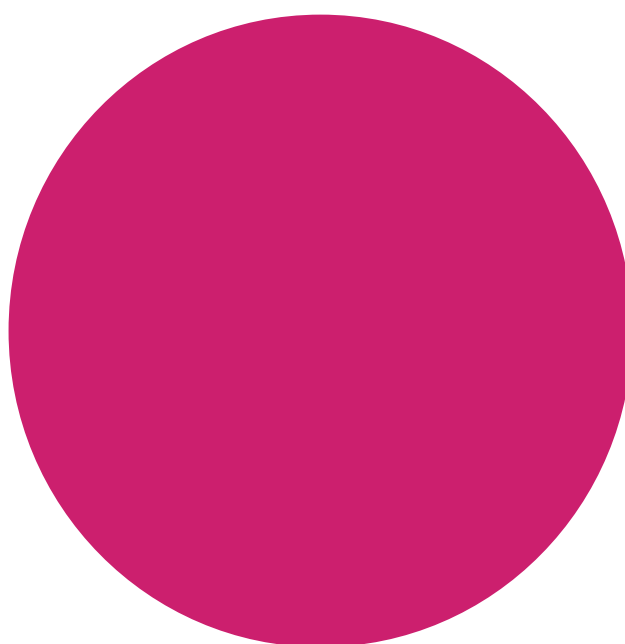


Misean Cara Learning Brief No. 2022/02

Education for all

Lessons from an impact study on girls' education projects



misean cara
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1. Introduction

For generations, missionaries have provided a high quality education to children in the Global South. They help shape each country's education agenda through influencing policy and practice, campaigning and advocacy. The holistic education they provide addresses the physical, intellectual, social, emotional and spiritual needs of those they reach; they encourage a love of learning and a critical questioning mind.

Misean Cara's members value deeply the benefits and opportunities education can bring to young people's lives. In 2021 alone, 38 member organisations contributed to achieving implemented 111 education projects in 35 countries in the Global South, with a focus on:

- Increasing equity of access to education
- Increasing quality of education and learning outcomes, and,
- Contributing to education system strengthening.

In 2021, Misean Cara commissioned an external evaluation to examine the longer-term impact of girls' education projects on the lives of students and graduates, their families and wider communities. The evaluation focussed on six projects run by four member organisations in four countries and aimed at identifying those strategies and practices that make educational interventions sustainable and successful.

2. Background

Education for all is more than just a human right. It helps to break the cycle of poverty, supporting people's empowerment, economic advancement, gender equality, health, resilience, and tolerance. UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030 as a foundation for improving people's lives and achieving sustainable development.

Under the slogan *All Means All*, the 2020 Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report identified barriers to and enablers of inclusion and education for all. The report concluded that 'an estimated 258 million children, adolescents and youth, or 17% of the global total, are not in school', with the number of out-of-school children in sub-Saharan

Africa continuing to grow. This is of particular concern for girls, who often have fewer educational opportunities. The GEM Report found that 'in at least 20 countries, hardly any poor, rural young woman completed upper secondary school.'

The barriers for girls to access education are many, ranging from social and cultural norms to poor school infrastructure that does not allow for safe learning. This is well noted by the international aid community.

"We recognise that girls more often than boys are denied education and that including girls brings positive social and economic benefits to the girls themselves and to wider society."

Irish Aid – A Better World

The COVID-19 pandemic and its secondary effects (including temporary school closures, national lockdowns and reduced household incomes) has made it even more difficult for girls to access education or remain in school. In light of this, the global community still has a long way ahead to ensure universal and equitable quality education.



Photo 1: Girls of the Queen of the Rosary School in Sierra Leone enjoying their break. The school is widely regarded a centre of excellence and serves as an example for regional and national policymaking.

3. Evaluation findings

Access to equitable education

This evaluation included primary and secondary schools in four African countries. While some Misean Cara members prioritise girls' education to the extent of managing girls-only schools, mixed schools were found to also regard girls' education

as a strategic priority and to have developed specific enrolment plans with targets to ensure gender parity.

Several school level interventions contribute to achieving the enrolment targets, addressing key access barriers including school fees, transport, accommodation, and the provision of safe bathrooms for boys and girls. Additionally, teachers received in-service capacity building or training around girls' education, which contributes to their understanding and sensitisation of the topic.

The evaluation concluded that while these initiatives increased enrolment and retention rates for vulnerable girls, achieving gender parity can still be a challenge in some environments. Recognising the importance of cultural change within the target communities, community outreach and sensitisation activities also play a key role in addressing access to education for girls.

Parental and community involvement

Parents, students and teachers alike identified the lack of parental support as a major barrier to girls' education, as well as issues around affordability of school fees, and socio-cultural attitudes and beliefs around girls' education.

The evaluation concluded that strong community engagement is vital to advancing girls' education. Harmful traditions, including early marriage and child labour, can effectively be challenged through the creation of strong links between school management, active parent and teacher associations (PTAs), and community members.

PTAs can have a strong influence on communities' attitudes towards girls' education. Some schools also created *Mothers' Groups* and *Girls' Networks* to advance girls' education. These structures were set up in collaboration with traditional leaders who are key in influencing community attitudes and practices. Thanks to community sensitisation and the opportunity of free education within their reach, most girls in the target communities no longer work as street sellers and farm labourers.

School retention of girls

The evaluation found that the participating schools have had a positive impact on completion rates for girls. Most of the schools involved in this evaluation showed higher completion rates than

the national averages in the corresponding education stages, indicating a highly positive impact on girls' education. Even though average retention rates for girls are generally still lower than for boys, there has been a positive trend over recent years.

