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Gender and primary school dropout in Sudan: Girls' education and retention in Red Sea State

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Abstract Within the Sudanese context, education retention and completion are major challenges that have not been seriously and sufficiently addressed. In order to understand in more depth how and why children drop out of primary school in Sudan, six empirical studies were planned as part of an EU-funded national programme focused on primary education and retention in the five states with the lowest basic education completion rates: Blue Nile, Gedaref, Kassala, South Kordofan, and Red Sea. This article discusses the second study (looking at the factors affecting the education and retention of girls in Red Sea State) with the aim of providing a deeper and more comprehensive understanding and analysis of the challenges that girls, in particular, face in accessing schooling, staying in school, and completing the primary cycle (grades 1–8). Specifically, the article provides insights into the processes of dropout and indicators of risk factors that one can use to predict dropout for girls.

Keywords Youth · Gender · Sudan · Dropout

Context for the research

The Republic of Sudan (Sudan) is the third-largest country on the African continent. It borders the Red Sea and abuts Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Central African Republic, Chad, and Libya. A country of tremendous ethnic and linguistic diversity, its largest single ethnic group is Sudanese Arabs, who are estimated to comprise 70% of the total Sudanese population of 45.7 million (BBC 2016). Sudanese Arabs are almost entirely (Sunni) Muslim, and the majority speak Sudanese Arabic (BBC 2016). In the northeast of the country—bordering Egypt to the north, the Red Sea to the east, and Eritrea to the south—is Red Sea State, where the largest ethnic group is a traditionally pastoralist and

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nomadic Cushitic people known as the Beja (Paul 2012). With high rainfall variability, scarcity of water, low natural productivity, and extreme temperatures, Red Sea State experiences extreme livelihood vulnerability and currently has the highest rates of malnutrition in the country (Babiker and Pantuliano 2006).

Since Sudan's independence from Britain in 1956, internal conflict has often embroiled the country. In large part, this has been due to identity politics and the 1956 constitution's failure to address two crucial issues: Sudan's official status as a secular or Islamist state, and the country's federal structure. Decades of struggle by the majority Christian and animist south against rule by the Arab Muslim north resulted in two rounds of north-south civil war (1955–1972, 1983–2005), which led to the succession of the south and, ultimately, the creation of the Republic of South Sudan in 2011. Fighting in the western Darfur region is ongoing between non-Arab rebel groups (primarily, the Sudan Liberation Army and the Justice and Equality Movement) and the *janjaweed* (Arabized nomadic tribes), the latter of which the Sudanese government supports. As a result of these conflicts, Sudan has lost over 80% of its oilfields to what is now South Sudan and faced economic stagnation, a slowing of GDP growth, and high inflation. Sudan currently ranks 167 on the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)'s human development index (UNDP 2016).

In terms of education, 70% of primary school–aged children in Sudan are enrolled in school (UNDP 2016). However, a substantial number of students drop out at the primary level: 20.1% of students will drop out before reaching the last grade of primary school, and young Sudanese on average complete only 7 years of schooling (World Bank 2012). Moreover, massive regional disparities exist; basic education–completion statistics vary enormously between Sudanese states, with Red Sea State falling well below the national average in gross intake, gross enrolment rate (GER), completion rate and retention rate (PERP 2012). In addition, location, vulnerability, and gender affect access to schooling: disadvantaged groups are significantly under-represented, urban children are 17% more likely than rural children to be at school, and boys are 8% more likely to be participating in primary education than girls (Sudan Ministry of Education Census 2010).

Girls' dropout: Wider educational debates

This study is situated within wider educational debates around access to education for all within the context of developing countries. I discuss, in the following section, the general trends and debates related to dropout and gender, with particular reference to sub-Saharan Africa.

General trends and dropout

Since the participants at the World Education Forum adopted the Dakar Framework for Action and the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) came into force in 2000, the Education for All (EFA) movement has been a global commitment to provide quality basic education for all children, youth, and adults. In some ways, the world has made significant progress toward the achievement of the 6 EFA goals, with 50 million more children enrolled in school today than in 1999. However, globally, the percentage of children dropping out before they have completed a full cycle of primary education has hardly changed since 1999. In some regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa, the percentage of children reaching the last grade has actually worsened; only 54% of children reached the last grade in 2004 compared with 58% in 1999

(UNESCO 2015). In Sudan, the primary-school dropout rate in 2013 was 20.6% (UNESCO 2016); in Red Sea State, where this study is situated, the primary-school dropout rate was 31.1% (PERP 2012). Contributing to the problem is that the agendas of researchers and policymakers have often neglected the issue of dropout.

