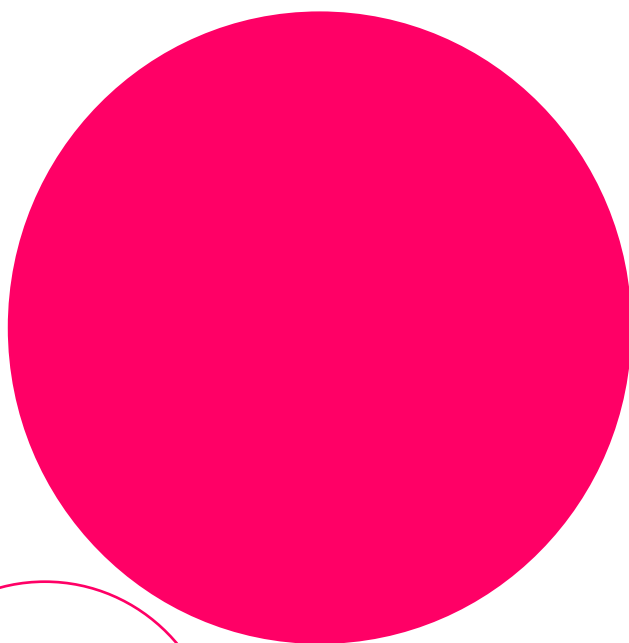


Girls' Education

Lesson from research into overcoming barriers to secondary education for girls: A case study from rural Ghana



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Mission Support from Ireland

Introduction

Internationally, significant progress has been made on girls' education, but no country in sub-Saharan Africa has achieved gender parity and poor girls living in rural areas are the least likely to access and complete at secondary level (Sperling and Winthrop 2016). As well as achieving gender parity, there is growing recognition of the importance of gender equality within education. This is reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals 4 (equity and quality education) and 5 (empowering women and girls).

This learning brief is based on findings from research carried out in April 2016¹, at the Presentation Junior High School (JHS) in Logre, Northern Ghana. Presentation Junior High School is managed by the Presentation Brothers. There are 231 students aged between 12 and 16: 126 girls and 105 boys. The school is a grant-aided school with the 12 teachers appointed and paid by the Ghanaian Education Service. The purpose of the research was to understand the barriers that girls living in rural areas face at junior secondary level and to explore the effectiveness of strategies to support them to overcome these barriers.



One of the classroom blocks at Presentation Junior High School.

There is a range of barriers faced by many children in developing countries to attend, remain and learn at secondary level. Many of these barriers, to varying degrees, affect both boys and girls and are experienced at the following different levels:

- Household/ community level;
- School level; and
- Policy and system level.

The research focused mainly on the household/community level barriers, which are outlined in this learning brief and summarised in Annex 1. Related strategies and key lessons are also examined.

Methodology

Presentation Junior High School was chosen for the research as it is located in a poor, rural area and has a number of initiatives to support and promote girls' education. The completion rate and performance of girls in the school is also higher than in other schools in the district. The research explored the reasons for this. The research sought to give voice to the experiences of the participants, to explore their understanding of the barriers faced by girls at secondary level, and to identify what works in overcoming such barriers. Qualitative techniques were used, with the main data collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The process consisted of seven group sessions with students (in total 23 girls and 18 boys took part), three focus group discussions with parents/guardians (in total 17 women and 9 men took part) and a range of semi-structured interviews with teachers and management of both Presentation JHS and the local primary school (also managed by the Brothers). Other key informants were also interviewed including local chiefs, the District Education Officer and other government officials, past students and local missionaries working in the area from the Daughters of Charity and St Patrick Missionary Society.

Barriers to Girls' Education

Poverty, distance to quality education and socio-cultural factors emerged as three overarching themes. Poverty and distance affect all children but affect girls to a higher degree than boys. There are two factors at play: being a long distance from school can mean having to walk in the dark, exposing girls to a greater risk of assault. A majority of parents/guardians interviewed expressed concerns regarding the safety of their children, especially their daughters, while travelling to

¹ The research was carried out by Misean Cara Education Project Officer, Anthony Hannon, as part of his MA in Development Studies at Kimmage Development Studies Centre.

school. The high cost of sanitary pads can mean families cannot afford to buy them, leaving girls open to embarrassment, which they avoid by remaining at home while menstruating.

