

## 9. SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT AND GIRLS' RETENTION IN UGANDA SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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### Abstract

*The report of the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2021) implied a disparity between boys and girls in retention despite the Uganda government's policies to facilitate the achievement of the 5th Sustainable Development Goal. This study examined the influence of school environment-based factors on girls' retention in Sironko District, Uganda. Participants for the study were 162 girls randomly selected from three government-aided secondary schools in Sironko District. The data collection instrument was the School Environment and Girls' Retention Questionnaire (SEGRQ). The validity and reliability of SEGRQ were 0.82 and 0.87 respectively. Frequency counts and percentages were used to present the results. Based on government efforts, the assumption was that school environment-based factors would be positive predictors of girls' retention. Results were confirmatory, girls in this study were motivated to stay in school due to the availability of adequate physical facilities, counselling services and teaching and learning facilities. However, there was no clear-cut evidence on respondents' opinion of completion, while 50.7% indicated they were sure of completing school, 49.3% were not. This is probably an indication that more efforts need to be exerted on other predictors of girls' retention in schools. Most of the respondents, 79.9% and 77.8% were equally not satisfied with teachers' methods of teaching and the teacher-student relationship respectively. Hence, it was recommended that in addition to various government policies on gender equality, the government should enact policies that will enforce schooling to completion for girls and improve school supervision and monitoring. The Schools' Management Board should be committed to the inspection of schools, particularly teachers' activities to enhance effective service delivery.*

**Keywords:** School Environment, Girls' Retention, Uganda, Secondary Schools

### Introduction

The government of Uganda is at the frontline of facilitating the Education for All (EFA) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly the gender education equality goal. To this effect, several specific girls' educational policies such as the National Strategy for Girls Education (NSGE), Girls' Education Movement in Africa (GEM), Equity in the Classroom (EIC), Child-Friendly School programme, Focusing Resources for Effective School Health (FRESH), Universal Primary Education Policy, Environmental Health Policy and the Gender Desk in the Ministry of Education and Sports headquarters, were all enacted and implementation facilitated. The Environmental Health Policy (2005) focused on different interventions for men, women and children's specific needs, specifically considering women as the main users of water and sanitation facilities and the improvement of sanitation to women's dignity. The Universal Primary Education Policy (UPE) 1997 aimed at providing adequate facilities and resources that will enable every Uganda child to enter and remain in school until the primary cycle of education is complete. The NSGE policy of 2004 was reviewed in 2013 to bridge the gap between policy and practice and promote effective service delivery. The review was premised on the shortcomings of the previous 2004 policy. Hence, the 2013 policy was designed to be a strategic tool for the identification, implementation and coordination of interventions to adequately promote girls' education in Uganda (UNICEF, 2014). Unfortunately, despite all these significant efforts, the transition rate as well as the

completion rate for boys in the secondary school system stands higher than that of girls.

Enormous success has been recorded in the Uganda education system, especially at the primary level. There is an equal status of 99% enrolment and 51% completion for both boys and girls in primary school. The completion rate for girls in Uganda primary schools was 12% and boys 7% but the transition rate to secondary for boys is 10% and girls 7%. (Education Policy Data Centre, 2018; Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2021) recorded an increase in enrolment for girls at the secondary school level, but disparity exists at transition and completion, which suggests a decrease in retention. Transition rate to secondary schools for boys for five years; 2013- 2017 was between 37 % and 28.4% and for girls between 27% to 21%. The percentage of secondary school-age boys who were out of school was 21% and 30% for girls. The completion rate for boys in secondary over the same period was between 36.7% and 36.2% while girls are between 33.8% and 33.5%. Transition to secondary school remains a challenge for the girl child compared to the boy, with a relatively significant completion rate difference. The expectation is that there will be no disparity in the schooling of boys and girls at all levels in Uganda, based on the various support programmes and policies enacted to facilitate gender equality in education.

Different mediating factors of transition and completion for girls in schools, such as poverty, social and cultural factors, school environment, family, internal attributes of the girl, and gender violence, among other factors have been highlighted by different scholars (Byaruhanga, 2019; Mikisa, 2019; Mackatiani *et al.*, 2022; Kayindu *et al.*, 2022; UNICEF, 2014; UWEZO, 2016; Sulaiman and Sanusi 2015; Sulaiman *et al.* 2017). Notwithstanding, the Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) identified four key factors as the challenges of achieving equality in education between boys and girls in Uganda sequel to the review of the NSGE 2004 policy, which, was replaced with the 2013 NSGE. The challenges identified are (1) Gender-based violence and abuse of power by men, which put girls at risk at home, school, and community. (2) Teenage pregnancy, which results in girls dropping out of school, and the need for reintegration, which will adopt the Pader Girls Academy (PGA) child mothers' rehabilitation model. (3) Family practices, such as gender division of labour, forced marriage and the general value attached to girls' education, which affect girls' access to education. (4) The school environment, which includes physical facilities and the social environment. The social environment covers all issues of human relationships within and outside the classroom, including guidance and counselling services and co-curricular activities (UNICEF, 2014). The question here is, have the 2013 NSGE interventions been achieved? This presents the major concern of this paper and the choice of the school environment as a yardstick to examine the influence of different intervention policies on girls' schooling.