Dropout is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that occurs after children have already achieved access to school. The emphasis that governments and international agencies put on initial access to school frequently obscures the problem of dropout, even though it is a major issue in many developing countries. Moreover, the phenomenon of dropout is often invisible in national and regional education statistics. This is because statistical data, such as gross enrolment ratios (GERs) and net enrolment ratios (NERs), are insensitive to changes in enrolment status over short periods of time. They also do not capture children who dropped out and reentered the education system at a later stage (Dunne and Anaga 2013). While a range of literature addresses the subject of dropout, few studies focus on it as a central theme. More usually, researchers embed the question of dropout within studies focusing on access more generally. Another challenge is that dropout tends to be viewed as an event rather than a process. As a result, studies often isolate out, and make prominent, the factors contributing to a student's final push from school. Few researchers focus on the complex processes and the push/pull factors within households, schools, and communities that factor into dropout over time. Moreover, many studies are quantitative; this method leads to the neglect of the personal stories of children who have dropped out, and of their parents and teachers (Hunt 2008).

Dropout varies between and within countries and occurs more frequently in certain age ranges and grades (depending on the educational structure and patterns of school participation in a specific country). However, researchers have identified some broad trends. Using national data from 13 sub-Saharan African countries to compare patterns of enrolment over time, investigation by the Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE) at the University of Sussex has revealed general patterns of educational exclusion due to dropout: (1) most children out of school have dropped out rather than never enrolled; (2) increased dropout and a greater number of overage children who are more likely to drop out often accompany increased enrolment rates; (3) children nominally enrolled, but learning little, face "silent exclusion" and are at risk of dropping out; (4) dropout is linked to both demand-side and supply-side factors. Supply-side problems (e.g., insufficient number of schools, too few qualified teachers, poor quality learning environment) remain a serious constraint to achieving access to basic education for all. On the other hand, demand-side problems (e.g., rising opportunity costs, lack of perceived relevance of education, early marriage) are growing in importance as enrolment rates increase and basic education is extended to include higher grades; and, finally, (5) expanding access to secondary schooling is critical to achieving universal access to primary schools. Unless transition rates to lower secondary are high, demand to complete primary schooling will soften (CREATE 2015).

Studies on the school environment from across sub-Saharan Africa also indicate that various forms of violence, including corporal punishment, verbal abuse, and sexual abuse, are part of daily life for many students and contribute to a hostile environment within schools. As being in school often places young girls and boys in difficult, uncomfortable, and even vulnerable circumstances, it is not surprising that many children and youth choose to drop out (Leach 2003; Dunne, Humphreys, and Leach 2006).

Gender and dropout

Dropout varies within countries, and previous research has shown that differences in school completion are often most stark between children from urban and rural areas, between children from the poorest and richest wealth quintiles, and between children with educated and uneducated mothers (Arnot and Fennell 2008; Colclough 2008; Colclough, Rose, and Tembon 2000; Unterhalter 2008).

Dropout rates are also highly sensitive to gender. In low-income countries, gender disparities in enrolment are commonly at the expense of girls, with only 20% of low-income countries' achieving gender parity in primary education, 10% in lower-secondary education, and 8% in upper-secondary education. Moreover, three quarters of the countries farthest from achieving gender parity within education are in sub-Saharan Africa. The gender disparity in education in developing countries is in marked contrast to the situation in middle- and high-income countries, where 2% of upper-income countries have a gender disparity at the expense of boys in primary education; 23%, in lower-secondary education; and 62%, in upper-secondary education (UNESCO 2014).

The fact that gender disparities within education are not globally consistent indicates that the differences in educational access, achievement, and outcomes between girls and boys result from notions of gender (the socially constructed roles, attributes, activities, and responsibilities associated with being male or female in a given society) and from unequal gender relations, which often manifest themselves through an inequitable distribution of educational resources, opportunities, and power. Moreover, gender intersects with other social categories—race, class, ethnicity, disability, and so on—to construct new forms of social exclusion. Thus, girls from low-income groups within ethnic minority communities (simultaneously bearing exclusions of gender, ethnicity, and class) are often the most marginalized and excluded from participation in education (March, Smyth, and Mukhopadhyay 1999).

Attempts by governments, intergovernmental organizations, and NGOs to address the problem of girls' dropout have traditionally been grounded within Women in Development (WID) frameworks. Framed through economic "efficiency" arguments, WID approaches generally focus on how girls' education benefits others—in terms of faster economic growth, more productive agriculture, smaller and better educated families, and reduced infant and child mortality ("if you educate a girl, you educate a whole nation") (Aikman and Unterhalter 2005). From a WID perspective, the goal is to expand education for girls and women through an equal allocation of resources and a focus on gender parity (the number of girls compared with the number of boys). In practice, this might entail providing girls and boys an equal number of places in school, equal resources (e.g., learning materials and school toilets), and an "equal" opportunity to enter teaching training colleges.

However, the WID focus on gender parity obscures such deeply embedded structures of power and exclusion as discriminatory laws, customs, practices, and institutional processes, which undermine opportunities and outcomes for girls in education. For example, WID interventions—abolishing school fees and providing food in return for school attendance, for example—typically do not raise questions about the gendered curriculum, the gendered practices of teachers, the gendered nature of school-management practices, or the gendered structures of power in society. Moreover, WID' gender parity policies often obscure the fact that girls participate in schooling under unequal conditions: their society and culture expect them to perform all domestic labour and childcare within the home. As these expectations often limit girls' opportunities to rest adequately, enjoy leisure time, and

keep up with their schoolwork, they are frequently disadvantaged in terms of educational opportunities and academic performance in relation to boys (Unterhalter 2005). Similarly, seemingly "gender-neutral" education policies and processes can end up disadvantaging girls and women (Leach 2003). For example, assumptions that male and female teachers interact with teacher-education structures on equal terms fail to take into account the different positions, needs, and experiences of men and women within society. This masks the particular problems that female teachers may have at deployment or in relation to their career advancement (e.g., postings to rural areas, separation from husbands, sexual harassment, marital responsibilities, childbirth and maternity leave). Within a WID framework, male and female teachers are assumed to be the same and to enter the teaching profession on equal terms; thus, they are treated the same, and no affirmative action exists to equalizes conditions between them (Mulugeta 2012).

The examples above illustrate the problems with focusing on gender equality (sameness) without also considering gender equity (fair and just outcomes) in order to address imbalances between males and females. Gender equity involves moving beyond a mere "counting of girls in school" to an analysis of the complex processes—including education—entailed in the reproduction and transmission of gendered identities and unequal gender relations within the family, the labour market, the community, and the state (Kabeer and Subrahmanian 1996). A focus on equity within education can help both girls and boys to develop their freedoms to choose lives that they have reason to value (Sen 1999). Conversely, simply adding girls and women to existing education systems and structures without addressing gender equity is, at best, likely to only result in short-term (and often superficial) benefits for a particular group of girls (Aikman and Unterhalter 2005).

Methodology

Research design

In order to discern the factors affecting girls' access to education and retention in primary schools (grades 1–8) in Red Sea State, I, the lead researcher, with the help of a local female researcher who is familiar with the area and is a native Arabic speaker, conducted empirical research in 3 locations (Port Sudan, Hayya, and Tokar) over a period of 12 days between March and April 2015. The Sudan Ministry of Education (SMoE) selected these locations for analysis because they have the highest rates of school dropout and repetition, and they represent an urban location (Port Sudan), a rural location (Hayya), and a remote rural location (Tokar). Located on the Red Sea, Port Sudan, with a population of approximately 500,000 people, is Sudan's main port city and is home to approximately 60% of the state's population. Hayya, a town of about 218,557 people, is a junction station on the mainline of the Sudan railway network. Tokar with approximately 40,000 people, is located 160 km south of Port Sudan, close to the Eritrean border.

The project team chose a qualitative approach for this study in order to capture girls' views and voices, and to produce an in-depth account based on their experiences of schooling and dropout. As researchers have conducted many studies on dropout using a quantitative methodology (household surveys, large scale questionnaires, statistical/ econometric approaches), this study addresses a gap in the literature by providing the perspectives of girls still in school and those who have dropped out, as well as those of key stakeholders such as parents and teachers (Hunt 2008). A qualitative approach to the study also

complements the quantitative data (baseline studies, EMIS, rapid survey) that the project's implementing agencies (two large INGOs) were gathering in the target localities.

Initial research questions that framed the study included:

1. Why do girls not stay in school or not attend at all?
2. If they are not in school, what are girls of primary age doing?
3. What are the factors in their families and communities that contribute to girls dropping out?
4. What factors in and around the learning environment may also play a role?
5. How do girls themselves see dropout and schooling?
6. What factors or changes would make it possible for girls to stay in school?

We asked each participant group (discussed below) a particular set of questions. As the research progressed, further questions emerged through an iterative approach.

Consistent with a qualitative research methodology, research methods for the study included document analysis (state, national, international levels); informal observations recorded in a fieldwork diary; and focus group discussions conducted with girls in school, girls not in school, boys not in school, mothers, fathers, teachers, and head teachers. Over the course of 12 days, we held 11 focus groups (3–8 participants each; 4 in Port Sudan, 3 in Hayya, and 4 in Tokar), with a total of 59 participants. We interviewed 18 girls not in school (aged 10–19) to determine their reasons for dropping out before completing the primary cycle of education. We conducted interviews with 12 girls in school (aged 10-15) to ascertain the factors that prevented some girls from dropping out. We also interviewed 5 boys (aged 10-13) to determine which factors resulting in dropout had a specifically gendered dimension disadvantaging girls. In order to capture the views of stakeholders within the education process, we likewise consulted 10 parents (4 mothers and 6 fathers), 6 teachers, and 8 head teachers of the girls interviewed. How many focus groups we conducted depended on the time available in each field site, and respondents' availability determined how many of them we interviewed.

In order to comply with government regulations, I drafted research instruments, which the project team leader vetted, and which we finalized through consultations with officials at the Federal Ministry of Education (FMoE) through a validation workshop. The local researcher translated all interview guides into Arabic before the fieldwork began. At the start of each focus group, we distributed bio-sheets (used to collect personal data) to each participant to complete with our help. In order to conform with local traditions, we led focus groups in single-sex groups. We also conducted interviews in English (teachers and head teachers), Arabic (girls in school, girls not in school, boys not in school, parents) and, where necessary, the local language of Beja (girls not in school in Port Sudan and Hayya). When required, we first read the interview questions in English and then translated them into either Arabic or Beja. The local researcher assisted in the interviews held in Arabic and two local research assistants (one male and one female) assisted with the interviews conducted in Beja. Where possible, we recorded interviews and later transcribed them into English.

We managed data analysis using thematic coding of interviewees' explanations and viewpoints on issues related to girls' education and dropout. This enabled us to note patterns, count the frequency of occurrence, make interpretations, and develop tentative theories, relating our findings to previous literature and research. From this, we were able to produce a general narrative description of the educational experiences of girls in Red Sea State.

Challenges in executing the research

Several bureaucratic and logistical issues arose during the planning and execution of the research that added layers of complexity to the research process and limited what we could achieve within the allotted time frame.

First, we specifically selected semistructured interviews, as they allow local, individual, and marginalized viewpoints to emerge more readily than are possible with structured interviews. The advantage of using a flexible interview format is that respondents can decide what is important and create the categories for the interview, directing the conversation toward issues of interest or concern to them. This enables the emergence of unexpected or unanticipated answers, which can challenge the researchers' preconceptions and suggest unthought-of relationships or hypotheses. However, because all research questions had to be vetted at the national level, this flexibility was largely lost, and the interview process became far more rigid than originally intended. The research process, and particularly the fieldwork duration, also required national and local authorizations. While these permissions were granted at both levels, the period of fieldwork permitted was less than we had initially requested.

In terms of access to participants, access to girls out of school proved to be challenging in all three localities, as these girls were often sequestered in the home and education officials did not know many of them. This was particularly the case for girls who had dropped out of school at a very young age or had never enrolled in school. Access to fathers was also difficult, as they were often unable to commit their time and attention for the entire interview, frequently being called away mid-interview to attend to personal matters.

Research findings and discussion

As discussed earlier, previous research has largely focused on dropout as an event rather than a process. However, this study indicates that complex processes and push/pull factors within households, schools, and communities contribute to dropout over time; moreover, specific gender-related factors can encourage dropout. This section discusses our findings on girls' education and retention in Red Sea State; it provides insights into the processes of dropout and indicators of risk factors that can be used to predict dropout for girls. In keeping with this study's unique qualitative emphasis, I highlight the personal stories of girls who have dropped out, those who have remained in school, parents and teachers.

Home and community-based factors

The findings of this study indicate that home and community-based factors are among the most significant in relation to girls' dropping out of school in Red Sea State. Below, I discuss which of such factors were the most noteworthy in determining girls' retention in school in each of the three localities.

Both parents living

Focus group interviews with girls in and out of school revealed that girls tended to be in school and remain in school if they lived with both of their parents. A stable home life seemed to provide the economic and social security conducive to helping girls to stay in

school. Girls whose parents had divorced and remarried did not seem to have a higher risk for dropout if the father (or stepfather) was present in the home.

On the other hand, a significant number of girls who had dropped out of school in all three localities came from families in which one parent had died or the parents had divorced and not remarried. In households where the mother had died, girls (particularly the eldest girl) often became responsible for domestic work and childcare in the home. On the other hand, girls whose fathers had died were more likely to be married early or sent out to work as domestic workers in order to relieve the "financial burden" on the family. In both cases, girls in these circumstances often dropped out of school. As one girl out of school explained, "My father died so my mother asked me to leave school and work in a neighbour's home to bring money. It is boring and I miss my friends".

Education of parents and their participation in their daughters' education

Nearly all girls who were regularly attending school had parents who were educated at least to secondary level. In many instances (particularly in Tokar), girls in school had mothers who had reached or completed tertiary education. Educated parents tended to strongly believe in the value of education for girls (for the girl's benefit as well as for the benefit of the family). Moreover, these parents tended to be actively involved in their daughters' education, were able to help them with their schoolwork, were actively involved in parent-teacher associations, and regularly participated in school meetings. Educated parents also tended to be more financially secure. As one female teacher in Port Sudan said, "If the parents have a car and a good house, they are more involved in their daughter's education and visit the school".

In terms of providing girls with help on their schoolwork, the education of mothers seemed to be more important, as mothers were the ones who were most often present and available in the home for the girls to talk to. On the other hand, education of fathers seemed to be more important in terms of girls' retention in school, as they were the ones who made the financial decisions for the family, including decisions regarding their daughter's marriage.

In contrast to girls in school, the vast majority of girls out of school came from homes where their parents were not educated. Such parents often had a lower appreciation of the value of girls' education or tended to view education of girls solely in terms of how it could economically benefit the family. Uneducated parents often felt unable to help their daughters with their schoolwork once they advanced past the early grades. Moreover, due to their status as "uneducated", these parents often lacked the confidence to approach and engage with the school because, as one uneducated mother stated, "uneducated people are different from educated people". Due to their lack of communication with the school, uneducated parents felt that they didn't understand what was required of them to support their daughters' education. Fathers, in particular, seemed to play a very limited role in the education of girls who had dropped out. Many of these girls complained that their fathers had always been busy and away from home, and that they were not available to help them with their schoolwork or to provide them with guidance on school-related matters. On the other hand, fathers often saw their roles in their daughters' education in very limited ways, such as only being responsible to provide the material and financial resources for them to go to school (e.g., textbooks, clothes, pens, bags, uniforms, and money for transportation to school).

Culture and tradition in relation to gender roles and responsibilities

Particularly important in determining whether girls would continue their education were family attitudes relating to gender roles and responsibilities. For example, parents (both mothers and fathers) who believed in girls' intellectual ability to achieve academically tended to support their daughters' continued attendance in school. Moreover, parents who believed in the possibility of women working outside of the home tended to support their daughters' education. These parental views and expectations were often related to whether or not the parents themselves had been educated.

However, parents who did not believe in girls' intellectual capabilities, or only believed that girls could excel in certain subjects, often did not feel that their daughters' education was worth the investment. Moreover, parents who believed strongly that "a woman's place is in the home" and that her "role" is to take care of the home and the family did not believe in education for girls, or they believed that education for girls should be limited to basic literacy, Qur'anic studies, and domestic education (sewing, cooking) to enable girls to become better housewives and mothers. As these modest educational goals could be achieved within only a few years of schooling, some parents saw no reason to keep their daughters in school past their acquisition of these skills. Ironically, prescribed gender roles for girls sometimes encouraged parents to send their girls to school and to keep them there as long as possible due to limited employment prospects for girls due to cultural constraints. As one father in Hayya explained, "Boys can find jobs anywhere [e.g., as a driver, bus conductor, shop keeper], but girls need an education to find a job".

Prescribed gender roles and responsibilities for girls within the home (cooking, cleaning, and taking care of younger siblings) were critical to decisions relating to girls' retention in school. While girls in school generally reported that their household duties were minimal (due to support from their mothers and older sisters), or restricted to after school, girls who had dropped out of school often reported that they had been responsible for housework and childcare both before and after school. This work often made them tired, gave them little time for rest or leisure activities, and did not provide them with enough time or energy to adequately complete their schoolwork. For the eldest girl in the family, as well as girls in families where the mother had died, this domestic burden was increased. As one girl in Tokar reported,

> I stopped going to school because my mother got pregnant and asked me to help her at home.

At the same time, all girls (both in and out of school) indicated that their father and brothers took no part in domestic work or childcare. Rather, as girls, it was their "responsibility" to perform these "duties". Although boys were not expected to work in the home, boys out of school reported that they experienced pressure from their parents and from society to work outside the home to financially contribute to the family. This was particularly the case in Port Sudan, where the availability of employment opportunities (for males) in the city made leaving school to enter paid work both possible and attractive for boys.

Another important issue related to gender was the concern expressed by (mainly uneducated) parents about the influence of schooling on girls' attitudes and aspirations. Fathers, in particular, often perceived education for girls as a threat to local cultural traditions and norms related to male authority. As one father in Hayya explained,

> Girls may do bad things if they are educated, such as go out to work and meet males. Educated girls can challenge the authority of their father and refuse to get married.

> Girls who go to school become impolite and stand up for their rights and challenge their husbands.

As such, these fathers were hesitant to keep their daughters in school.

Fathers, particularly, said that poverty was a major source of their unwillingness to continue to send their girls to school, as they believed that it was more expensive to educate girls than boys. However, through in-depth discussions it emerged that, for fathers, the cost of educating sons and daughters was actually the same. Rather, the perceived higher costs were, in fact, in relation to transportation costs for girls, whom they felt needed to be "protected" from damage to their (and their family's) reputation from interacting with boys on the street. In other words, cost differentials in educating boys and girls can be explained through culturally constructed notions of "honour and shame", where females are made responsible to preserve the "honour" of the family and community through regulating their dress, movements, and behaviour (conditions that do not apply to boys). For parents, these cultural constructions relating to honour tended to be articulated in rigid terms through particular interpretations of Islam ("we are ruled by Islam") and regulated through social pressure from the community. However, in contrast to the claims made by many fathers, the vast majority of girls indicated that they walked to school and so did not incur any additional financial costs for their parents.

Early marriage

Directly related to the prescribed gender roles and responsibilities discussed above, but deserving particular mention, is the issue of child marriage, which is pervasive in the Red Sea State communities we studied (some marriages being arranged from birth). As family sizes in these communities are large and there is little family planning ("we are ready to receive the number of children that come"), which intensifies economic hardship within the household, most fathers expressed a desire to marry off their children quickly. However, their particular choice to marry off their daughters (rather than their sons) shortly after they reached puberty was due to fears of their bringing shame on the family. Once a girl was married, not only did she become the financial responsibility of her husband but, also, her behaviour now reflected on him rather than on her family. As one father in Hayya explained, "If someone proposes, we agree to be free from the responsibility [both financial and honour]".

Many girls expressed that they felt they had no choice but to accept proposals that came and to do their "duty" and marry. As one girl stated, "Marriage cannot be planned, it is kismet". Early marriage has profound implications for education. Most of the out-of-school girls dropped out either because their husbands did not permit them to stay in school ("my husband wants me to be a housewife") or because they were now responsible for all the domestic work and were engaged in pregnancy and/or childcare, which did not give them enough time or energy to continue their education. Although some girls indicated that there were special classes for girls who had become pregnant, most did not see attendance as a viable option for the reasons already mentioned. Girls were generally not happy to have dropped out of school. As one girl from Tokar stated, "My life is okay but being educated is better. Staying at home doesn't benefit us. Domestic work is boring". By contrast, interviews with girls in school revealed that none of them had yet married.

School-based factors

In addition to home and community-based factors, this study's findings indicate that school-based factors are very significant in relation to girls' dropping out of school in Red Sea State. The following were the most significant of such factors in determining girls' retention or dropout from school.

Quality of education and teaching

In general, all girls (those in school and those who had dropped out) expressed satisfaction with their school environment in terms of infrastructure and facilities. Girls generally reported that their school was within walking distance (or, in the case of Port Sudan, a short rickshaw ride away), had an adequate supply of water and electricity (subject to power cuts) and separate toilets for girls. Moreover, food (free or subsidized) was available at or near almost all schools. Most girls reported that they felt safe to walk to school alone or in groups (especially in the close-knit rural communities of Hayya and Tokar). As a result, none of these factors seemed to be significant in determining whether or not girls stayed in school. (The one exception was the difficulty of nomadic families to access schools in rural areas, such as Tokar, due to the nature of nomadic life.) Rather, for the girls, the most important factor in their decision to remain in school or drop out was educational quality, which they understood in terms of their experiences in school and their interaction with teachers, in particular. These findings challenge WID-based assumptions often held by education policymakers and planners that we can address dropout (particularly for girls) simply by improving educational infrastructure (e.g., providing toilets for girls) or providing free school meals.

Girls in school generally spoke about how they enjoyed learning and were satisfied with the quality of teaching. For the girls, a "good teacher" was someone who could explain curriculum content clearly, was engaging in the classroom, freely gave of his/her time to students, and did not punish students indiscriminately. Also important to the girls was the care teachers expressed toward them and teachers' courtesy in their communications with students. As one girl in school said, "I like going to school because our teacher loves us". Most girls (in and out of school) expressed that they felt more comfortable having female teachers, because "they understand us, and it is easier to communicate with them".

On the other hand, girls not in school often spoke about how their experiences in school and their interactions with teachers had not been positive. Frequently mentioned were teachers' inability to explain curriculum content clearly, their lack of classroom management skills, and their frequent use of corporal punishment when students arrived late or were unable to complete their schoolwork. As one girl who had dropped out of school in Hayya reported, "I hated school because I was beaten by a specific teacher [hit in the face]. I will not return to school until that teacher changes his behaviour". Girls who had dropped out of school also reported that their teacher had often shouted at them and made them feel afraid; left them alone in the class unsupervised for long periods of time; and sometimes asked them to come to their homes to clean, serve their visitors, or retrieve things for them from the shop.

For their part, teachers widely reported that they felt demoralized and unmotivated due to the poor conditions of service, low salaries, low status of teachers in the community, lack of recognition for their work, and lack of opportunities for promotion and advancement. As one female teacher from Port Sudan explained,

> In the past, there was a song about teachers and people wanted to marry a teacher, but now teachers are not well educated and they have poor salaries. I will not encourage my children to be teachers because they are poor and not respected in the community. Even if we work hard to get another degree, we are not recognized.

Several female teachers said that they had entered the teaching profession only because teaching was one of the few "suitable jobs for females" open to them in the community, as female teachers could work without having to travel away from home, which might be required of them in other professions.

As the number of schools for girls is small (particularly in Hayya and Tokar) and relatively few teachers are employed per subject, teachers explained that they were forced to teach unreasonably large classes (up to 100 students per class at primary level). Large classes forced the teachers to use traditional teaching methods, like lecturing, which did not enable them to pay attention to individual students' needs. Moreover, large class sizes meant that the teachers did not have the time or energy to provide extracurricular activities for the students. Classroom management was a recurring concern, and students often complained that excessive classroom noise and quarreling amongst the students both distracted them from learning and made the learning environment unpleasant. As a result of the complex classroom management issues related to large class sizes and teachers' limited training to deal with such issues, teachers reported that they often resorted to using corporal punishment to control the class. As one male teacher from Port Sudan explained, "In the past, families asked us to hit their children, but now teachers cannot hit children by law. Students don't respect us if we don't hit them".

On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, students commented that fear of the teacher and corporal punishment discouraged them from wanting to remain in school.

As a result of the challenges they faced in the public education system, several teachers expressed a desire to teach in private schools, where salaries were higher and training and advancement opportunities were present. Other teachers wanted to leave the teaching profession altogether. Yet, several teachers said that they received great intrinsic satisfaction from teaching. These teachers had a strong desire to improve their professional practice through in-service training (INSET) in creative teaching methodologies and in the classroom use of computers and of information and communication technology (ICT). In other words, teacher motivation was often linked to professional development. However, teachers noted that these training opportunities were generally not available to them.

Lack of student progression and academic failure

A significant factor in whether girls remained in school was related to their level of academic success. Girls in school almost unanimously reported that they were doing well in most or all subjects and that they had not been asked to repeat any grade. Girls tended to like subjects in which they excelled and in which they felt they had a good teacher.

Girls who had dropped out of school generally reported that they had been near the bottom of the class in achievement, had failed one or more subjects, and then were not able to progress to the next grade. In some cases, girls had repeated grades several times. There were several reasons for this academic failure. In some instances, girls felt that the curriculum was too challenging (often due to irrelevance or age inappropriateness). This was a particular issue for girls whose parents were uneducated and who, therefore, did not have anyone at home to help them with their schoolwork. Although many older girls (both

in school and who had dropped out) indicated that they had paid for evening classes from their teachers (a form of supplemental income for cash-strapped teachers), these classes did not seem to help students to avoid academic failure. As students began to fail, their confidence was shaken, and they began to dislike school.

Other students experienced failure as a result of ongoing and/or persistent absences from school. For some girls, these absences were connected to an inability to get to school (disability, tiredness from excessive domestic work, or ongoing illness) or avoidance of school (from loss of confidence, fear of the teacher, or bullying from other students). As absences increased and accumulated, students started falling behind in their schoolwork, failing in exams, and becoming unable to catch up. For these students, dropout was gradual rather than caused by a specific event. Because of the large classes they were working with, teachers were often unaware of the warning signs of dropout or were unable to address them. As one female teacher from Port Sudan explained, "I cannot pay attention to every student. I don't know when students are absent".

Personal aspiration was another factor in school retention related to academic achievement. Girls in school generally enjoyed education and valued it as a way to achieve their personal goals and dreams. In other words, they were intrinsically motivated to continue their education. On the other hand, girls out of school commonly lacked motivation and tended to view their education narrowly in terms of how it could benefit their families ("it will benefit my [future] children"). Also playing a role in motivation were girls' expectations as to the outcomes of their education. When asked what they wanted to do in the future, virtually all girls (in school and out) said they wanted to be teachers, doctors, or engineers. While being a teacher was a reasonable goal for many girls, the high academic achievements required to enter the fields of medicine or engineering meant that these goals were unrealistic and unattainable for most students. With their limited knowledge of other potential careers open to them, many girls who were not high achieving academically simply gave up hope that their education would one day help them to participate in the labour market.

Gender bias within schools

Related to student achievement is the issue of gender bias in schools. Within schools in Red Sea State, girls and boys study the same subjects, follow the same curriculum, and use the same textbooks. However, our focus groups with teachers revealed that they have very different expectations for student behaviour and achievement, based on gender. Teachers and head teachers generally believed that there are inherent differences between girls and boys in terms of characteristics ("girls are helpful, obedient, and quiet") and academic ability ("boys are cleverer in science and math"). Moreover, both teachers and head teachers interviewees understood these differences between males and females to be innate from birth and "given by Allah". Thus, they were "natural" and could not be changed.

These beliefs shaped teacher expectations of students ("girls are less gifted but are more motivated") and influenced their assignment of roles, tasks, and responsibilities for students within the school. As one male teacher from Tokar explained, "Boys should be class president because boys have courage and girls are afraid. We assign girls to clean the classroom and fetch water".

Further, these beliefs also influenced teachers' views on suitable types of education for males and females; males were guided into education that would enable them to perform their socially constructed roles as "breadwinners" for the family, and girls were encouraged to develop skills that would enable them to perform their future "roles" as homemakers and

mothers. As a female teacher from Tokar noted, “Technical and vocational education is better for boys so they will find a job sooner. Home economics and domestic education are better for girls so they will raise their children in a better way”. When asked their opinions on the best ways to encourage girls to stay in school, teachers often drew on their understandings of expected gender roles for males and females in society. As one female teacher from Tokar suggested, “To keep girls in school, tell them they will not marry a good man if they are not educated. Give them kitchen resources and sewing machines”.

Moreover, interviews with girls revealed how constructions of gender transmitted through the curriculum (with its focus on the achievements of males in history and science) and, mediated through teachers, was helping to influence girls in how they saw themselves. For example, a few girls indicated that they were not doing well in math “because they were girls”. Thus, although boys and girls were studying the same curriculum in the same classrooms in Red Sea State, they were often not receiving the same education.

Lack of re-entry strategies and mechanisms

Once girls dropped out, after a period of time passed, they often felt that they couldn’t return to school because of being overage. One girl from Tokar averred, “I can’t go back to primary school because of my age. I will feel shy, and I have no friends there anymore”. Moreover, many of the girls who had dropped out indicated that, although they would like to return to school, they had no strategy for doing so and no one to support them in this endeavour. Teachers and head teachers also reported that their schools did not provide any re-entry mechanisms for girls who had dropped out.

Conclusions

The discussion above has highlighted the key factors affecting girls’ education and retention in schools in the Red Sea State communities of Port Sudan, Hayya, and Tokar. These findings indicate that home, community, and school-based factors influence girls’ decisions to stay in school or drop out. Moreover, parents and teachers have a particularly strong influence over girls’ retention in school, either by directly or indirectly impacting the girls’ decisions to stay in school or, in the case of parents (and especially fathers), making these decisions on behalf of the girls.

The most significant home and community-based factors affecting girls’ dropout are the presence of both parents in the home, the parent’s level of education, and the parents’ (particularly the fathers’) active support of, and involvement in, their daughters’ education. Although poverty is a factor affecting parents’ decisions to withdraw their children from school (influenced by the indirect costs of schooling and the opportunity costs of education), it is family attitudes about gender roles and responsibilities, as well as familial and community beliefs and practices around child marriage, that determine if the particular children withdrawn from school will be girls.

In terms of school-based factors, girls generally do not make decisions about staying in school based on infrastructure issues (school buildings, water and electricity supplies, the availability of food), nor do they put much emphasis on the presence or absence of specific facilities and services for girls in schools (toilets for girls, provision of menstruation

supplies). Rather, girls are most significantly influenced by the content of education, the quality of teaching, and their achievement and progression in school.

For parents (particularly those who are uneducated), their beliefs about the relevance of education to prepare their children for their perceived future roles in society (boys as future breadwinners, girls as future wives and mothers) are what influence their decisions to keep their girls in school. Moreover, these beliefs about gender roles are reproduced in the school through the formal curriculum, which is then mediated by teachers who hold different expectations for students based on the latter's gender. Gender bias reproduced in the home and through schools is significant in shaping the educational experiences and future aspirations of girls.

Girls who drop out of school in Red Sea State generally end up in full-time domestic work either at home or in the homes of others (in contrast to boys, who generally end up in paid employment). Although many girls express a desire to return to school, most say that they have no strategy for doing so, nor do they have anyone to support them in this endeavor.

Based on the discussion and conclusions above, it is clear that the causes of girls' dropout from school in Red Sea State are related to deep structural issues (content and relevance of education, quality of teaching) and cultural issues (gender roles and relations). Therefore, there can be no quick fixes, and WID-type interventions, such as providing school feeding programmes, are unlikely to result in anything more than modest short-term gains that are unlikely to be sustainable in the long run or benefit more than a particular group of girls. As a result, what is needed to increase girls' retention in school and to facilitate girls' re- entry after they have dropped out are transformative approaches that require long-term and sustained commitment from educational policymakers and planners, parents, teachers, and the girls themselves and their wider community. These include increased and sustained investment in education (and particularly in teachers), provision of re-entry mechanisms for girls who have dropped out, community education and training on the importance of education for girls, and improvement of school/community relations.

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