“The distance (to school) is far and bushy so walking on the way there are weed smokers and mad men ... and they can do whatever they want to do with her and destroy her life by raping her or anything”.

Mother from the focus group discussion.

Barriers related to socio-cultural factors re-inforce the effect of poverty and distance on girls. These include the **expectations of a daughter’s future role within the family, household chores** and the **stigma associated with teenage pregnancy**.

A social norm that had a particularly strong effect related to the **expectations of a daughter’s future role within the family**. While new opinions were heard during the research, the traditional view remains strong, and the social norm that emerged is that sons stay within their parents’ home, while daughters, when they marry, leave to join their husband’s family. From this perspective, investing in the education of sons is more likely to reap more long-term benefits for the parents when compared to daughters. There is, as a result, a higher incentive to invest in the education of sons over daughters. The saying quoted by Rao and Sweetman (2014) that *“educating a daughter is like watering your neighbour’s garden”* is particularly pertinent in this context.

“If you educate a girl, at the end the girl will go to the husbands’ house. The money she will get it will not be for the fathers’ house. So they (parents) prefer educating the boy and leave the girl”.

A female student

Household chores, both before and after school, are largely carried out by girls. This had an effect on punctuality and school

performance, with girls more likely to arrive late for school and have less time for study. While all students passed their end of junior school state exam in 2015, girls averaged a pass mark of 69% while boys averaged 82%. The effects on girls of having to do household chores emerged as one of the key reasons for this gap in performance.

“It is the girl that is supposed to take care of the household chores so the boys they don't get up and sweep or wash clothes ... but the girl, you have to stay and wash and make sure that the house is clean before you leave.”

A female Student

Over the previous three years, five students had dropped out of Presentation JHS, one boy and four girls. In some cases this was due to the family migrating from the area. In the case of two girls, it was due to pregnancy. In Ghana, government policy is that pregnant and post-natal girls have a right to continue with their education.

Addressing the **stigma related to teenage pregnancy** was, however, a significant challenge. The District Education Officer (DEO) noted that *“more often than not girls drop out when they become pregnant because of stigmatisation”*. Addressing the shame of pregnancy was highlighted by one of the school managers as one of the biggest challenges to girls’ education. This includes ensuring the school environment is welcoming towards pregnant and post-natal girls².

The use of language when discussing teenage pregnancy was noteworthy. In a number of interviews, with a broad range of participants, the behaviour of pregnant or post-natal girls was described as “immoral,” highlighting the risk of reinforcing the stigma of teenage pregnancy.

² It should be noted in this regard that the school works actively to discourage teenage pregnancy.

The deep-rooted nature of the social norms that disadvantage girls, and the extent to which this is internalised by the girls themselves also emerged as a challenge. A Daughter of Charity Sister observed that *“psychologically they internalise it and it is difficult to uncode what they have already coded in themselves that because they are girls, simply because they are girls, they can’t do better”*.

The variety of opinions expressed during the research is worth highlighting. While traditional norms and opinions were in the majority during most of the focus group discussions, counter-arguments were also strongly proposed. It was particularly prevalent when participants debated the future role of girls within the family and post-natal girls continuing with their education. While clear themes emerged, the diversity of opinions does highlight the complexity and the importance of not making simple generalisations.

Strategies to support girls overcome barriers

In terms of strategies to support girls to overcome the barriers they face, **practical supports** emerged as important. These included a **feeding programme**, **scholarships** and **supply of sanitary pads** to overcome barriers related to poverty, and the provision of **bicycles** to overcome the barrier posed by distance.

For two of the three annual school terms, Presentation JHS provides a lunch-time meal for all students. There were insufficient funds to support the feeding programme throughout the year, so they provide a meal when there is a higher likelihood of food scarcity. This was highlighted by many of the participants as a particularly important support when there was a poor harvest and during the “hunger months” when food in many households was in short supply. Female students reported that the feeding programme *“helps us learn without hunger during the last two terms”*.

Presentation JHS accesses scholarship schemes run by the Ghanaian Ministry of Education to support girls at secondary level. Thirteen of the 126 girls benefit from the scheme, which includes the provision of school materials and

sanitary pads. All female teachers and students noted that the supply of **sanitary pads** was particularly important for girls to attend school during menstruation.