It was also positively noted that school policies are generally flexible enough to support vulnerable students whose parents cannot pay the required school fees by providing (partial) scholarships.

Students indicated that a conducive learning environment is a significant driver of motivation to learn, which resulted in good pass rates. This positive environment can include simple things like clean, colourful and safe school grounds and well-ventilated classrooms, as well as well-equipped science laboratories, an infirmary with a qualified nurse, a psychologist, bathrooms for boys and girls, and the pride of belonging to a school that has a good performance record. Students also suggested that the provision of food during lunch hour improved their concentration in class.

Innovative approaches

Several innovative approaches were identified that could be replicated by other girls' education projects:

- **Bicycle scheme:** A major barrier is often the distance between a girl's home and her school. Walking long distances to school carries security risks for girls and also conflicts with their domestic chores early in the day. Some Misean Cara-funded schools provide girls with bicycles, which significantly reduces their travel time to and from school, allowing for greater personal security, better time management, and reduced levels of fatigue from travelling long distances by foot.



Photo 2: Ewuno (16) benefits from the bicycle programme of the Presentation Junior Secondary School in Logre, Ghana.

“Before I had a bicycle, I used to come to school late. As a girl, I have to wake up early and do my house chores before I come to school. By the time I come to school I would be late, and I would get punished for coming late. But ever since I got my bicycle, I wake up early, do my home chores and come to school on time. Having a bicycle has helped me a lot in terms of my performance in class.” *Ewuno, Ghana*

- **Girls’ Clubs:** One school established a Girls’ club that teaches girls about their bodies and changes occurring during puberty, including menstruation hygiene management and family planning. The club also provides an opportunity to teach life skills to create future leaders, as well as practical skills like sewing.
- **Menstrual hygiene management:** One school involved in the evaluation undertakes income generating activities (IGA) to raise funds necessary to provide free sanitary pads, soap and buckets to female students.
- **Tertiary education support:** Another school uses IGA to offer scholarships to particularly disadvantaged girls to enable them to pursue a university career.
- **“My girl child’s education, our future”:** This is the slogan of an outreach campaign run by one of the projects, which reinforces key messages on the importance of girls’ education and child protection, specifically targeting out-of-school girls to (re-)integrate them in education. Some evaluated schools that have a strong focus on girls’ education support nearby schools and communities to set up their own sensitisation and protection mechanisms.
- **Bye-laws:** One project set up a task force to advocate for girls’ education legislation at the community level. This is a proactive way to focus efforts and ensure that schools remain on track with their efforts for girls’ education and other education sector priorities.
- **Education Commission:** In one project, to promote inclusive education across over 40 schools in the area, an education commission was set up to support and strengthen the presence and voice of the project as a key

player in the education sector at district and potentially national level. This ensures that the project can contribute to system strengthening efforts in the education sector.

4. Recommendations

The following points were identified to further strengthen girls’ education:

- Address remaining or existing access barriers through the **provision of transport or accommodation** for girls and/or improving security in schools
- Put in place or strengthen the capacity building component for teachers by **supporting in-service training** with accredited teacher training institutions.
- Explore ways of **establishing and strengthening school alumni associations**, as female graduates are positive role models for other girls and their communities.
- Appoint a **Girls’ Education Focal Point** in all schools. This person should be trained in identifying and addressing issues impeding girls’ education in the specific context of the school.
- Actively consolidate girls’ education as a human right by **strengthening feedback mechanisms for students as rights holders**. Additionally, education networks can be used to influence policymakers to strengthen girls’ education rights at the regional and national level.
- Establish a pathway to support graduates to pursue their ambitions after school to ensure that educational achievements allow girls to pursue academic careers. As shown by one project, successful income generation at the school can provide funds to establish a **scholarship programme for vulnerable students** to pursue third level education.



Photo 3: Parents and Community Members at St Peter’s Primary School in Mzuzu/Malawi.

5. Conclusion

The evaluation findings indicate that all participating schools increased access to quality education for vulnerable and marginalised girls in rural and hard to reach areas. The presence of the schools in communities has had a positive influence on community attitudes towards girls' education.

Barriers to girls' education were addressed through school-level improvements, providing a conducive teaching and learning environment, by upskilling teachers and creating mechanisms to

change community attitudes towards the value of educating girls. As a result, participating schools generally have above-average completion rates for girls and are well recognised within their communities.

"We are encouraged to believe in ourselves. In some areas, people feel like girls shouldn't go to school. We are motivated by the school to discover ourselves and follow our dreams."

Female Graduate

Projects included in this evaluation

Location	Project Title	Organisation
Sierra Leone	Queen of the Rosary Girls' School	Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary
Nigeria	Tafawa Balewa Secondary School	Presentation Brothers
Ghana	Presentation Junior High School	Presentation Brothers
Ghana	St. Raphael's Basic School Cluster	Presentation Brothers
Nigeria	Nicholas Barre College	Sisters of the Infant Jesus
Malawi	School access and governance improvement project	St. Patrick's Missionary Society (Kiltegans)

Table 1: List of selected projects

About Misean Cara

Established in 2004, Misean Cara is an international and Irish faith-based missionary development organisation made up of 88 member organisations working with some of the most marginalised and vulnerable people in over 50 countries in the Global South. 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 allows for rapid, efficient and targeted responses.

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Further expressing our desire to reach the most vulnerable and marginalised, the Strategy sees Misean Cara bringing a particular focus to bear on targeting five groups: women, children, refugees, displaced people and people with disabilities. For more information about Misean Cara and our work, please refer to our website: <https://www.miseancara.ie/>

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