from discrimination” (Failures to Protect and Fulfill the Right to Education through Global Development Agendas, 2016). Although this may be the law, it doesn't mean it is the reality.

In the 1970's, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) developed a classification system for a global picture on education, dividing it into several levels including early childhood education, primary education, lower secondary education, and higher secondary education (Sperling & Winthrop, 2016). Governments typically refer to the first three levels of education as basic education. “Basic education is most often understood to comprise the essential foundational levels of education, to which every child around the world has a right” (Sperling & Winthrop, 2016, p. 70). The authors note that the chances of a girl being able to enroll and continue in primary and secondary school depends on where they live. “In Sub-Saharan Africa, 16.6 million school-age girls are not enrolled in primary school and 11.3 school-age girls are not enrolled in secondary school” (Sperling & Winthrop, 2016, p. 70). Girls are able to enroll and attend primary education more easily than secondary education. School enrollment rates decrease over time as a girl ages. In the Figure 4 from UNESCO, the trends can be observed including a comparison in school participation rates between boys and girls. According to Figure 4 it can be seen that only 8% of girls in Sub-Saharan Africa finish lower secondary schooling.

**Figure 4**

*School Participation Rates over Time in Developing Countries and Sub-Saharan Africa*



**Millennium Development Goals**

The United Nations met in 2000, where leaders from 189 countries across the globe signed the Millennium Declaration; a set of several goals with the intention to improve issues around the world. The intent was to have eight goals met by the target year of 2015. Goal

number two was to achieve universal primary education (Sustainable Development Goals Fund, 2018). Since 2000, there has been progress made on this goal. Between the year 2000 and 2012, the number of out-of-school primary aged children decreased by 42% worldwide (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015). However, about 58 million children around the world continue to be displaced from school (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015). A startling statistic:

If current trends continue, around 43% of these children—or 15 million girls and 10 million boys—will probably never set foot in a classroom. Most of the 30 million out-of-school children in sub-Saharan Africa will never go to school if current trends continue (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015, p.13).

Internationally, the goal was to have the Millennium Development Goal of universal primary education achieved by 2015, which has not happened yet in 2022. “As a result, the promise made to children in 2000— that they would all be able to complete a full course of primary schooling by 2015—has been broken” (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015, p. 13).

### **Sustainable Development Goals**

The United Nations Sustainable Development Summit occurred in New York in 2015, where they worked to create a post-2015 development agenda. This had a focus on partnership:

We are determined to mobilize the means required to implement this Agenda through a revitalised Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, based on a spirit of strengthened global solidarity, focused in particular on the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable and with the participation of all countries, all stakeholders and all people (United Nations, n.d.).

The United Nations recognized the progress that still needs to occur, after the Millennium Development Goals were not met in 2015. “But the progress has been uneven, particularly in



Africa, least developed countries, landlocked developing countries, and small island developing States, and some of the MDGs remain off-track...” (United Nations, n.d.). The United Nations adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals in the new agenda, which spans from 2015-2030. Goal number 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals is to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”.

Advancing the Sustainable Development Goal 4 was the adoption of the 1960 Convention Against Discrimination in Education, by UNESCO. “This legally binding instrument encompasses the idea that education is not a luxury, but a fundamental right and it underscores the state obligation to proscribe any form of discrimination in education while promoting equality of educational opportunity” (United Nations, n.d.). Again, this emphasizes that education is a right for everyone, and that no one should face discrimination in education, but rather should have opportunities for equal success.

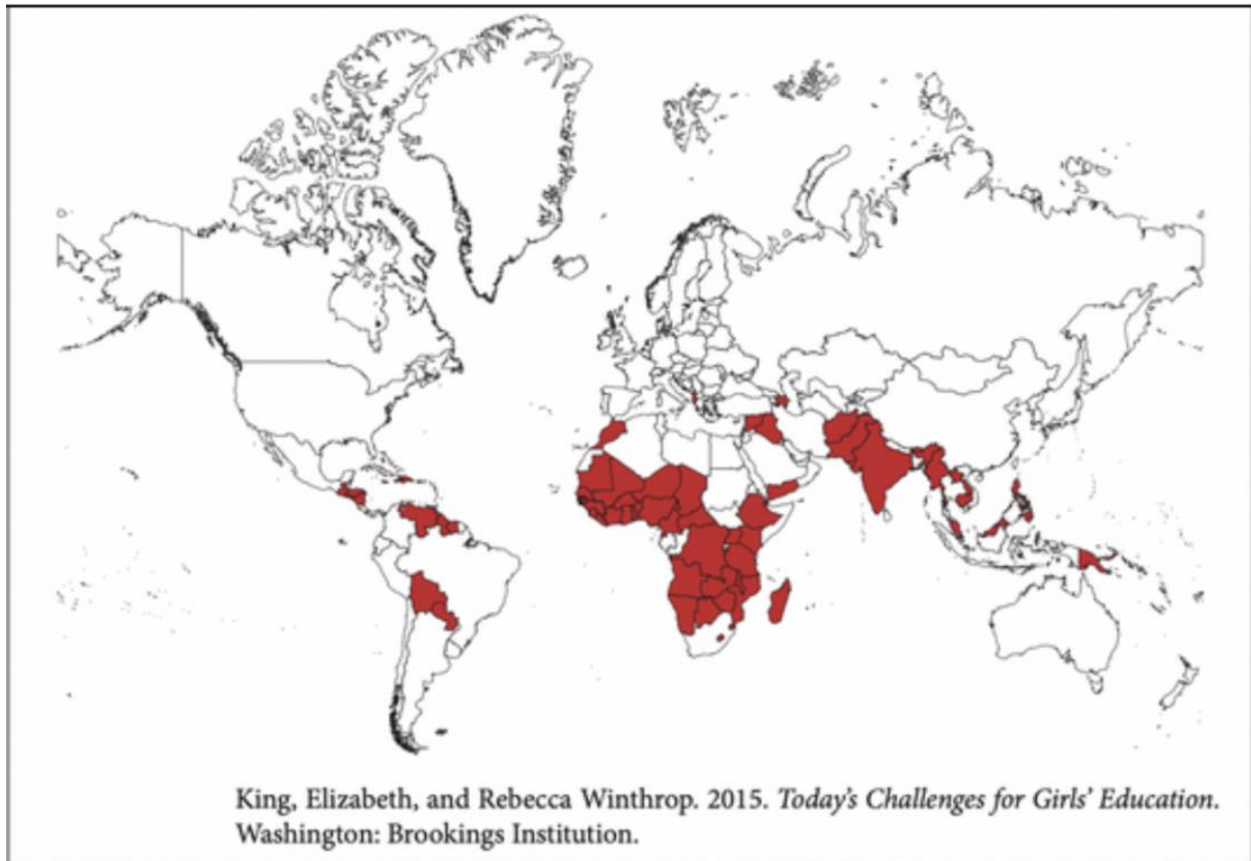
### **The Education Deficit**

Girls worldwide are entitled to quality primary and secondary education. However, they face many challenges and barriers to achieving the appropriate entitlement. There are many measures needed to enhance education access around the world, one being that “relevant governments tackle the numerous violations, abuses, or situations that keep children out of school. This in turn depends on political will to institute strong governance systems, including via the judiciary, to uphold and fulfill the right to education” (Failures to Protect and Fulfill the Right to Education through Global Development Agendas, 2016). Global policies must be in place that set girls up for success given the structural challenges in numerous countries around the world. Dozens of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa are lagging behind on girls’ education goals. These countries struggle to enroll girls in school relative to the average across the world.

Many of these countries are also enrolling less girls than boys in school. The figure below provides a visual representation of these countries across the globe labeled as “hot-spots” (Sperling & Winthrop, 2016, p. 78).

### Figure 5

#### *Girls' Education Hot Spots*



### Barriers to Education Access for Girls

#### *Teen Pregnancy and Child Brides*

Teen pregnancies and how young mothers are treated are significant issues that impact a girl completing secondary education. In many countries, the approach to teen pregnancies serves to limit, rather than support and advance, young mothers, as evidenced by this quotation from Bhana et al.:

Schools tend to understand pregnancy and parenthood as a personal rather than a social problem. Alongside narratives that stigmatise and pathologise pregnancy, this means that school authorities are neither expected to nor expect themselves to do much more than simply admit pregnant and learner-parents (Bhana et al., 2008, p.8).

According to the authors, schools uphold a hostile environment for pregnant students and young mothers. "School responses to these learners tend to reinforce privileges and inequalities built around gender, with particular experiences mediated by class, race and the strength and flexibility of familial support networks" (Bhana et al., 2008, p.8). Though girls may not necessarily always be denied access to schooling when they become pregnant or a mother, it can make schooling harder when girls experience this inequality in treatment based on gender.

Not every country has policies to protect girls from remaining in school once pregnant or as a young mother, or if they later want to return to school. "According to UNICEF Country Office Annual Reports, only 49 out of 155 countries appeared to have policies in place to allow pregnant girls and young mothers to continue their education in 2013" (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015, pp. 59-60). Even with such policies in place, it may not have an impact on teachers' or administrators' own perceptions on young mothers or pregnant girls, and these attitudes may prevent girls from going back to school. There are many factors that come into play regarding the re-entry decision of adolescent mothers. Some of these factors include the socioeconomic status of the mother's household, attitude of her parents, support from school staff, the social support and quality of the school system, as well as additional, relevant [sic] services that are available (UNICEF, 2018).

Additionally, early pregnancies as well as child marriage can force a girl to drop out of school. "If a girl has not already dropped out before marriage, she tends to drop out shortly after

as a result of her new domestic responsibilities or because her husband or his family does not support education” (Pereznieto, 2017, p.20). UNICEF defines child marriage as “any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child” (2021). One of the ways in which this is a barrier to education is because of the gender inequality that exists, which makes girls disproportionately affected. “Child marriage robs girls of their childhood and threatens their lives and health. Girls who marry before 18 are more likely to experience domestic violence and less likely to remain in school” (UNICEF, 2021).

### ***Menstruation***

Menstruation is typically accompanied by shame and embarrassment, and acts as a barrier to girls' access to school during this time. Across the world, menstruation is a taboo topic, and one that is also gendered due to who menstruates and who does not. “Because only girls and women menstruate, menstrual blood also marks a tribal identity of femaleness. When girls reach menarche (i.e., experience their first menstruation), parents and others treat them differently than they did before” (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 10). Though beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that people who may not identify as women may menstruate as well. Gender comes into play here due to how girls are viewed as “different from the normative and privileged male body” (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 10).

Menstruation acts as a barrier to education due to a lack of access to sanitary pads and the shame surrounding menstruation. Studies show that “...girls expressed that they missed school during their menses due to lack of menstrual products, fear of leaking blood on their uniforms and pain from menstrual cramps” as well (Austrian, et al. 2021, p. 2). The lack of sanitary products available to use acts as a barrier to girls going to school. Evidence from Montgomery et al. (2016), supports this as a barrier:

A study of 595 schoolgirls in northeast Ethiopia found that after adjustment for residence, household income and parental education, girls who did not use disposable sanitary pads had 5.37 times higher odds of school absenteeism during menses than those using disposable pads (p.3).

This study shows that a lack in access to sanitary pads causes girls to miss school when menstruating.

Not only is menstruation associated with shame and embarrassment, but a lack of adequate resources in school poses a challenge for girls as well. “In the confined school environment, with a lack of access to adequate latrines or separate latrines for males and females, menstrual management presents a significant challenge”. They write that cloth “can often leak, soiling uniforms or outer garments” (Montgomery et al., 2016, p.3). This leads to trouble with both attendance and engagement for girls in school, and teachers also recognize menstruation as a barrier to education access as well (Montgomery, 2016). Additionally, in 2019, under 50% of primary and lower secondary schools in Sub Saharan Africa had access to basic handwashing facilities, which are “key basic services and facilities necessary to ensure a safe and effective learning environment for all students” (United Nations, n.d.).

The challenges that are associated with the relationship between menstruation and success in school is a problem for girls globally. “The fact that a universal, medicalized concept of menstruation is uniformly experienced by adolescent girls in different regions of the world, among different peoples, cultures, religions, and nations; as well as the links drawn between menstruation, education, and empowerment” (Joshi et al., 2015, p. 52), emphasizes the importance of this issue across the world and the need to end the barriers surrounding menstruation so that this is no longer a reason that a girl misses school.

### *Poverty*

Another barrier to girls' access to education is poverty. Countries that face extreme poverty have a difficult time with primary school enrollment and completion. Globally, “[i]n virtually every region, a relatively small number of countries account for a disproportionately large percentage of children out of school” (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015, p. 41). One of the most significant reasons for poverty being a barrier in these countries is that there are not enough teachers and classrooms to support the number of girls who need to go to school. “To [have] achieve[d] universal primary education by 2015, 4 million teachers would be needed to staff new classrooms and replace attrition of the teaching workforce” (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015, p. 41). Even if the resources were devoted to expanding educational resources and having enough teachers, there would still be girls displaced from school due to extreme poverty (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015).

One of the most significant ways that poverty affects a girl having the opportunity to go to school is due to the family's economic hardships. Some of the reasons a girl may not be able to attend school is due to schooling costs, informal fees to teachers, and the loss of family income from the child's labor, diverted when choosing school over work (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015). “Families that are already impoverished, including displaced and refugees, may be unable to cover education costs such as uniforms, fees, lunches, books and other materials, certificates, and transportation” (Pereznieto et al., 2017, p.20). Living in poverty directly impacts the quality and access to education that children receive. “In many countries, it is the poorest children who receive the poorest quality education, served by schools with overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teaching materials and textbooks, high teacher absenteeism and poor quality facilities” (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015, p. 42). Child laborers, if they attend

school, are more likely to fall behind during school and have lower attendance. School absenteeism and tardiness is also linked to school drop-out (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015). Additionally, Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest prevalence of child labor in the world at 27% (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015).

### ***COVID-19 Impacts***

The coronavirus disease pandemic (COVID-19) has impacted the way of life across the world, and education was not excluded from the negative impacts. The impact that COVID-19 has had on schooling is being referred to as a “generational catastrophe”, according to the United Nations. “The most vulnerable children and those unable to access remote learning are at increased risk of never returning to school and of being forced into child marriage or child labour” (United Nations, n.d.). The United Nations (n.d.) writes that:

It is estimated that 101 million additional children and young people (from grades 1 to 8) fell below the minimum reading proficiency level in 2020 owing to the consequences of the pandemic, which wiped out the education gains achieved over the past 20 years. In Sub-Saharan Africa, 29% of children were completing secondary schooling, prior to the pandemic (United Nations, n.d.). Depending on school closures, it is possible that the rise in school completion rates may stop or even reverse, “which are resulting in learning losses and affecting the motivation to attend school, and on the extent to which poverty might increase, adding to the obstacles faced by disadvantaged children” (United Nations, n.d.). With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools had to close. According to UNICEF, around 250 million children in Sub-Saharan African countries were affected by these closures (Winthrop, 2022).

The director of Amnesty International West and Central Africa, Samira Daoud says, “COVID-19 has brutally exposed and deepened inequality across Sub-Saharan Africa. Governments should urgently re-invest in people and “repair” the broken economic and social system which perpetuates poverty and inequality, including leaving too many behind” (Amnesty International, 2021). COVID-19 has also exacerbated conflict that exists in certain countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, which makes attending school increasingly difficult.

### *Conflict*

Another factor that limits access to education in Sub-Saharan Africa is conflict that is occurring in the region, including specific countries in West and Central Africa. Of the world's out-of-school children, one-half of them live in conflict affected countries (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015). As cited by the World Bank (2011), children of primary school age in conflict-affected countries are almost three times more likely to be out of school than children in other parts of the developing world (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015). Some of the most vulnerable people, including women and girls, are affected by this conflict, and are deprived of their human rights to access education:

Right now, nearly two million children are being robbed of an education in the region due to violence and insecurity in and around their schools. In Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Niger and Nigeria, a surge in threats and attacks against students, teachers and schools – on education itself – is casting a foreboding shadow upon children, their families, their communities and society at large (UNICEF, 2019).

Figure 6 shows the highlighted countries that are experiencing violence, conflict, and attacks on education.



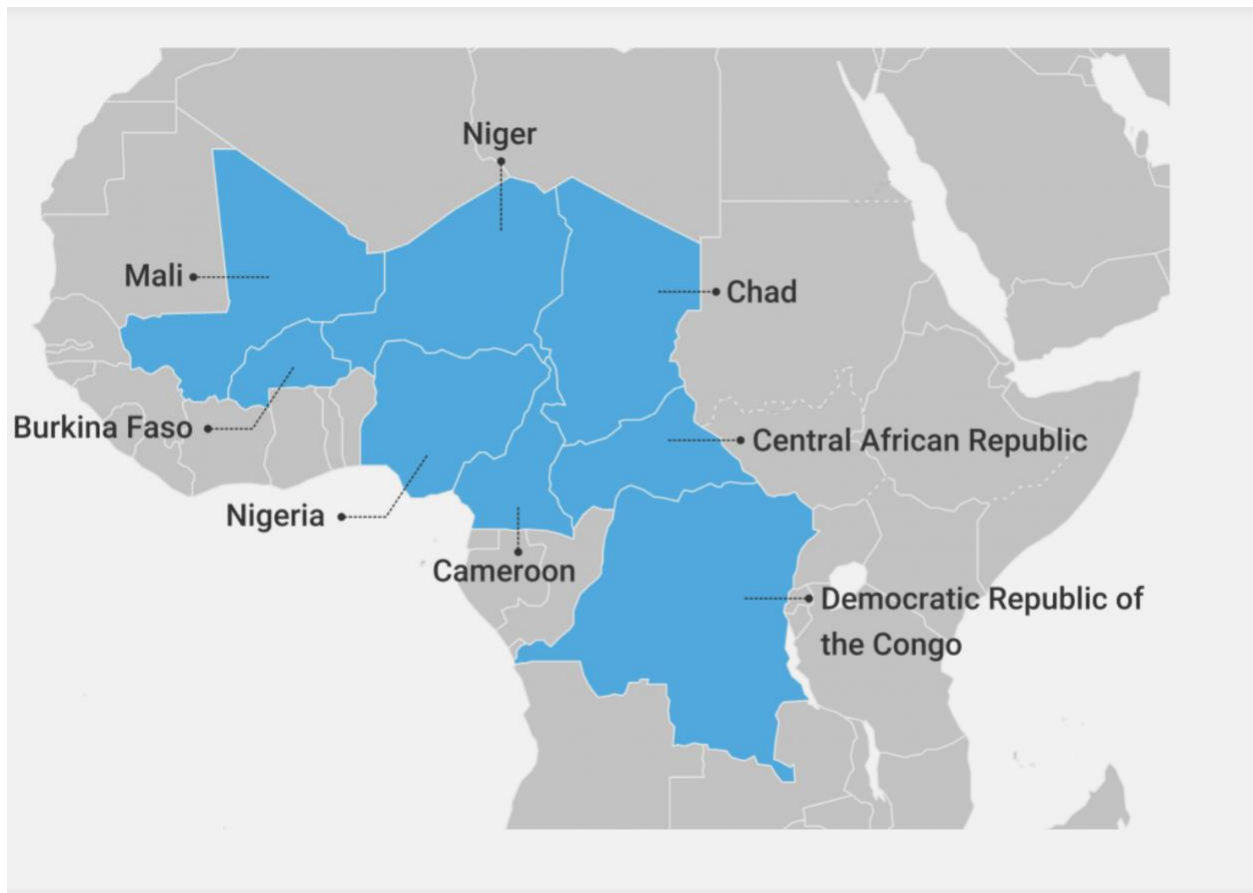
**Figure 6***West and Central Africa Crisis at a Glance*

Image Source: UNICEF. (2019). *Education under threat in west and Central Africa*.

According to UNICEF:

The number of schools forced to close due to rising insecurity in conflict-affected areas of West and Central Africa *tripled* between the end of 2017 and June 2019. As of June 2019, 9,272 schools closed across eight countries in the region, affecting more than 1.91 million children and nearly 44,000 teachers (2019).

Education is under attack in these countries and is “deliberately targeted” for several reasons.

Conflict in these countries and armed groups occupying schools disrupts a child’s access to

education as well as the quality of it (UNICEF, 2019). Additionally, in these countries, “ideological opposition to what is seen as Western-style education – especially for girls – is central to many of these disputes” (UNICEF, 2019).

In recent years, schools have been under purposeful attack in West and Central Africa, causing them to close. “More than 9,200 schools closed across Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Niger and Nigeria, leaving 1.91 million children without education”, from June 2017 to June 2019 (UNICEF, 2019). When children are not able to attend school due to these conflicts and violence, they are at a higher risk to be recruited by armed groups; girls especially are at a higher risk. “Girls face an elevated risk of gender-based violence and are forced into child marriage more often, with ensuing early pregnancies and childbirth that threaten their lives and health” (UNICEF, 2019).

Armed groups in countries in this region have been attacking and kidnapping civilians, one of which is the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army-in Opposition (SPLM/A-IO). This is a group responsible for the abductions of 887 civilians during a five-month timespan in 2018. “Many abductees, including boys under 15, are forced to be fighters. Women and girls are raped and abused” (Tut Pur, 2020). There are many women and children that are being held against their will by this group. “Since fighting broke out in South Sudan in December 2013, more than 19,000 children are understood to have been ‘recruited’ by armed forces and groups” (Okiror, 2019). In 2020, 78 women and 50 children were released to the United Nations from the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army-in Opposition. Girls who have been kidnapped and turned into “wives” of soldiers who have escaped the group's base live in fear. “One girl who was abducted aged 15 but allowed to leave after nine months spoke of how her former

commander had come looking for her several times since her release. To avoid re-abduction, her family moved her to another town” (Tut Pur, 2020). While these releases were organized by advocacy from the United Nations as well as with assistance from former vice-president Riek Machar, leader of the SPLM-IO, not enough is being done to address this issue overall and prevent the kidnaps and assaults on children and women. “For example, while UNICEF takes the lead in releasing children recruited into armed groups, no parallel agency has a mandate to identify women and girls who were forced to join armed groups and want to leave” (Tut Pur, 2020). The lack of mandates to identify girls and women who have been kidnapped by armed groups leaves them even more at risk.

In April 2015, a 15-year-old girl was kidnapped by these rebel forces in South Sudan. After years of assaults and rapes, she was released in 2018 as part of a deal with authorities. When she returned home, she was four months pregnant. Though child soldiers are given support from the United Nations and other child advocacy organizations, it is often not enough to fully help them from these experiences (Okiror, 2019). Fear and stigma from this prevent girls from reaching out for additional services. This young girl states:

‘I feel frustrated. I find it hard to take care of myself and the baby. I have to do casual work to get money. I have to do farming to get money for food, treatment and buying baby clothes. I have no one to assist me. My parents are poor. They can’t support me and the baby adequately. I need help,’ she says. ‘Before I was kidnapped I had friends. But when I returned from captivity nobody wanted to be close to me’ (Okiror, 2019).

She identified that she “can’t manage” to go back to school following this experience.

Conflict zones and armed groups directly and indirectly affect girls' education. As cited by UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2011):

Children's forced recruitment into armed forces, often through abduction, is one of the biggest barriers to their education. This is not only because of the immediate effect of not being in school but also because of the longer-term psychosocial effects and trauma, including the difficulties children face while trying to reintegrate into their communities after conflict (Pereznieto et al., 2017, p.17).

Children are often abducted from their classrooms, "despite the fact that schools are often perceived to be 'safe havens'" (Pereznieto et al., 2017, p.17). Many of the previous factors identified as barriers to girls' education tie into conflict as well:

Girls are recruited into armed forces not only as soldiers but also for sexual purposes or forced marriage. Many are recruited by force, though some may join as a result of economic, social, or security pressures (the displacement and dire poverty children experience during conflict make them even more vulnerable to recruitment) (Pereznieto et al., 2017, p.17).

Additionally, "(c)onflict affects an entire population and the poorest are likely to be the worst impacted because they are already marginalised financially, socially, and politically"

(Pereznieto, 2017, p.26). Though there are several barriers to girls' access to education, there are also many economic and social benefits to girls' educational attainment.

## **Benefits of Education**

### ***Economic Benefits***

Arguably, one of the most significant motivations across the world for girls staying in school is the economic benefits that education yields. More educated girls worldwide create more jobs. With more women entering the workforce, there is potential to add up to \$12 trillion

USD to global growth (Malala fund, n.d.). Increased years of schooling for girls has been linked to global economic growth. The economic argument for investing in girls' education is clear:

Countries with greater gender parity in primary and secondary education are more likely to have higher economic growth. Based on World Bank research and data and UIS education statistics, Plan (2008) estimated that the economic cost to 65 developing countries of failing to educate girls to the same standard as boys was a staggering US\$92 billion each year (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015, p. 58).

Crucial to this discussion is the importance of quality education for girls. Though there is a correlation between years of schooling and economic growth that is important and apparent, more recent research makes note that the key is the quality of schooling, i.e. cognitive skills, in contributing to economic growth. A study that took place over forty years across twenty countries shows that cognitive skills have a strong influence on economic growth. According to this research, student math and science test scores, combined with the number of years of education and income levels in countries, showed that “test scores that are larger by one standard deviation (measured at the student level across all OECD countries in PISA) are associated with an average annual growth rate in GDP that is 2 percentage points higher over the whole forty-year period [1960–2000]” (Sperling & Winthrop, 2016, p.22). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) uses PISA, the Programme for International Student Assessment, which “measures 15-year-olds’ ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges” (OECD, n.d.).

When girls are able to achieve higher levels of education, more economic benefits result. Educated girls and women obtain jobs, leading to higher individual wages which then boosts household income. At the same time, increased individual and family income increases national

economic growth and reduces poverty (Sommer & Fallon, 2020). According to the World Bank, “Studies show that an extra year of secondary schooling for girls can increase their future wages by 10 to 20%” (Achieve Universal Primary Education by 2015, n.d.). This data is also supported by Sperling & Winthrop who write that, “The rate of return on an additional year of schooling has been consistently estimated to be a 10 percent increase in wages. The latest data find returns to be slightly higher for women, especially for secondary and tertiary education” (p. 25). Wesangula (2017) also finds that each additional year of secondary schooling that a girl completed adds a 15-25 percent increase in potential income earnings.

Pregnancies and young marriages are significant contributing factors that limit girls from completing secondary schooling and, thus, their financial success. Delaying marriages and pregnancies is more common when girls complete their schooling. In turn, child marriage and infant mortality rates decrease, and girls have more educated children the longer they stay in school (Malala fund, n.d.). As cited by Hanushek (2008):

the easiest case [for educating women and girls] is made in terms of the simple economic benefits. The first-order analysis is that women are equal to men in their potential contribution to economic outcomes, and this equality implies a huge untapped reservoir of talent in many developing countries (Boutilier, 2020, p. 189).

Additionally, rather than carrying out traditional gender roles, educated girls can profit from their schooling and use their human capital to succeed in the workforce (Boutilier, 2020). This is a key way to challenge social norms. Boutilier (2020) outlines that “[e]ducation increases rationality and productivity, correcting inefficiencies enabling growth and development” (p.188). As cited by Hanushek (2008), Boutilier (2020) continues and highlights that, “[t]he first-order analysis is that women are equal to men in their potential contribution to economic outcomes, and this

equality implies a huge untapped reservoir of talent in many developing countries” (p. 189). As such, women’s education benefits themselves, communities, and national economies (Boutlier, 2020).

The second of the Millennium Development Goals was to achieve universal primary education. According to the World Group, “Between 2000 and 2012, the total number of out-of-school children worldwide declined from 100 million to 58 million, and the global primary completion rate increased from 81% to 92%. However, 58 million children are still out-of-school” (Achieve Universal Primary Education by 2015, n.d.) The World Bank notes that educating girls has the greatest impact on eliminating poverty and that it has “placed education at the forefront of its poverty-fighting mission, and is one of the largest external financiers of education in the developing world” (Achieve Universal Primary Education by 2015, n.d.).

It is necessary for countries to invest internally in advancing girls’ education. Doing so increases the health and economy of a nation. Countries which invest less in this advancement experience slower economic growth and lower incomes (Sommer & Fallon, 2020). “Reduced poverty and economic growth lead to reductions in population growth, resulting in smaller and healthier families—especially in nations with low female secondary enrollment” (Sommer & Fallon, 2020, p. 208). This ties into the social benefits that result from advancements in equitable female education.

### ***Social Benefits***

In addition to the economic benefits, there are many social benefits to girls remaining in school. Many of these benefits positively affect individual girls and women as well as their families. “Education is a powerful driver of development and one of the strongest instruments for improving health, gender equality, peace, and stability” (Achieve Universal Primary Education

by 2015, n.d.) Education has been found to directly reduce poverty, improve decisions regarding maternal health and child health, and delay the age in marriage and improve health overall” (Burnett, 2014). Additionally, “For women and girls, increased education has been associated with benefits including: health for women and their children, literacy, delayed sexual debut and marriage, self-efficacy, improvements in labour force participation, and involvement with household decision making” (Montgomery et al., 2016, p.2). Additionally, as cited by Gakidou et al (2010), “[a]round one-half of the reductions in maternal and infant mortality over the past four decades have been attributed to the expansion of girls’ education, especially when they finish primary school and complete at least lower secondary school” (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015, p. 58).

When girls remain in school, the rates of child marriages decrease. Child marriages are a significant problem around the world. It is estimated that, from the 55 countries where data is available, over 30% of girls are married under the age of 18 years old (Rasmussen et al., 2019). Cultural norms are in play here as well, as often families will marry their daughters young to “safeguard against premarital sex” as well as to “settle familial disputes” for economic reasons (Rasmussen et al., 2019, p.17). “Some parents see child marriage as a way to protect their daughters and the family from the shame of premarital sex and pregnancy outside marriage, and encourage their daughters to marry as soon as they reach puberty” (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015, p. 60). Rasmussen et al. (2019) suggest that:

interventions, which reduce child marriage through increased attendance at school and changing social attitudes to child marriage, are both important in reducing child marriage and should be pursued jointly. A more complete study would more fully address the



broader systemic health, demographic, and intergenerational effects of the low status of young women in many developing countries (p. 522).

This evidence shows decreasing the rates of child marriages as an additional social benefit for advancing girls in the educational experience.

Fredriksen & Fossberg (2014) share additional evidence of the social benefits of girls' access to education and remaining in school:

Girls' access to secondary education is particularly important as it comes at a critical time of adolescence when remaining at school can help break intergenerational cycles of poverty, resist early pregnancy and marriage, and make a successful transition to employment. However, efforts to promote gender equity at this level must start addressing factors causing inequality in primary education because such inequalities carry over to subsequent levels (pp. 239-240).

Authors Fredriksen and Fossberg highlight an important point that addressing gender inequality must start at a young age in school because when this is not addressed, gender inequality continues into higher levels of education including secondary education.

With increased educational attainment comes social advancements. Education helps to increase contraceptive use and reduce family size, "which aids in expanding women's life opportunities and employment" (Sommer & Fallon, 2020, p. 208). Additional benefits include the promotion of child health and extended female life expectancy. Girls completing secondary school leads to economic growth, better jobs and wages for women, saves the lives of children and mothers, leads to smaller and more sustainable families, and better educated children (Sperling & Winthrop, 2016). Sommer and Fallon (2020) discuss the numerous social and familial benefits. Educating girls in schools leads to a reducing family size, which then benefits

women's life opportunities and employment. "Scholars therefore generally agree that equitable girls' secondary enrollment is a key component in improving social (via health) and economic development" (Sommer & Fallon, 2020).

### **Policies to Address the Problem**

#### **South African Schools Act of 1996**

As mentioned, one of the several barriers to girls' access to education in Sub-Saharan Africa is the treatment of pregnant girls and young mothers. Typically, this is viewed as an individual problem, rather than a social problem that needs to be addressed. Prohibiting the discrimination of pregnant girls in schools is an important solution for ensuring girls can achieve their human right of education. There are policies in place to attempt to help these girls, one of which is the South African Schools Act of 1996. "Since the promulgation of the South African Schools Act in 1996, it has become illegal to exclude pregnant girls from school" (Bahana et al., 2008, p.1). However, although this is a policy in place, it does not guarantee the success of the young mothers that it is supposed to be helping:

Some schools are sympathetic and supportive, but most do not welcome the extra burden of dealing with issues of parenthood amongst learners. They tend to regard pregnancy and parenthood as challenges for individual learners rather than for the schooling system as a whole. This places the burden of pregnancy and parenthood onto the learners themselves and generally onto girls rather than boys. Moreover, schools justify their failure to implement the law by employing gendered moral discourses that perpetuate gender inequalities (Bahana et al., 2008, p.14).

Gender inequality acts as a barrier to schooling here as schools do not provide adequate opportunities or environments for young mothers to thrive. Additionally, research suggests that

when a young girl gets pregnant, this experience is just hers and that fathers are not included much with school practices as they relate to pregnancy and parenthood. Bhana et al. (2008) writes that fathers are “seldom identified and treated as 'a problem' or an 'inconvenience' in the ways that pregnant girls and young mothers are” (p. 10). A project conducted including both qualitative and quantitative data collected by talking to teachers, principals, and students in Cape Town schools showed that teachers see the gender inequalities that exist in schools. Qualitative data from teachers provides evidence that:

Where fathers were acknowledged, the various views remained embedded within gendered notions of responsibilities that both acknowledged and reproduced inequalities. At Lilian Ngoyi, the principal, Mr Kusa, stated that 'most of the time it is the girls... that are affected... whereas the boys are always free, are always free' (Bhana et al., 2008, p. 10).

Important to note is that some teachers recognize this difference in treatment due to gender should not be the case. According to the interviews, one teacher stated:

‘...the boys getaway... and I don't think that this should happen. I think that the boys should also face the consequences. Normally the boy goes strutting around like a proud peacock - nothing is said about it and society does not look at him as if he has done something bad - all the blame is heaped upon the girl and that is wrong' (Bhana et al., 2008, p. 10).

Though beyond the scope of this paper, this ties into a greater problem of sexual coercion that schoolgirls experience and is important to mention. In this case, girls are coerced by the taxi drivers that bring the girls to school. The author notes “the issue within complex networks of social processes through which vulnerability and the position of girls as 'victims' of taxi drivers

and sexual abuse is highlighted” (Bhana et al., 2008, p. 10). They write that girls are often coerced into sexual relations with older men. It is important to keep this context in mind when analyzing this issue of the difference in treatment and expectations from girls and boys.

The South African Schools Act 1996 attempts to provide a standard system for the organization, governance, and funding of schools, to create consistent norms for learners' education (Joubert, 2001). Some of the aims of the policy include to advance the democratic transformation of society, to address past injustices that occurred in the education system, to combat discrimination and injustice as it relates to sexism and racism, and to help advance towards the eradication of poverty and work towards advancements in the economic well-being of society (Joubert, 2001). In the South African Schools Act of 1996:

The first major curriculum statement of the democratic government is called Curriculum 2005. This curriculum reconceptualises the nature of learning and teaching through the adoption of an outcomes-based system. From the start the process of implementation of Curriculum 2005 has been attended with difficulties. Many of these difficulties are linked to the wider, immediate post- election context of social change and policy formation in which Curriculum 2005 emerged (Joubert, 2001).

This policy has been successful in meeting the Millennium Development Goal of universal primary education, ahead of the intended target of 2015, as South Africa has increased access to primary education (Goodier, 2017). Overall, additional research on the South African Schools Act of 1996 is needed to evaluate the effectiveness and follow through, particularly on the extent that young mothers in South African schools can continue with their education and are not turned away due to attitudes that exist in the educational setting.

### **Complementary Basic Education**

In Brong Ahafo, Ghana, the Complementary Basic Education (CBE) program provides education to children in poor, rural communities. This program provides literacy and numeracy support to out-of-school children. “A total of 192,000 out-of-school children in 45 districts across five regions in the country have so far been transitioned into formal schools since the inception of the Complementary Basic Education (CBE) programme in 2013 to date” (Doudo, 2017). Complementary Basic Education is a five year project aimed to provide access to education for eight to fourteen year old children who have not attended school (Doudo, 2017).

The CBE program is aimed:

at supporting the government’s efforts to achieve Universal Primary Education Coverage ensuring that every child of school-going age is attending school, which is [in] line with the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4). The programme also focuses on more female involvement, an effort to focus more on creating access to basic education for girls and empowering women in the community as a whole (Dudo, 2017).

The Complementary Basic Education program does seem advantageous for the students who have participated in the program. In under a year, children who dropped out of school or never attended school improved their learning, to the same level or higher than children who had attended at least three years of primary education (Akyeampong, 2019). The authors write that:

It achieves in less than a year, what three years or more of public education achieves, and gives hope, not only to the prospect of closing the learning gap between out of school children and children already in public schools, but also the possibility of reducing dropout due to poor learning in public schools if the CBE pedagogy can be adopted there (Akyeampong, 2019, p.43).

All in all, there are many factors that limit educational access and attainment for girls in Sub-Saharan Africa. Attitudes regarding teenage pregnancies, the experience of girls becoming child brides, menstruation, poverty, impacts of COVID-19, and conflict all act as barriers to schooling and education in this region. There are many global organizations that prioritize education and eliminating the barriers in place that limit educational access and attainment. However, there are a lack of policies in Sub-Saharan Africa that address this human rights issue. This makes it challenging to have a uniform standard for educational access for children in these countries. Especially with a lack of policies to address the issues that disproportionately affect girls, many of the barriers remain and will continue to act as a barrier to their successful educational attainment. Although a lot of progress has been made, there is still a lot of work that needs to be done to ensure that the millions of out-of-school children do not experience barriers that prevent them from attending and successfully completing school.

## **Theories**

### **Intersectionality**

It is crucial to keep intersectionality in mind when analyzing the barriers that prevent girls from completing school. A framework coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality looks at the ways in which peoples' social identities are overlapping and can cause multiple forms of discrimination. Not only are girls and women affected by gender inequalities, but poor girls are also at a higher disadvantage when it comes to schooling. Those experiencing poverty, conflict, and gender inequalities face more challenges to educational access and attainment in Sub-Saharan Africa.

“Girls facing intersecting factors of marginalisation because of poverty, race, ethnicity, geographical location, or disability and minority status experience the greatest

exclusion from education” (Pereznieto et al., 2017, p.9). This is important for educators to keep in mind as they approach student learning and thinking of the education system overall. “Considering intersectionality requires equity-oriented educators to rethink interventions for redressing systemic inequities” (Skelton, n.d.). These systemic inequalities affect girls in Sub-Saharan Africa in daily life, and as it relates to their education. Social inequalities exist across societies globally as well, and another theory that addresses this is conflict theory.

### **Conflict Theory**

Conflict theory is a sociological perspective that is used to guide thinking on social problems. This theory was developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the 19th century. “Marx and Engels’ view of conflict arising from unequal positions held by members of society lies at the heart of today’s conflict theory. This theory emphasizes that different groups in society have different interests stemming from their different social positions” (*Sociological perspectives on social problems*, 2010). Conflict theory can be used to analyze the ongoing inequality that exists in a society, including inequalities that are based on race, class, and gender. Overall, conflict theory emphasizes the importance of social change to limit inequality (*Sociological perspectives on social problems*, 2010). Figure 7 shows the major assumptions and the views of social problems that conflict theory holds.

**Figure 7***Theory Snapshot*

<b>Theoretical perspective</b>	<b>Major assumptions</b>	<b>Views of social problems</b>
Conflict theory	Society is characterized by pervasive inequality based on social class, race, gender, and other factors. Far-reaching social change is needed to reduce or eliminate social inequality and to create an egalitarian society.	Social problems arise from fundamental faults in the structure of a society and both reflect and reinforce inequalities based on social class, race, gender, and other dimensions. Successful solutions to social problems must involve far-reaching change in the structure of society.

Image source: *Sociological perspectives on social problems* (2010).

Conflict theory can be used to analyze the major inequalities that exist in countries around the world as it relates to access to education. In Sub-Saharan Africa, girls face many social inequalities that limit their access to school and their education. As discussed, girls who experience teenage pregnancies, menstruation, poverty, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and conflicts limit their educational access and attainment. Children facing poverty and whose parents rely on them for income may have to work instead of going to school. “Traditional conflict theory acknowledges the unavoidability of struggle over educational resources and priorities, but conflict theorists have not systematically adapted to the range of critiques just described” (Ferrare & Phillippo, 2021, p. 7). Conflict theory can be used to address many of these social inequalities, including poverty.

Poverty is one of the barriers to education for children. In Sub-Saharan African countries, parents “may be forced to remove children from school because they cannot meet the costs of



schooling or so that children can contribute to income-generating activities (Pereznieto et al., 2017, p. 20). When analyzing poverty as a barrier to schooling, conflict theory can be used to address this social issue. Across the world, poverty can be explained as a social issue, rather than an individual one. It is not one person's fault for experiencing poverty, but rather a worldwide social issue that prevails and affects people in many ways, including food insecurity, hunger, homelessness, malnutrition, and poor health. "Some girls remain far more likely to be out of school than others, with the poorest girls in rural areas particularly disadvantaged and women from poor households, in general, far less educated than any other group" (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015, p. 57). Conflict theory addresses poverty as a social issue, acting as one of the limiting barriers for educational access in this region and worldwide.

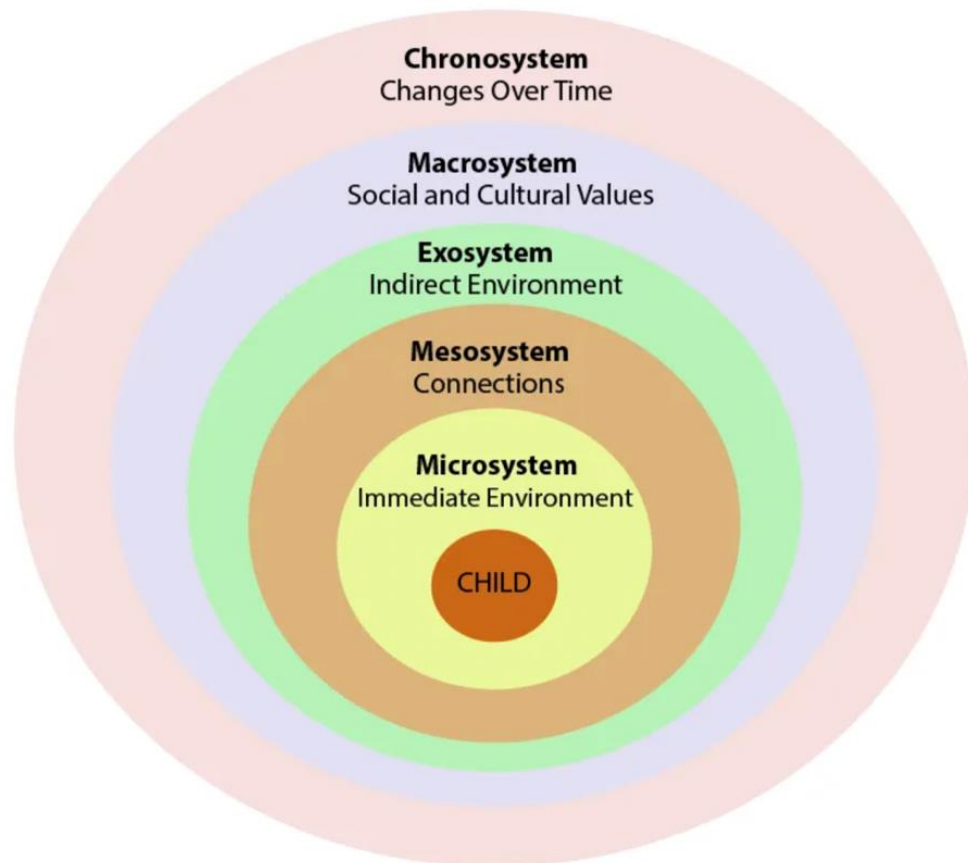
Overall, conflict theory explains how the structures of societies influence social inequalities. Along with intersectionality, conflict theory outlines how people are affected based on these inequalities. Girls in Sub-Saharan Africa can be negatively affected by their intersecting identities and experiences, and this leads to higher chances that they will be unable to go to school and unable to complete their education.

### **Ecological Systems Theory**

A third theory that is critical to this conversation is Ecological Systems Theory. This theoretical framework was developed by Bronfenbrenner, an American psychologist, in 1979. Ecological Systems Theory is used to describe the different levels and impacts of the environment on a child's development. There are five interrelated structures that make up this framework: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and the chronosystem. A visual representation of the structures in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is provided in Figure 8.

**Figure 8**

*Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory*



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The structure that is crucial to examine in this conversation is the macrosystem, which focuses on how cultural elements affect a child's development (Guy-Evans, 2020). The cultural beliefs, practices, and values that are embedded in a society ultimately have influence on and shape one's development. Gender inequality exists in Sub-Saharan Africa and affects the cultural norms and practices in this region. Embedded in the culture is differential treatment of girls and women compared to boys and men. Gender inequality is one of the barriers to education for girls in these countries and hinders girls' educational attainment. This plays a part in girl's being

affected by discrimination if they are pregnant, young mothers, the increased risk in becoming a child bride, cultural views towards menstruation, and violence against girls and women.

This embedded gender inequality plays a part in many of the barriers that affect girl's educational attainment, such as violence. Specifically in South Africa, girls and boys are aware of the rituals of gender and sexuality. "Their expressions suggest a familiar context, illustrating their knowledge and experience of gender inequalities—with young girls in marginal positions. This is of particular concern, since much of the research shows patterns of vulnerability and risk for women and girls" (Bhana et al., 2011, p. 447). Violence is one of the significant social problems in South Africa and remains a topic in the current debates about education (Bhana et al., 2011). Violence affects a child's ability to learn, and for schools to provide a safe learning environment (Bhana et al., 2011). Since gender inequality is embedded in the culture in countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, it is crucial that education intentionally addresses these cultural norms to decrease risk to girls and to increase their educational opportunities. The cultural understanding of a young girl in a society impacts the systems in which culture is immersed in. Therefore, it is crucial that education be a space where conversations and actions display a sense of equality for girls and boys, to positively impact their culture as they grow up.

## Data Memo

Figure 9

*Barriers to and Benefits of Girls Access to Education in Sub-Saharan Africa*

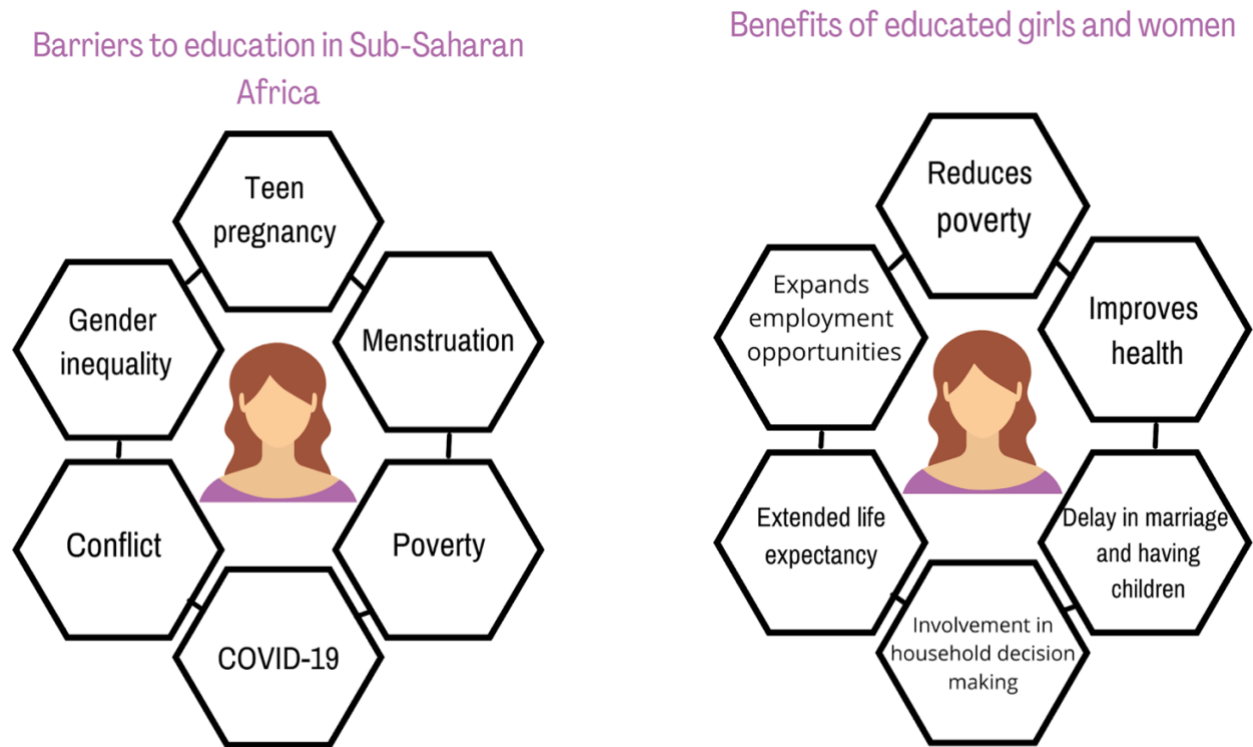



Figure 9 shows the barriers to education in Sub-Saharan Africa, as well as the benefits to girls and women in this region when they have education access. When girls have access to schools and education, the barriers lessen and their chances of success with social and economic outcomes improve. Their health improves as well as the health of their children. Women have access to higher wages and employment opportunities which reduces poverty. With increased education women have more control in household decision making as well as control over their own lives.

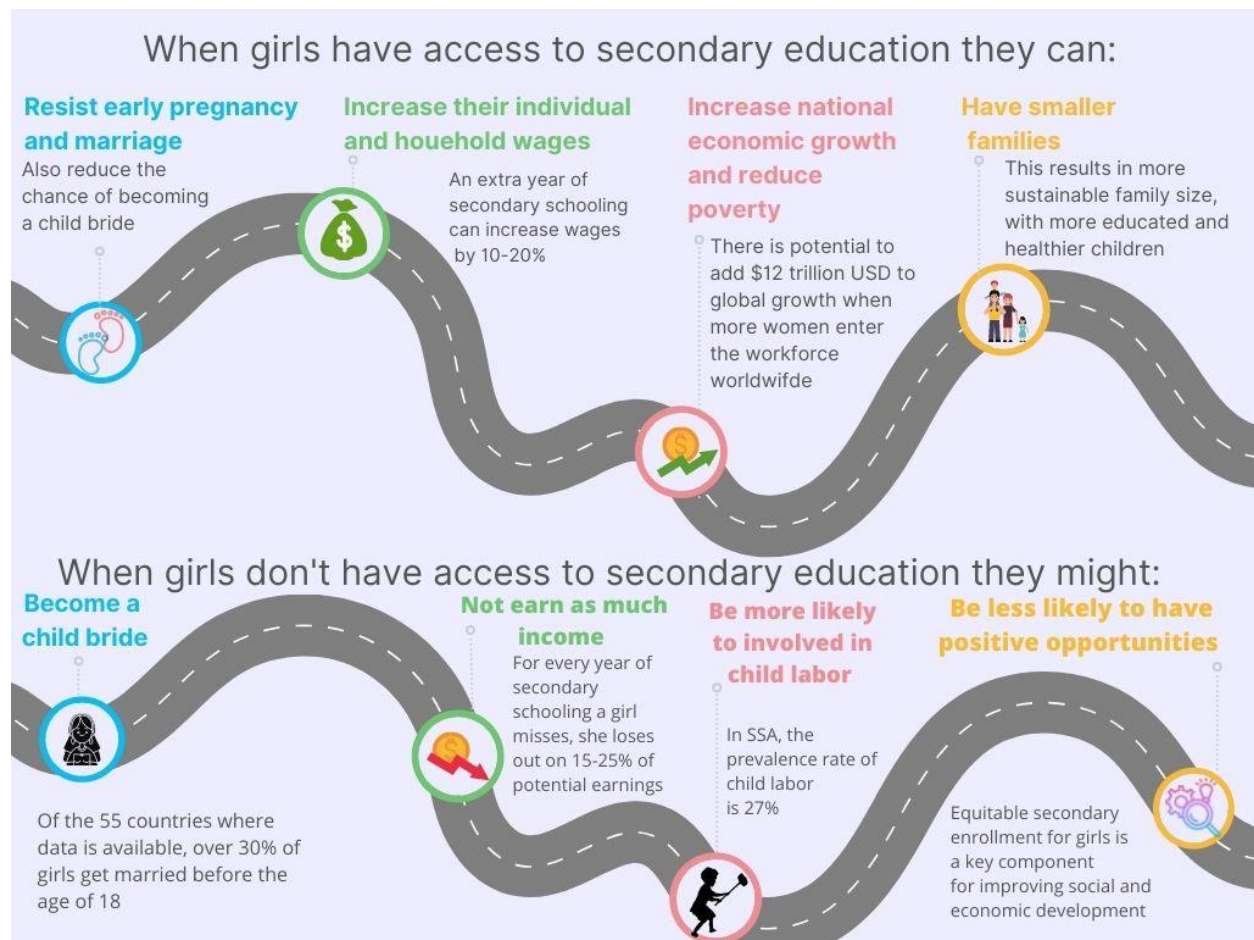
**Figure 10**

*Millions of Children Displaced from School in Sub-Saharan Africa*



**Key:**  = 250,000 children

According to data from 2018, there were 258.4 million children, adolescents, and youth out of school around the globe, of primary age, lower secondary age, and upper secondary age (UNESCO, 2019). This is a visual representation of the number of out-of-school youth across the world, with each image representing 250,000 children.

**Figure 11***Benefits of Secondary Education for Girls*

The millions of children who are out-of-school around the world are at a disadvantage compared to youth who have access to education, especially in their ability to complete secondary education. For girls, there are many advantages to completing secondary education; some of the outcomes are below. Comparatively, girls who don't have access to secondary education or are unable to complete their schooling are at a disadvantage compared to those who do. Included in the figure below are some of the social and economic benefits of secondary school completion for girls, specifically for the region of Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA).

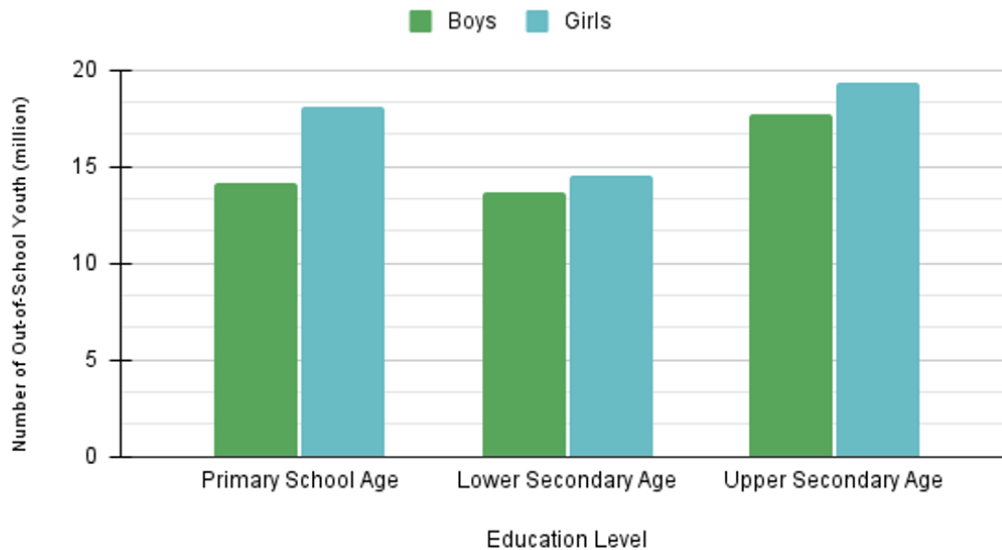
**Figure 12***Comparison of Out-of-School Youth in Sub-Saharan Africa, by Gender*

Figure 12 shows the differences, by gender, of the number of youth who are out-of-school in the region of Sub-Saharan Africa, for primary school age, lower secondary school age, and upper secondary school age. For all levels of education, there are more girls out of school than boys. There are the most youth, of both genders, out of school in upper secondary age youth. This can be explained by poverty, the necessity to work over going to school for individual or familial reasons, as well as upper secondary school not being compulsive (UNESCO, 2019). There are 19.3 million girls out of school for upper secondary age, compared to 17.7 million boys. These numbers are based on data taken from UNESCO (2019)'s 2018 data.

## Recommendations

### Provide Sanitary Products

Although there are some policies in place to improve educational attainment for children in Sub-Saharan Africa, it is not enough to address all the barriers that exist in the region. Therefore, more specific recommendations are needed to improve access to quality education and decrease the reasons for missing school.

Menstruation acts as a barrier to girls' access to education due to the stigma associated with menstruating. In many countries, there is silence around menstruation, which often leads girls to feeling shameful. “A key factor contributing to embarrassment about menstruation in the study area seems to be [the] role of wider cultural taboos/etiquette in inhibiting open discussion of the topic in many Kenyan family settings” (Jewitt & Ryley, 2014, p. 142). This can lead to girls feeling like they cannot ask their mothers questions surrounding puberty and menstruation. Due to this, one important solution to this problem is to de-stigmatize the way menstruation is viewed across the world, and work towards menstrual equity:

Embarrassment or taboos may prevent people from advocating for themselves, but if that stigma is removed — or even eased by talking through these issues — we as a society can move forward to address the needs of half of our population. There is no equity when half the population bears the financial and physical distress as a consequence of the reproductive cycle needed to ensure human survival (Farid, 2021).

This ties into period poverty, a concept used to describe the millions of people around the world who cannot afford menstrual hygiene products.

Providing sanitary products to girls is one solution to help combat period poverty and to alleviate girls missing school while they are menstruating. Authors Jewitt and Ryley write that:



Although programs promoting improved sanitary product access can do little to tackle entrenched gender inequalities (and associated cultural tolerance of schoolgirls' sexual exploitation/prostitution), they may help to improve girls' access to social capital resources including education and (in the case of multi-sectoral schemes) SRHR education to compensate for cultural resistance to discussing sexual maturity at home (2014, p.144).

One solution to this barrier to education is to give all girls reusable sanitary towels that they can have and wear to feel more comfortable going to school when they are menstruating. Kenya is one country in Sub-Saharan Africa which provides sanitary towels to girls, boosting school attendance while improving sanitation and healthcare. This helps decrease the number of days girls skip school due to experiencing challenges due to menstruation and shame surrounding this time (Wesangula, 2017). According to research by Scott et al. (2009), providing sanitary towels as well as menstrual hygiene management education to girls in Ghana reduced school absenteeism by more than half (Jewitt & Ryley, 2014). Most critical here is the action of providing sanitary products to girls as well as the education surrounding menstrual hygiene management. With these two together, results are more positive and successful.

All in all, access to free sanitary products to school aged girls is one recommendation to impact school absenteeism as it relates to menstruation. In addition to providing sanitary products, pairing this with education for both school staff and students would create stronger knowledge around menstruation, de-stigmatize this and normalize questions and conversations for girls. Education can also be provided to families, as parents often might not know about puberty and how to have these conversations with their daughters. An in-depth look at a

community's cultural norms and expanded education surrounding menstruation and menstrual hygiene management is needed to fully address this concern.

### **Decrease Military Spending and Allocate Funds to Education**

The social and economic reasons that keep girls out of school worldwide must be examined and analyzed. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural organization (UNESCO) shares that reform must go beyond education:

Formal education systems must be part of wider reform efforts that transform economic and social institutions to address the inequalities, poverty, vulnerabilities and, indeed, the aspirations of children and families that can work for or against conflict. This requires education systems that are designed and implemented alongside wider economic and social policies. The most critical are economic interventions to reduce poverty, undernutrition, and the need for child labour (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015, p. 51).

The factors that act as a barrier to girls' access to education in Sub-Saharan Africa must be addressed, and to do so, policies must look beyond education.

Living in and going to school in a conflict zone is one of the barriers to girls' access to education in Sub-Saharan Africa. Conflict and war directly impact education and “(t)he impact on education for children in the affected areas can be every bit as severe as for children in countries facing all-out war” (UNESCO, 2015, p. 47). Girls are kidnapped by armed forces in these conflict zones, schools are taken over, and girls face gender-based violence. Wars and conflicts are impacted by military spending, so it is necessary to examine the impacts that this money has on education, or the lack thereof.

It is important to see where global funds are allocated, and where money can instead be diverted towards education. One of these is on military expenditure. Jaeger (2016) asks a good question, “But if education is such a valuable investment, why do we spend more than eight times as much of our federal budget on the military than schooling?” He continues and outlines that in 2015 in the United States, military expenditures accounted for 54% of discretionary spending, whereas only 6% of the budget was allocated towards education. Jaeger writes that the White House recognizes the importance of investing in education and the profit that this yields for a child’s life. “For every dollar invested in early childhood education programs, society benefits to the tune of \$8.60, ‘about half of which comes from increased earnings for children when they grow up’, a 2012 report from the Council of Economic Advisers found” (Jaeger, 2016).

It is crucial to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of military spending, and the results from such, as it relates to education. Pollin & Garrett-Peltier (2009) write:

It is true that jobs generated by military spending tend to pay relatively well, which is part of the reason that fewer jobs are created per dollar of expenditure than through alternative spending targets. However, we have also seen that \$1 billion in spending on education, on average, generates more than twice the number of jobs as does military spending, and higher-paying jobs (p. 456).

Therefore, money allocated towards education provides more jobs than does military spending.

Investing in education yields more jobs than the United States’ military budget does. “Advocates of America’s mammoth defense budget claim it generates jobs. But academic studies reveal that it does so far less efficiently than government investment in education,

clean energy, transportation and health care” (Beinart, 2021). The academic study referenced is “The U.S. Employment Effects of Military and Domestic Spending Priorities”. This study shows evidence of the greater benefits in quantity of jobs as well as in investing the United States’ military budget in other sectors:

Our first conclusion in assessing such relative employment impacts is straightforward: \$1 billion spent on personal consumption, health care, education, mass transit, and construction for home weatherization and infrastructure will all create more jobs within the U.S. economy than would the same \$1 billion spent on the military (Pollin & Garrett-Peltier, 2007, p. 445).

In terms of the number of jobs, and higher paying jobs, money spent on education is more beneficial than money spent on the military.

When it comes to the number of jobs, investing in education is more beneficial than investing in the U.S. military budget. This can be generalized towards other regions in the world, and specifically towards Sub-Saharan Africa. Conflict and violence are prevalent in many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, affecting access to quality education for girls in the region. Therefore, to focus on education and the numerous social and economic benefits this yields, governments should focus more money on education, rather than money towards conflict and wars in this area. Angola has the largest defense spending budget in Sub-Saharan Africa; \$7,650,000,000 US dollars. This is followed by Libya, Sudan, and South Africa (Saleh, 2021). Although Africa only accounts for around two percent of global military spending, it is due to the “(i)nternal conflicts caused by political instability and terrorism determined the need for many African countries to improve their military strength” (Saleh, 2021).

South Africa is one of the countries in this region that has invested money towards education, and in doing so, reached the Millennium Development Goal of increasing access to universal primary education (Goodier, 2017). As cited by UNECA (2015):

Currently, substantial amounts of money are spent on education by governments across the African continent, with average public expenditure on education in the region as a percentage of GDP increasing from 4.2% to 4.9% between 2000 and 2012 (Godier, 2017, p. 17).

Specifically in South Africa, education expenditure has been rising in recent years. This has increased from ZAR (South African rand) 31.1 billion in 1995, to ZAR 59.6 billion in 2002, to ZAR 105.5 billion in 2007 (Godier, 2017). With this investment in education and the acknowledgement of the importance of educational resources for students, they have been able to improve access to universal primary education.

### **Girls' Empowerment Education**

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides a framework for understanding how the macrosystem, a society's cultural values, affects one's development. Because gender inequalities and differential treatment of girls compared to boys is embedded in the cultural norms of countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, this affects young girls' development and how others look at girls and women. "Long-held misconceptions and cultural norms can keep girls from reaching their full potential — and further inequality in society" (Malala Fund, n.d.).

Therefore, arguably the biggest recommendation is to change the value of how a girl is viewed. Recognizing the assets that girls and women have is crucial to improving their educational attainment, and personal and professional opportunities as they develop. If girls and women can continue to contribute more to the workforce and influence a country's economic development, it

changes the perception of girls and women to a more positive one. When cultural expectations change, society will see more value in girls, and the power that investment in education can bring to this adjusted cultural norm.

Solutions to this problem of gender inequality need to be embedded within the education systems in the community. Many of these barriers to education are culturally based, including gender inequality, treatment of young mothers, the prevalence of child brides, and conflict. Policies directed at the issue will not maximize their benefits without cultural changes. These cultural changes begin with education. Expanding education to include topics on gender equality, more open conversations regarding gender norms, and teaching equality is crucial for morphing cultural norms into more positive and inclusive ones. A question to ponder: should cultural views and norms be respected and valued without adjustments even if it is at the expense of the life and successes of a girls' education?

UNESCO Institute for Statistics states:

“The barriers to girls' education can be overcome if the environment around them—their homes and communities— supports their schooling, and if schools themselves are accessible, safe and inclusive. It will take time to root out the discrimination that keeps so many girls out of the classroom, but much can be done to ensure that schools welcome, nurture and protect all their pupils, girls as well as boys” (2015, pp. 62-63).

It is crucial to have safe schools for children to attend in Sub-Saharan Africa, and to eliminate preventative barriers. This includes having a zero-tolerance policy on violence, having more female teachers, and having government support for teaching “advocacy and awareness- raising programmes for parents, youth and communities to modify deeply-rooted cultural beliefs about femininity and masculinity and make the case for girls' education” (UNESCO Institute for

Statistics, 2015, p. 64). If discussions around gender equality are taught from a young age and are normalized in school, society's understanding of girls and the power that their social and economic contributions have will be increasingly valued. With increased education surrounding gender equality, benefits will come to the community and country, and improve the quality of life for everyone.

### **Conclusion**

There are numerous social and economic benefits for girls and women that result from investing in quality education. However, there continue to be barriers that hinder accessibility to education for girls in Sub-Saharan Africa. When girls are able to complete secondary schooling, they are more equipped to get a job, have higher wages, delay marriages and pregnancies, and have healthier children. On an individual level, there are positive benefits, which affects societal benefits as well. Countries benefit economically when investing in girls' education. There are many advantages to equitable access to education for girls:

Girls' education is the key to our new and better future. The key to increased health, prosperity, and security. If the world's leaders truly want to invest in this future then they must deliver on their promises and start investing in books, in education—in hope for girls who have too often been left behind (Sperling & Winthrop, 2016, p. xviii).

Investing in girls' education not only in Sub-Saharan Africa, but around the world, is critical to advance girls and women's rights.

Malala Yousafzai is a powerful international spokesperson and advocate for girls' rights to education. As an advocate for education and growing up in Pakistan, she was threatened by the Taliban for her beliefs. The Taliban shot Malala Yousafzai in the head when she was sixteen years old after she refused to back down from her dedication to education; she survived and is

advocating internationally for the right for girls to go to school. The 2012 attack sparked worldwide outrage; in Pakistan, more than two million people “signed a right to education petition, and the National Assembly ratified Pakistan's first Right to Free and Compulsory Education Bill” (United Nations, 2017). The following year, Malala Yousafzai and her father co-founded the Malala Fund which brings awareness to the social and economic impacts of girls' education and to empower girls to demand change (United Nations, 2017). Yousafzai became the youngest person to win a Nobel Peace Prize for her dedication to raising awareness of the importance of girls' education (United Nations, 2017).

All in all, the following quotation acts as a reminder of the importance of education to enact lasting and powerful change:

I am Malala. You are Malala. We are Malala, the voices who must stand up for one of the most basic human rights. No more can education rest as a privilege; it is a fundamental necessity. Those who can speak must speak up for girls' education— girls' power. We must proclaim the truth to all so that no one will suffer in the violence of ignorance. Knowledge is the antidote to ending crimes against humanity. Through education, we can make a better future. In the words of Malala, ‘Let us remember: One book, one pen, one child, and one teacher can change the world’ (Wilder, 2020, p.80).

The power that quality education has, a fundamental right, can change the lives of girls in Sub-Saharan Africa and around the world, and as such, they must be given the chance to succeed to their fullest potential.



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