The school runs an innovative scheme where it provides **bicycles** to 8 students (7 girls and 1 boy) who would otherwise have to walk for over two hours to get to school. When interviewed, female students revealed that they *“feel sick when footing but because of riding we feel better”* and this *“helps us learn”*. The female students also reported feeling safer on bicycles as they do not have to travel to school in the dark and there is less risk of being attacked. Maintenance of the bicycles was, however, a significant challenge.

Extra tuition was also provided by the school, with a daily supervised study session immediately after classes ended. This helped all students study in a conducive environment and was reported as a great support to girls in particular, who had less time to study at home due to their household chores.



Students being elected as prefects. More than half the prefects elected were girls.

To address the barriers more connected with socio-cultural and psychological factors, themes emerged around **empowerment** and **building the self-confidence of girls**. As noted by Mosse (1993), building self-esteem and confidence forms a foundation for girls to challenge what might at first appear as rigid social structures. Various strategies to increase self-confidence included the **use of former students as role models**, **girls being selected for leadership positions** and **peer support groups like girls’ clubs**. The school invited former female students to come back to speak

to the students, which was seen by the students as particularly encouraging.

"Girls who are nurses, who are teachers, come as (role) models ... to say 'I was here like you. I was able to go through all the difficulties. I competed with the boys. Here I am. So you can do it.'"

School Principal

Maintaining a cohort of female teachers who can act as role models for the students was a challenge as there are very few female teachers in the district. Statistics from the DEO show that there are 15 junior high schools with 130 teachers in the district. Only 25 of the teachers, however, are women. Only one female teacher has taught in Presentation JHS over the last three years.

The school acting as an **advocate for girls' education** was a second strategy used to support girls overcome socio-cultural barriers. This solidarity was particularly illustrated by the active and ongoing engagement of the teachers and principal with parents and community leaders to promote girls' education.



Two students who won a national competition for traditional dance perform their routine in front of classmates at the end of term ceremony.

The level of commitment and energy required to act as an advocate does need consideration. The school had a policy that if students were missing from school for a number of days without explanation, a member of staff would visit the home of the child to investigate.

Promoting girls education but avoiding reinforcing stereotypes

Dr J.E. Kwegyir Aggrey (1875-1927), a visionary Ghanaian educator, stated that *"If you educate a man you simply educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate a family"*. This sentiment is frequently used by advocates for girls education and was one of the key messages used by the school to promote girls education. Chant and Sweetman (2014) provide food for thought when they argue, that this view does not place sufficient emphasis on a girl's **right** to education and risks creating a "feminisation of responsibility and/or obligation", reinforcing the stereotypes of men as irresponsible and only interested in themselves, and women as altruistic and self-sacrificing.

There were a number of reported instances also where the student, or other community members, would go to Presentation JHS in the hope of getting some assistance. In one case, a community member reported to the school that one of the female students was being kept out of school, against her will, with a view to arranging an early marriage. The principal reported this to the police and together they went to where the girl was being held. The girl was released and the men holding her were arrested.

"Once the children were convinced (of the importance of education), even when the parents tell them don't go to school they will go through the back door and come to school. And when they come they will report (to the school) that this is the issue ... and their parents will now also come because ... they know that we are going to take them on."

Daughter of Charity Sister

The **aspirations of the girls** and their own desire to be educated is strongly evident in the research findings. In discussions with parents/guardians, it became apparent that some of the

parents would have preferred that their children, and particularly their daughters, would not travel so far to go to school, mainly because of safety concerns as highlighted earlier. The girls' determination to go to Presentation JHS, however, outweighed their parents' preferences. A majority of the parents/guardians indicated that it is their daughter's choice to attend Presentation JHS. One of the fathers revealed that *"the child herself decided that she wants to be in Presentation JHS. So, the time she was in primary six she was determined to just attend Presentation"*. The quality of education at Presentation JHS was a key reason for this.

A factor that emerged as critical for the provision of quality education is **effective school management**. Motivating teachers, maintaining discipline, ensuring teachers and students arrive on time and that parents/guardians are engaged were all noted by a variety of participants as differences between Presentation JHS and other schools in the district. The findings suggest that the leadership provided by the principal is a key reason for this.

