What we know (and don’t know) about persistent social norms that serve as barriers to girls’ access, participation, and achievement in education in 8 sub-Saharan African countries

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Research objectives and the Gender at the Centre Initiative

The Gender at the Centre Initiative (GCI) supports the leadership of ministries of education (MoEs) and other national actors to advance gender equality in education. Currently being implemented in 8 countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

A key objective of the GCI is to find appropriate strategies to shift the gender landscape through the transformation of key social norms or related practices that create barriers to girls’ education.

This research was commissioned to review existing studies on gendered social norms that serve as barriers to girls’ education including:

- to investigate social norms that impede girls’ education access, participation and achievement across the 8 partner countries;
- to identify gaps in understanding what multi-level factors serve to keep these social norms in place;
- to propose a research agenda.
• Despite progress in reducing gender disparities in education, the UNDP’s Gender Inequality Index (GII) shows that gender equality has been slowing in recent years (UNDP, 2020)

• Deeply entrenched social norms as a last frontier?

• Literature review: what has been done and best practices in who and how to engage (not always an obvious priority in Education Sector Plans)

• Global studies and specific from Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Mauritania, Mali, Mozambique, Chad, Niger, and Burkina Faso
Key findings

- Social norms that reinforce gender biases are extremely prevalent globally, reinforced from a young age, and deeply internalized by community members, including women and girls.

- Women and girls not often asked what an alternative future to the status quo would look like.

- These biases are taught and reinforced across societal structures, including at schools.

- Education Sector Plans/Priorities rarely mention Social Norms in their Sectoral Strategies and unclear mandate to address those that affect education, but seem to fall outside of their responsibility.

- A need to transform underlying structural contexts, and focus on changing perceptions of what is condoned or disapproved of in a social group (leveraging influential people).
What do we do now?

We need context-specific and locally-led research to move forward

• Identify and address 3-4 key social norms rather than broad programs to address all

• Explore what else is interfering: focus on early marriage, adolescence, SRGBV, menstruation through participatory techniques (consider photovoice among others)

• Identify who to engage: Teachers and school leadership, but also how meaningfully engage others?

• Gender Units within Ministries of Education can be given real power to engage different actors, research, and action

• Men’s engagement and positive deviants: identify what there is to lose for power holders and address these concerns head-on
THANK YOU