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# SPOTLIGHT

## CHALLENGES THAT HINDER GIRLS' PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATION IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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### Key Points

- There are a number of policies and practices in place to support girls' education. However, poor implementation of the policies impedes girls' progress in education.
- There is a need for realigning gender education policy to improve girls' participation in education.
- Teacher training programs and practices need to shift to gender-friendly pedagogy including implementation of Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) in teacher's training curriculum.
- It is necessary to increase funding and to establish gender unit in schools to improve retention of girls.
- There is a need for more research and awareness on the rights of girls to access education.

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## CHALLENGES THAT HINDER GIRLS' PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATION IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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Education as a human right has been recognised and affirmed in various national and international declarations. Allowing more girls to enrol and complete education will have multiplier effects and contribute to increase income for families and improve living standards as alluded by Mahatma Gandhi .

*“Education of a girl means education of a family. Unless a woman is educated, there will never be an educated home or even an educated community.”*

The approach to girls' education is critical for both social and economic development. It is necessary to have clear understanding concerning how to provide essential education services to the girls' population and improve their participation. This article analyses the current gender education policies and the extent to which these policies were upheld and implemented. While the Government of PNG (GoPNG) ostensibly supports girls to access education through its policies, and indeed has signed a number of human rights treaties to support girls' rights, including the UN Convention on Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and Convention on the Rights of the Child, these have not resulted in the number of girls' participation in education. According to the National Department of Education (NDOE, 2014), transition rates of girls from primary to secondary school and into tertiary institutions remain very low.

### Gender equality and education

Gender equality in education is recognised in the National Constitution of Papua New Guinea which declares that all citizens have the same rights and privileges irrespective of race, tribe, religion or sex. It is also supported by the two goals in the constitution, specifically;

**Goal 1. Integral Human Development** which declares that everyone is dynamically involved in the process of freeing himself or herself from every form of domination and oppression so that each man or woman will have the opportunity to develop as a whole person in relation to others.

**Goal 2. Equity and Participation** declares equality for all

citizens and directs that the opportunities must be created for all citizens to participate actively in social, political, economic and education advancement for all.

Furthermore, PNG is a state signatory to the 1945 UN Human Rights Charter where the equality of women and men has been accepted as the fundamental principle of human rights and 1979 Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and Convention on the Rights of the Child (domesticated as Lukautim Pikinini Act 1989). PNG also signed a treaty in the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action and adopted the 2005 Pacific Platform for Action and PNG National Platform for Action in line with the Commonwealth Plan of Action 2005 – 2015.

These policies and commitments make up a framework on gender equality that has become a model to a more gender inclusive approach. The overarching goal of Universal Basic Education plan (NDOE, 2009) calls for all school-age children to enrol in school and complete nine years of basic education. It is envisaged that the UBE plan will:

- *play a key role in the reduction of poverty and societal inequality through the implementation of strategic actions to allow for equal opportunities for all;*
- *identify strategic solutions for certain key issues such as reforming education management structures and building institutional capacity to allow for the attainment of the basic education goals as expressed in the National Education Plan 2005 – 2014 and NEP 2015 - 2019.*

While the GoPNG has clear policy alignment to gender equity and participation of girls in all levels of education, it is apparent that there is more to do in advocating for girls' participation in education.

### Challenges of implementing Gender Education Policy

**Lack of oversight and policy implementation:** While policy concerning gender participation is clear, the implementation is poor. Education Management Information System (EMIS) focuses on general enrolment and retention. There is no clear guidelines to admission by gender. This can lead to confusion and under-reporting. Moreover, the experience of

implementing Behaviour Management Policy revealed that schools are reluctant to implement this policy as they face difficulties in dealing with behaviours and its repercussions. This leads to increasing behaviour problems, especially bullying and sexual harassments against girls by over-aged male students.

**Social and cultural challenges:** Social and cultural practices favour boys' education over that of girls in PNG. Cultural beliefs greatly affect women's roles in the society (Kelep-Malpo, 2008). Most parts of PNG are patrilineal societies and women seem to be less valued than men. Hence, most girls are not often sent to school. Women in PNG tend to play second fiddle roles rather than forerunners in achievement and honour. The late enrolment of girls in school greatly affect their retention as most of them reach puberty while still in primary school. This affects transition rates of girls from primary to secondary. UNICEF (2003) reported that lack of school fees, lack of family support, law and order problems, parents' preference for boys and early marriage affect girls' education. Furthermore, menstrual taboo affects girls' education because not all schools have proper toilets and sanitation for managing menstruation. Although, WaSH Policy aims to provide equitable access to safe and convenient water supply and sanitation and to promote improved hygiene over a long term, its impacts have not been measured yet. More research is needed on factors affecting girls' participation in education.

**Participation in education (access and retention):** Prior to the implementation of free education policy, access and retention of girls in schools were very low. Even though, PNG promotes gender equality through a number of local policies and international treaties, participation of girls in education has been very low. EMIS Data (NDOE, 2014) shows that girls' participation has been low compared to boys, in all level of education. As the children progress from elementary to secondary, more overage children are enrolled in secondary than elementary for both male and female. A study by UNICEF (2003) also cited early marriage of girls between the age of 10 and 14 in rural areas. Teenage pregnancy is also prevalence in PNG's schools. When parents are making decision about who to put in school, boys are likely to take the preference over girls. Although, Free Education Policy has improved access, the number of girls accessing education remains low.

**Attitude of some teachers:** Teachers are viewed as the second parents away from home for all school-aged children. Teachers are responsible for the welfare, safety and source of knowledge for students. EMIS data (NDOE, 2014) confirmed that there were lesser female teachers in all level of education from elementary to tertiary. Edwards (2015)

examined School Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV) and reported high number of girls feeling unsafe in school. Most violence is committed by over-age male students and male teachers. Sexual harassment is very debilitating for girls. It effectively limits girls' space and their social and intellectual freedom in the classrooms. An earlier study by Yeoman (1985) found that most females from the Highlands regions leave school due to sexual harassment by male students and teachers. Edwards (2015) estimated that 5 percent female students between the age of 13 and 19 at boarding school get pregnant each year. There is no clear relationship between teachers and female students' pregnancy, however, there is appalling evidence to suggest poor teacher-students relationship may cause girls to leave school and have early pregnancy.

**Financial challenges:** The National Education Plan (NEP 2015–2019) recognises a 10-year financial and budgetary framework for the National Department of Education in line with the UBE Plan 2010-2019. The 10-year budget framework was to improve access, retention and to improve quality. It also reports enhancing aspects of equity such as gender. However, it does not have any budget specifically for implementing gender-related policies and other intervention strategies. The education department budget framework has been largely driven by teacher's emoluments, national functions, and subsidies had been getting very little attention prior to 2012. Although UBE plan mentioned about the equity enhancement, total funding did not explicitly appropriate in the National Education Plan. This seems to be mismatched between the two overarching education plans. There is no clear budget allocation for gender intervention programs like building facilities and making girls-friendly schools.

### Ways to to improve girls' participation in education

- **Awareness of girls' rights to education (gender equality)**

Awareness have been carried through out the country, but more awareness should be carried out in the rural areas of PNG. This should focus on a shift from the current male dominated enrolment towards enrolling more girls early in school and allow them to complete schooling and contribute to the society. It can also contribute towards discouraging early marriage and teenage pregnancy among female students. In addition, it can assist people to shift away from socio-cultural barriers to a gender inclusive society where boys and girls are given fair opportunity to attend schools.

- **Teacher training programs to shift towards more gender inclusive pedagogy**

Make Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) a compulsory course in teacher training curriculum. All teachers must be trained in interpersonal skills to understand and be sensible when dealing with female students. Teachers' colleges should select more female students and train and deploy them as teachers.

- **Curriculum that reflects gender inclusion and gender equality**

- Increase funding for gender education. Funding should be made for capacity building for gender-friendly and inclusive facilities for girls and boys;
- Setting up a school gender unit in schools to provide support for girls' needs; and,
- Improving school counselling centre so that students with problems can access the services.

- **Specific interventions strategies are necessary to improve girls' participation in education**

- Remove all barriers to education including school fee problems. Provide free education from elementary to Grade 12. Data from EMIS shows that elimination of fees directly increases access and retention.
- NDOE should have a policy on selection to consider putting a quota for male and female for each level of education.
- Schools should be gender-friendly and conducive to learning. Schools should have proper toilets, showers and sanitation for female and male students.
- Build more schools closer to the communities to enrol girls early.

## Conclusion

There are number of issues affecting girls' education as highlighted in this paper. This includes inadequate awareness of gender equality policy, girls access and retention in school, social and cultural issues and, schools' lack of management on students' and teachers' behaviour especially towards girls. Nonetheless, since 2012, Free Education Policy has improved access and retention of girls, however, more effort is needed to address stigma and discrimination of girls in schools. The government, through the Department of Education, should intervene by constructing more infrastructures in schools,

constructing more schools closer to the communities, implementing Education Sector Strategy Plans 2010-2030 by removing all barriers to girls' education and reviewing selection from primary to secondary school or by setting up a quota system for females and males to access education. There is a need for a nationwide research on why girls' participation in education is low. This can contribute toward improving gender equity in education and allowing more girls to participate in the education system.

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