"Teachers (at Presentation JHS) are strictly required to do what is expected of them ... so when there is strict discipline and the teachers do their work well there is a likelihood that the children will perform."

District Education Officer.

Learning from the Research

Holistic Strategies

It was clear that girls at secondary level face social, cultural and economic factors that merge to create barriers that are complex, interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Bearing this in mind, an important learning is that only addressing practical factors linked to poverty and distance is insufficient to supporting girls overcome the barriers that they face. The deeply engrained effects of gender norms and stereotypes means that, to promote gender equality, **strategies need to be more comprehensive and holistic, incorporating elements of both the humanist approach to education,**

with its emphasis on personal development, and the radical approach, with its emphasis on empowerment. This is consistent with the work of missionary organisations and their commitment to holistic and transformative education.



Students enjoying their lunch break in the shade.

Role of Advocates

In order to realise the full potential of education as an empowering and liberating force, a second key finding is the **importance of girls having an advocate to stand in solidarity with them, and support them on an ongoing basis as they challenge social norms**. Focusing only on empowerment runs the risk of placing a heavy burden on girls if they feel alone. The findings suggest that **combining empowerment with ongoing solidarity has greater potential and can be a powerful force** to support girls challenge the socio-cultural norms that negatively affected them.

Teenage Pregnancy

Taking the time to research and explore the barriers girls face to reach their potential through education is also of critical importance. In particular, the **stigma related to teenage pregnancy**, both within schools and in the wider society, is a challenge. It is important to be proactive in addressing this stigma and to support post-natal girls to complete their education.

Agents of Change

The extent to which **girls emerge as key drivers behind their own education** and were their own agents of change is another key learning. The research also supports the argument that girls are more likely to complete their education when they have access to good quality schools (Sperling and Winthrop 2016).

Conclusions

The research aimed to identify effective strategies to support girls with their education. The most encouraging aspect was the extent to which girls emerged as their own agents of change, making great sacrifices to overcoming significant barriers in order to receive a good quality education. **In the words of a Daughter of Charity Sister, "the most important people that can change the system are the children themselves once they are empowered"**. The research supports this and argues that empowerment, combined with solidarity and ongoing support, can unlock the potential of education as a liberating force for girls.

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Annex: Summary of Findings

Overarching Theme	Barriers to girls' education	Strategies to overcome barriers	Challenges to strategies
Poverty	Direct costs – levies & fees Indirect Cost – e.g., Sanitary Pads Poor harvests - Shortage of food	Scholarships Provision of sanitary pads Feeding programme particularly during "hungry months"	Insufficient government support Funding to sustain
Distance	Safety concerns, tiredness, time spent travelling	Provision of Bicycles	Maintenance and retrieval of bicycles
Socio-cultural factors	Daughter's future role within family Household Chores – done mainly by girls Stigma related to teenage pregnancy Psychological effects	Building confidence Empowerment - Girls as agents of change Use of role models (e.g. past students) Promotion of girls' education with parents / guardians Acting as advocate for girls	Negative peer influences Promotion of girls' education - Reinforcing gender stereotypes Judgemental language reinforcing stigma related to teenage pregnancy

About Misean Cara

Established in 2004, Misean Cara is an international and Irish faith-based missionary development movement made up of 90 member organisations working in over 50 countries. We work with some of the most marginalised and vulnerable people in developing countries. Adopting a human rights focus, we support communities addressing basic needs in the areas of education, health, and livelihoods, as well as advocating for economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights. At times of humanitarian crisis, the trusted and long-term presence of missionaries in affected communities also allows for rapid, efficient and targeted responses.

Misean Cara and our members work collectively and individually through the missionary approach to development. This framework is based on five values: respect, justice, commitment, compassion and integrity. Together, these establish the basis for the approach of missionaries to good development practice.

Our Strategy 2017-2021 identifies five goals:

- Uphold the right to quality education
- Uphold the right to better health, clean water and sanitation
- Uphold the right to sustainable livelihoods
- Uphold and advocate for human rights
- Enhance and promote the missionary approach to development.

Further expressing our desire to reach the most vulnerable and marginalised, the Strategy will see Misean Cara bringing a particular focus to bear on targeting five groups: women, children, refugees, displaced people and people with disabilities.

Misean Cara gratefully acknowledges the funding support of:

