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Education Think Piece Series
UNICEF has commissioned 10 Think Pieces by leading research and practitioners to stimulate debate around significant educational challenges facing the Eastern and Southern Africa region. While the pieces are rooted in evidence, they are not research papers or evidence briefs, nor do they represent UNICEF policy. Rather, they are engaging pieces that aim to inspire fresh thinking to improve learning for all.

Girls' education is improving, but not for all girls – how can we accelerate change?

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Throughout the Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA) region, there are countless groups of children who experience significant constraint on their capability to learn[1]. These include children with disabilities, children from an ethnic minority, children displaced by emergency or conflict and children living in extreme rural and/ or impoverished conditions. While both boys and girls make up these excluded groups, the constraints that are experienced – be it due to extreme poverty, displacement or disability – *are compounded and multiplied when they are experienced by girls*.

Both boys' and girls' education suffers if they are expected to work and bring income to the family, but girls will have the added constraints of extra domestic duties, vulnerability to sexual harassment, menstruation and in some contexts, expectations of early marriage[2]. These are the reasons why this Think Piece will have a definitive focus on girls' education. It will unpack why girls' educational achievements remain low, despite the number of girls' education programmes in the ESA region. It will also put forward a new approach to girls' education – one that aims to galvanize and coordinate such efforts so that more comprehensive, accelerated and sustainable change can be achieved.

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[1] In 2010, around 9 million primary aged children in ESA were out of school. UIS Data Centre, 2012.
[2] King & Winthrop, Today's Challenges for Girls' Education, 2015 p. 24-34.

Why girls' educational achievement suffers: multiple forms of constraint

A great deal of documentation and evidence demonstrates that girls' education is an enshrined human right[3] and contributes significantly to a country's development[4]. As a result, a focus on girls' education features in most ministry of education sector plans[5]. Tremendous progress has been made towards achieving gender parity in the first few years of primary school; girls are often well represented in year 1-3 classrooms in the ESA region.

However, over the following years, girls' presence and participation in school starts to drop, leading to very poor completion and transition rates[6]. Clearly, girls are not attending and learning to their full potential. They are not empowered to gain the benefits that education brings in terms of livelihoods, social status and self-fulfilment. Thus, girls, as well as their nations, suffer from a terrible waste of potential.

Girls' poor completion and transition rates are due to the multiple forms of constraint they experience both inside and outside schools, particularly as they grow older. Household poverty is a significant constraint that both *pulls* girls and boys out of school (due to costs of uniforms, materials, exam fees), and also *pushes* them into providing labour to benefit the family (either at home or in the informal economy). For girls however, these challenges are compounded by additional constraints, such as extra domestic chores (cooking, cleaning, collecting water, caring for siblings, etc.), having inadequate support and sanitary products for menstruation, and the prospect of an early marriage, as dowries often offset family poverty.

Additional barriers within schools and classrooms add to constraints at the household level. Teachers frequently have unconscious or conscious preferences and biases towards male pupils[7]. Textbooks often depict men in positions of power and authority, thereby shaping and limiting girls' aspirations.

School cleaning protocols frequently reinforce gender norms and girls' domestic roles and duties. These are just some of the subtle ways that girls and boys are treated differently at school. More extreme differences occur when sexual harassment, predation or violence is directed towards girls by teachers, students or community members[8]. Girls do not often have the knowledge, life skills and confidence to claim their rights in such instances; and insufficient protection and reporting systems leave girls vulnerable to sexual advances.

Such insufficient systems are frequently tied to failings at district and national levels, whereby policies regarding gender, sexual harassment or codes of conduct are poorly drafted, disseminated or enforced (if they in fact exist). These inefficiencies are often due to a lack of gender prioritization and political will within governments, which can be a result of broader social, cultural and/or religious norms that do not recognize or value equality between women and men.

Figure 1 on the following page outlines these and other constraints that affect girls' education in the ESA region. It locates constraints within the different levels of the education system: the home and community; school and classroom; and system and policy levels. Such an analysis helps to illustrate how inequalities that affect girls' education are complex, interconnected and compound each other from the macro- to micro-level[9].

[3] Right to Education, Understanding Education as a Right, 2018.
[4] Plan, Paying the Price: The economic cost of not educating girls, 2008.
[5] Global Partnership for Education, Girls' education and gender in education sector plans and GPE-funded programmes, 2017.
[6] Global Education Monitoring Report, Gender Review: Creating sustainable futures for all, 2017, p. 17.
[7] Mbilinyi & Mbughuni, Education in Tanzania With a Gender Perspective: Summary Report, SIDA, 1991, p. 17.
[8] Parkes & Heslop, Stop Violence Against Girls in School: A cross-country analysis of baseline research in Ghana, Kenya and Mozambique, ActionAid, 2011.
[9] It should be noted that positive effects can be seen when certain significant constraints are not an issue. For example, amongst well-off families where poverty is not a constraint, girls' primary completion rates are actually higher than that of boys. This is the case in Burundi. DHS, 2010.

Figure 1: The different types and level of constraint on girls' capability to learn

System and policy constraints

Inadequate recruitment of female managers and teachers

Social norms de-prioritise gender throughout government

Inadequate gender budgeting, planning, M&E in MoE

Insufficient national policies for gender, sexual harassment, pregnancy and re-entry

Inadequate pre-service training on gender responsive pedagogy

Inadequate district gender support and monitoring of schools and teachers

School and classroom constraints

Inadequate in-service training on gender responsive pedagogy

Low female representation in leadership and decision-making roles

Inadequate gender awareness and focal points at national, regional or district level

Teachers prioritise boys and do not encourage girls

Home and community constraints

Girls' extra domestic work (cooking, cleaning, caring for siblings, collecting water)

Long distances to school increase vulnerability to harassment and abuse

No monitoring, planning or budgeting to address unfair treatment of girls

Leadership roles (like class prefects, class monitors) assigned to boys only

Girls contribute to the family's income (farm labour, selling at the market)

Constraints on a girl's capability to learn

Sexual abuse, manipulation, rape can lead to pregnancy

Sexual harassment of female pupils by teachers, community, students

Assertive boys access desks, chairs, LTMs and extra-curricular activities more/first

No professional role models and parents do not encourage girls to have careers

Girls drop out of school due to early pregnancy

Girls do not know or have the confidence to claim their rights

Use of corporal punishment or threatening behaviour

Parents prioritize boys' education, especially if family poverty is an issue

School absenteeism due to lack of sanitary products during menstruation

Parents arrange an early marriage, as dowries can offset family poverty

No guidance counsellor or designated trained teacher to provide a safe space

School chores and cleaning duties reflect and reinforce traditional gender roles

TLMs reinforce traditional gender roles and assumptions about careers for females

Inadequate hygienic facilities/toilets for female students and staff

Teasing/bullying by boys (particularly regarding sexual maturation)

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Interventions to address constraint

Many international partners, civil society organisations, donors and governments have designed and implemented interventions that aim to address the myriad of constraints that lead to girls' poor educational achievements. However, these interventions have had varying degrees of success. Generally speaking, they focus on only one or two particular constraints at a particular level of the education system. This can be problematic, as projects focusing on constraints at school can easily be undermined by constraints that still exist within the home (or vice versa). This often occurs when education programmes that have girls as their sole beneficiaries automatically assume they are 'gender responsive' and thus overlook other forms of constraint. Robust research has evaluated many such programmes and interventions; and has concluded that the impact on girls' education is greatest when a combination of different kinds of intervention comes together to provide a holistic approach to constraints[10].

Figure 2 highlights some of the interventions that are used to address constraints, and demonstrates why a comprehensive approach is needed. It first maps out constraints from Figure 1 against pivotal ages during which girls experience them. The first grey row indicates the *intended* ages for primary and secondary classes/grades, which may vary slightly from country to country. The second purple row illustrates *indicative* age ranges that occur for these classes/grades after girls experience over-age entry into school, absenteeism and drop out. The blue rows beneath then outline the constraints that girls experience, and when they typically experience them. The grey column to the right illustrates interventions that have, in various contexts, been implemented to address the constraints. It maps the interventions against the specific constraints, and demonstrates how most interventions can only address a limited number of constraints at a time, and single levels of the education system at a time.

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[10] Unterhalter et al., Education Rigorous Literature Review: Girls' Education and Gender Equality, DFID 2014, p. 15.

Figure 2: Constraints experienced at pivotal ages and interventions to address them

Pre-primary, P1-3			P4-5		P6-7		Lower/Upper Secondary intended age							Interventions to address constraint
			P1-3 (delay)				P4-5 (absenteeism)			P6-7 (drop-out no transition)				
5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	

HOME & COMMUNITY CONSTRAINTS

Constraint (age range)	Interventions
Parents do not have funds for school costs (uniforms, materials, exam fees), home environment, food (5–18)	Cash transfers/bursaries; school feeding; family livelihood programmes
Parents have low level of education, low confidence/status, de-prioritization of education (5–18)	
Prioritization of boys' education due to cultural norms, family poverty, too many children (5–18)	
Girls responsible for domestic work (cooking, cleaning, collecting water, care for siblings) (8–18)	Social Behaviour Change Communications (SBCC) regarding gender norms; boarding; transport
Girls contribute to family income (farm labour and selling at the market) (9–18)	
Long distances to school increases vulnerability to abuse by community members (9–18)	
Belief in/need for dowry (early marriage), risk pregnancy (12–18)	Sexual Reproductive Health (SRH) education for boys and girls; sanitary products
Lack of sanitary products and info on SRH (12–18)	
Transactional sex for school fees - risk of pregnancy (12–18)	
Early pregnancy w/ no support - drop out to care for child (12–18)	
Complex process for abuse - parents avoid reporting (12–18)	Support reporting systems and policy dissemination
Lack of awareness of rights, pregnancy re-entry policy (12–18)	

CLASSROOM & SCHOOL LEVEL CONSTRAINTS

Constraint (age range)	Interventions
Inadequate in-service training on gender responsive pedagogy (5–18)	Pre- and in-service teacher training on gender responsive pedagogy, non-violent classroom management, positive discipline strategies; HT, SMC, PTA training on gender responsive school scorecards, girl-friendly schools, school governance
Teachers prioritize boys and do not encourage girls (5–18)	
Use of corporal punishment or threatening behaviour – demoralizes pupils (5–18)	
No guidance counsellor or designated trained teacher to ensure that the school is a safe space for girls (5–18)	
Teacher absenteeism and low number of female teachers and role models (5–18)	
TLMs reinforce traditional gender roles and assumptions about careers for females (5–18)	
School chores and cleaning duties reflect/reinforce traditional gender roles (8–18)	
Assertive boys access desks, chairs, TLMs and extra-curricular activities more/first (9–18)	
Leadership roles (like class monitors, prefects) assigned to boys (9–18)	
Inadequate hygienic facilities/toilets for female students (12–18)	WASH; SRH education; Girls' Clubs; sensitization of boys/men; enforce school safety policy/reporting and teacher code of conduct
Teasing/bullying by boys (regarding sexual maturation) (12–18)	
Sexual abuse/harassment by teachers/students (12–18)	
Transactional sex with teachers for grades (12–18)	
No school safety/reporting policy for cases of abuse (12–18)	

DISTRICT AND NATIONAL LEVEL CONSTRAINTS

Constraint (age range)	Interventions
National policies for enrolment, harassment, pregnancy not disseminated, implemented or enforced by districts (5–18)	Gender responsive policy and ESP development, dissemination, main-streaming; bursaries for female teachers; training for District Gender Officers
Inadequate recruitment/deployment of female teachers and managers (5–18)	
Inadequate gender structures/officers/support at district and national level (5–18)	
Inadequate reporting systems, law enforcement, national hotline for cases of sexual abuse/harassment (5–18)	
Inadequate gender budgeting, planning, M&E at district and national level (5–18)	
Inadequate pre-service training on gender responsive pedagogy (GRP) (5–18)	Pre-service training on GRP

Within the ESA region, there are many examples of interventions that aim to address particular constraints, such as cash transfers to parents to keep girls in school[11], provision of sanitary products[12] and Girls' Clubs[13]. There are also general education programmes that try to mainstream gender within their broader capacity development with teachers, communities and district education officers[14]. These examples are laudable; however, often these interventions are uncoordinated. Their targets, beneficiary age range, timeframes and geographical scope vary, and together they do not add up to a holistic response to the challenges girls face. In addition, organizations frequently work in isolation from each other, leading to a fractured landscape of girls' education projects that can involve duplication and overlap.

In addition to this, there are examples of interventions aimed at addressing national level constraints. Most notably, the work that the Global Partnership for Education, UNGEI and UNICEF are doing to support ministries of education to address gender in their education sector plans (ESP). In 2016, they developed *Guidance for Developing Gender Responsive Education Sector Plans*[15], which provides practical tools to support: 1) a gender analysis of a country's education sector; 2) using the analysis to plan and design interventions, allocate human and financial resource and define monitoring approaches; and 3) appraising the extent to which a country's education system and ESP address gender concerns.

These are very important objectives that target many of the system and policy level constraints identified in Figures 1 and 2. When these objectives are achieved by ministries of education, many more countries will have sector plans, policies, budgets and monitoring systems that are significantly more gender responsive[16]. However, the guidance document does not acknowledge that in most contexts there are many donor and NGO partners already implementing girls' education interventions at the grassroots level. It would be helpful to harness these programmes in order to ensure a harmonized approach, as well as facilitate ESP implementation.

Thus, there is a need for a coordinated strategy in which gender responsive sector plans and grassroots interventions, however small and specifically targeted, are part of a combined response that provides a comprehensive approach to constraint on girls.

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Addressing constraint - a different approach to implementation

As discussed, grassroots efforts to tackle constraints on girls' education can often be too narrowly-focused and too disparate to have major impact. Research also suggests that silver bullet solutions do not work. Gender responsive sector plans may have more broadly-focused analysis, vision and strategies to address constraint; but they do not often harness, coordinate with or require the alignment of grassroots girls' education programmes that are being implemented.

An approach that looks at the problem in the round and coordinates both macro- and micro-level interventions towards a common strategy may be the way forward. This would require supporting ministries of education to: 1) develop a comprehensive Theory of Change (ToC) to underpin their gender responsive sector plan or national gender in education policy[17]; and 2) use the ToC to guide implementation as it provides a common strategy and coordination mechanism for both system actors and like-minded organizations working on girls' education interventions.

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[11] Girls' Education South Sudan
[12] Zana Africa Foundation
[13] Girls' Clubs and Empowerment Programmes, ODI, 2015.
[14] Education Quality Improvement Programme in Tanzania
[15] Guidance for Developing Gender Responsive Education Sector Plans, Global Partnership for Education, UNGEI, UNICEF, 2016.
[16] Regional training workshops to provide orientation on the guidance document began in 2017 and runs through 2018. Thus, the actual implementation of gender responsive sector planning may not yet be occurring, but will hopefully come to fruition in the coming years.
[17] Since the guidance document on gender responsive ESPs is relatively new, the development of gender responsive sector plans may take time to bear fruit. Thus, if there is scope to support a ministry of education to develop or amend a gender in education policy, a ToC tool could be used in this instance.

Developing a transformative approach to change

As discussed, the *Guidance for Developing Gender Responsive Education Sector Plans* contains many tools that support ministries to conduct a gender analysis of their education sector and use the analysis to plan and design appropriate interventions. What may strengthen this process is the development of a robust theory or approach to change, that takes into account all the different types/levels of constraint along with corresponding interventions. This can then be used to provide a comprehensive roadmap to harness and coordinate girls' education programmes operating on the ground.

Figure 3 on the following page is an illustrative and generic theory of change that aims to do this by starting with the different levels of constraint identified in Figure 1, and the relevant interventions that were identified in Figure 2. Both constraints and interventions should be tailored to the context in which it is being used. This can be done through discussions with key stakeholders, particularly girls, to contextualize, validate and elaborate on constraints, and to prioritize which constraints are the most significant in particular districts or regions[18].

Based on prioritized constraints, interventions can also be prioritized at all levels, from the individual to institutional. If interventions are implemented simultaneously and in the same context, the hypothesis is that more gender responsive systems, schools, homes and communities will begin to develop. And when that happens, girls' educational access, completion and transition will be significantly improved. This is not just a theory of change, but a theory of system transformation.

That said, transformation is not straightforward or linear and this approach is predicated on assumptions regarding a climate of support for girls' education (politically, culturally, economically and socially). These factors significantly influence the development and implementation of interventions for girls' education. But even if levels of support are wanting, this transformative approach can be used as a roadmap to galvanize any support that does exist, by ensuring that all interested parties remain focused and aligned.
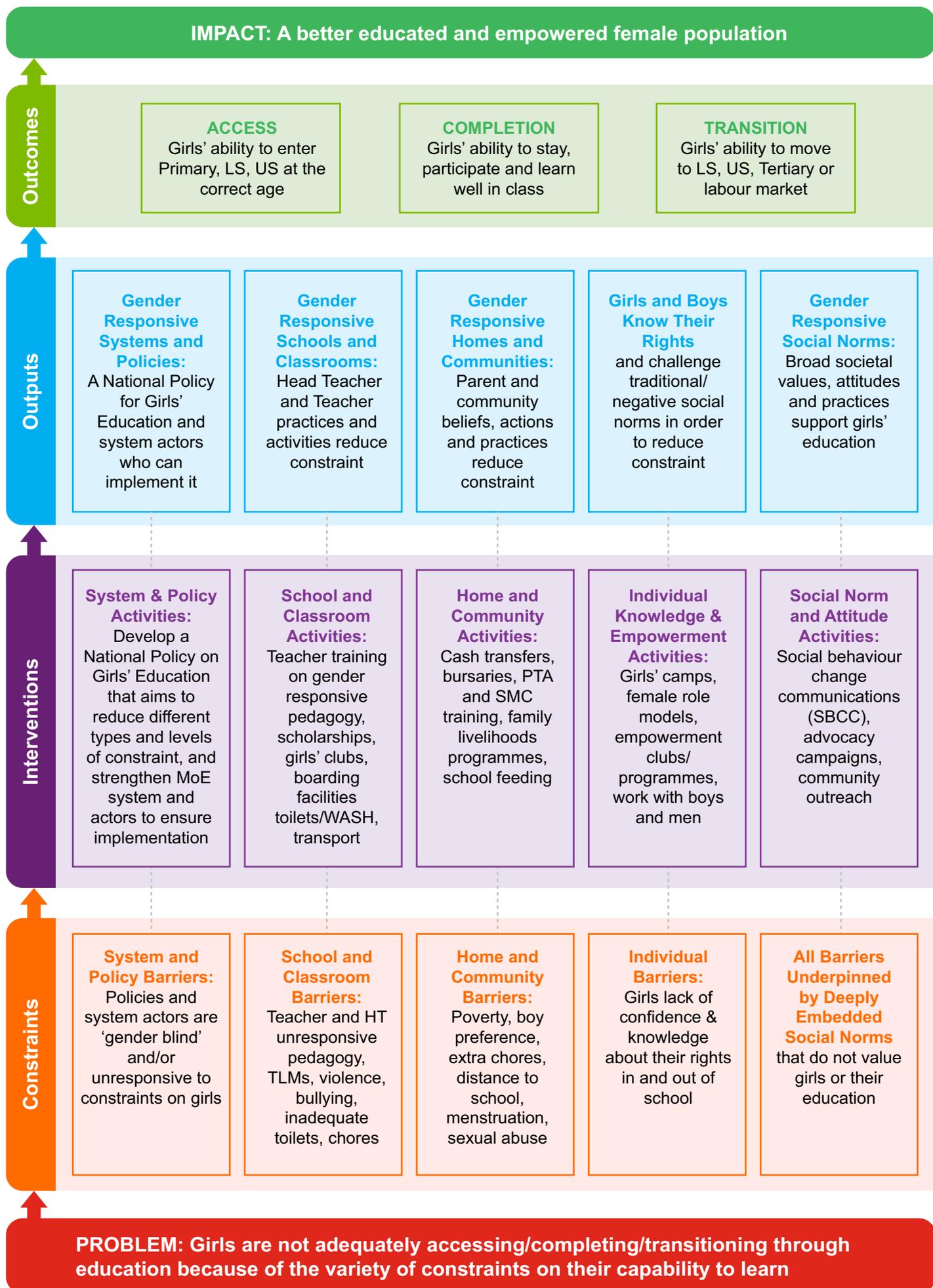
After the approach has been contextualized and used to underpin a gender responsive sector plan or policy, who within the ministry should own it? Particularly in order to harness and coordinate the various girls' education interventions being implemented? In most ministries of education, the gender 'unit', 'division' or 'desk' has a mandate for implementation, but they are often institutionally weak, under-staffed and under-resourced. Inadequate strength and resourcing has often led to power imbalances between ministry gender officers and donors, whereby officers end up 'following donors' money' and getting pulled from one project to another. However, such power asymmetries and unproductive outcomes can be reduced if gender officers were supported to oversee the implementation of the ministry's transformative approach and roadmap, and ensure that all system actors, donors and NGOs were working towards it. This is where those working to strengthen education systems and system actors, such as UNICEF education specialists, are key.

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[11] If ministry planners use this ToC to underpin the development of a gender responsive sector plan or policy, they should also be the ones to conduct these discussions.

Figure 3: A transformative approach to improve girls' educational achievements

IMPACT: A better educated and empowered female population

Outcomes

ACCESS
Girls' ability to enter Primary, LS, US at the correct age

COMPLETION
Girls' ability to stay, participate and learn well in class

TRANSITION
Girls' ability to move to LS, US, Tertiary or labour market

Outputs

Gender Responsive Systems and Policies:
A National Policy for Girls' Education and system actors who can implement it

Gender Responsive Schools and Classrooms:
Head Teacher and Teacher practices and activities reduce constraint

Gender Responsive Homes and Communities:
Parent and community beliefs, actions and practices reduce constraint

Girls and Boys Know Their Rights
and challenge traditional/ negative social norms in order to reduce constraint

Gender Responsive Social Norms:
Broad societal values, attitudes and practices support girls' education

Interventions

System & Policy Activities:
Develop a National Policy on Girls' Education that aims to reduce different types and levels of constraint, and strengthen MoE system and actors to ensure implementation

School and Classroom Activities:
Teacher training on gender responsive pedagogy, scholarships, girls' clubs, boarding facilities toilets/WASH, transport

Home and Community Activities:
Cash transfers, bursaries, PTA and SMC training, family livelihoods programmes, school feeding

Individual Knowledge & Empowerment Activities:
Girls' camps, female role models, empowerment clubs/ programmes, work with boys and men

Social Norm and Attitude Activities:
Social behaviour change communications (SBCC), advocacy campaigns, community outreach

Constraints

System and Policy Barriers:
Policies and system actors are 'gender blind' and/or unresponsive to constraints on girls

School and Classroom Barriers:
Teacher and HT unresponsive pedagogy, TLMs, violence, bullying, inadequate toilets, chores

Home and Community Barriers:
Poverty, boy preference, extra chores, distance to school, menstruation, sexual abuse

Individual Barriers:
Girls lack of confidence & knowledge about their rights in and out of school

All Barriers Underpinned by Deeply Embedded Social Norms
that do not value girls or their education

PROBLEM: Girls are not adequately accessing/completing/transitioning through education because of the variety of constraints on their capability to learn

Using the approach to map current projects as a roadmap for future coordination and implementation

As discussed, there are many good organizations addressing specific constraints on girls, but they are not always coordinated with each other, or with a national policy or vision for girls' education. In order to make these efforts work more powerfully, projects should align with a ministry's transformative approach in order to ensure the greatest reach, scope and reduction of duplication. One way to do this is to support ministry implementers, particularly gender officers, to map current girls' education projects against the 'Interventions' level of their contextualized approach to determine who is doing what/ where; and whether there are any gaps (i.e. geographical, type of intervention, target ages, etc.), misalignments or duplications. This can be done in consultation with projects so that they too can see where they may need to revise their activities to align with the approach.

In order to fill any gaps that appear, gender officers could be supported to develop an application process and vetting criteria for future activities and interventions. Those organizations planning to implement a girls' education project should be sensitized to the ministry's transformative approach, and then asked to submit a proposal or application detailing how and to what extent they address the gaps that have been identified. The ministry has every right not to permit organizations that are not approved (either because they have not addressed gaps or refuse to apply), to proceed with their projects. Such a process is not meant to promote a culture of over-regulation; rather, the aim is to ensure that donor, international partner and civil society organization priorities and projects are aligned with a coherent and holistic ministry vision for girls' education.

Although change is not straightforward or rapid, this transformative approach can be used as a clear roadmap to keep the ministry, system actors, organizations and projects focused and aligned. One way to ensure this is for gender officers to create a Girls' Education Network that allows for stakeholders and approved/potential projects to meet to: 1) share progress, knowledge, materials, best practice; 2) get updates on new and current projects contributing to the approach; and 3) coordinate efforts where relevant. Such a network could exist at both national and district levels in to ensure that all parties aiming to improve girls' education are aligned with the transformative approach/roadmap, and as a consequence, with each other.

Conclusion

It is promising to see that quite a lot of work is being done to improve girls' education and that a lot is known about 'what works' in certain circumstances. But the problem of poor learning outcomes for girls persists. Part of the reason for this is that there are multiple types and levels of constraints on girls and some of these, particularly cultural and religious norms, take a great deal of time and care to shift. Another part of the problem is that efforts to tackle constraints at the grassroots level are often too disparate, too narrowly-focused, too short-term and too small to have major impact on their own. And efforts at the national level do not adequately harness or coordinate these efforts at the grassroots.

That is why this Think Piece has put forward a new approach to girls' education. One that:

1. Brings together gender responsive sector plans/policies with grassroots actors through use of a comprehensive and transformative approach to change

2. Uses a consultative process to prioritize constraints and the interventions needed to address them

3. Uses this transformative approach as a common roadmap and coordination mechanism to ensure that all project interventions are contributing to the same objectives and goal

That said, transformation is not easy. The development and ownership of an integrated and coordinated approach to girls' education and the driving of change requires a great deal of leadership and political will from multiple actors within ministries of education. UNICEF education specialists are well positioned to support ministry planners, international partners and civil society to use this transformative approach; and to empower gender officers to ensure that all girls' education programmes/interventions are aligned with and contribute to it. It is also imperative for girls' education programmes themselves, and the donors and NGOs supporting them, to actively engage in and promote a coordinated effort through this approach. Because it is only through working together – from the macro- to micro-level and through government and non-governmental partners – that we can truly accelerate, sustain and transform our investments in the education and lives of girls. Now, and for years to come.

List of Acronyms

DFID   Department for International Development
ESA   Eastern and Southern Africa
ESP   Education Sector Plan
GRP   Gender Responsive Pedagogy
HT   Head Teacher
JHS   Junior High School
MoE   Ministry of Education
NGO   Non-Governmental Organisation
PTA   Parent Teacher Association
SBCC   Social Behaviour Change Communications
SHS   Senior High School
SMC   School Management Committee
SRH   Sexual Reproductive Health
TLM   Teaching and Learning Material
ToC   Theory of Change
WASH   Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

Further reading

1. Global Education Monitoring Report, Gender Review: Creating sustainable futures for all, UNESCO, Paris, 2016.
2. King & Winthrop, Today's Challenges for Girls' Education, Global Economy and Development at Brookings, Washington DC, 2015.
3. Sperling & Winthrop, What works in girls' education: Evidence for the world's best investment, Brookings Institution Press, Washington DC, 2016.
4. World Atlas of Gender Equality in Education, UNESCO, Paris, 2012
5. Unterhalter et al., Education Rigorous Literature Review: Girls' education and gender equality, DFID, London, 2014.