The choice of the school environment is its ability to provide the required interventions, which would facilitate achievement of equal education for both boys and girls. The school environment influences students' behaviour and impacts other factors that affect students. (Adzamba 2016; Orira, 2016; Odeh *et al.* 2015; UNICEF 2014; Sulaiman *et al.* 2017). The school environment, especially for the girl child, involves the physical, psychological, social, cultural, and learning environment (Adzamba, 2016). However, for this study, the sociocultural aspect of the school environment is discussed along with the school's learning environment. The

physical environment of the school is characterised by its facilities: adequate and well-equipped classrooms, size of the classroom, ventilation, sitting arrangement, availability of tables, chairs, whiteboards, and shelves, books, educational devices, school-based health supports for emergency health issues and hygienic toilet facilities with changing rooms for the girls separate from those of boys. Usually, the availability of toilet facilities with running water is a retention factor for the girl child. She always needs to change her sanitary pad and sometimes clean up (Kalembe and Emojong, 2020). The efficacy of adequate schools' physical environment in promoting performance, retention and completion has been emphasised in different studies (Kalembe and Emojong, 2020; Mackatiani *et al.*, 2022). One of the key intervention programmes of the MoES is physical facilities, including the availability of girls' friendly toilet facilities.

The psychological environment of the school is defined by its philosophy and practices, such as the rules and regulations of the school, methods of discipline, guidance and counselling services, and attitude of the teachers and administrators towards students, particularly the girl child. The psychological environment of the school impacts on the behaviour and personality of students. The guidance and counselling services are expected to assist in shaping the understanding and behaviours of students. The essence of guidance and counselling in schools is to facilitate appropriate decision-making and worthwhile adjustment (Auf, & Arinaitwe, 2022; Sulaiman, 2015; UNICEF, 2014). Students generally, and girls specifically, are guided to deal with and overcome all challenges that may prevent transition and completion. According to Sulaiman (2015; 2021), counselling adequately prepares and equips young ones, girls in particular, to become the next generation of parents, workers, leaders and citizens. The well-being of the client is crucial to the counsellor, the goal is to constantly prevent potential problems from emerging, motivate behavioural change, teach appropriate problem-solving skills and facilitate worthwhile development. Although guidance and counselling services are not provided by professionals in most schools in Uganda (Auf, & Arinaitwe, 2022), guidance and counselling remain an essential service of the Ministry of Education and Sports and many schools' programmes. Guidance and counselling services were identified as an important intervention tool for the achievement of equal educational attainment for both girls and boys in Uganda (UNICEF, 2014).

The schools' learning environment involves the teaching and learning process, effective teaching and learning are key factors of transition and completion for girls (Adzongo & Olaitan 2019; Munna & Kalam, 2021; Marshall, 2016; Mackatiani *et al.*, 2022; Namukwaya, & Kibirige, 2014; Orira, 2016). The effectiveness of teaching is judged by the teacher's ability to use various teaching and learning techniques to achieve meaningful learning. The performance of learners in a particular classroom can be attributed to a teacher's ability to manage and control the classroom during instruction (Adzongo and Olaitan, 2019). A girl-friendly effective teaching and learning classroom creates conditions that facilitate learning. The teacher motivates learning by developing a good student-teacher relationship, with the use of different skills, knowledge and attitudes, which inspire learners to enjoy all the activities within and outside the classroom. Adzongo and Olaitan (2019) assert that teaching entails active involvement and participation by students, students must be actively involved in the teaching and learning processes with teachers putting into consideration the peculiarity of each learner. Teachers who are enthusiastic about encouraging the participation of girls in the classroom encouraged their completion

rate. Mackatiani *et al.* (2022) reported that teacher's attitude towards girls in the classroom was crucial for retention. Orira (2016) added that the variables that measure effective classroom learning environments as perceived by students predict their attitude towards schooling and performance.

Further, the school learning environment includes the social and cultural environment, which are reflected in the various personal and interpersonal relationships within the school. The students' interactions with their peers, teachers, and administrators are all components of the learning process for students, particularly the girl child. The teacher is a role model who trains in learning and character. The school as an agent of socialisation teaches appropriate norms, values and cultural practices; the school dissociate itself from prejudices, educates both boys and girls, and specifically empowers the girl child. The co-curricular activities of the school teach teamwork, self-sacrifice, loyalty and different social skills, which are usually part of the school guidance and counselling programmes (Sulaiman *et al.* 2017).

### **The Problem**

Premised on the Uganda government's efforts in facilitating the achievement of the 5th Sustainable Development Goal of gender equality through the enactment of different policies and programmes, the outcomes remained insignificant. Unfortunately, the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2021) still recorded disparity in the education of boys and girls in Uganda. The transition rate to secondary schools for girls, 21% is lower than that of boys, 28.4%, the percentage out of schoolgirls, 21% is also lower than that of boys 30% and the completion rate for boys in secondary over five years (2013- 2017) is between 36.7% and 36.2% while that of girls is between 33.8% and 33.5%. In addition, the Ministry of Education and Sports, realising the challenges of the policies took a drastic step of reviewing one of the policies NSGE 2004 in 2013 to bridge the gap between policy and practice and provide appropriate interventions that will facilitate the achievement of the national goal of equal education opportunities. NSGE 2013 policy interventions were to run for 5 years (2015 – 2019). The expectation is that the interventions would have corrected the identified challenges, and the goal of the policies would have been achieved. Hence the need for the study to examine the influence of school environment on girls' retention. As earlier noted, the choice of the school environment is its ability to provide the required interventions to facilitate the achievement of equal education for both boys and girls and the decision to examine retention is based on the gap between boys and girls in transition and dropout rate (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

### **Questions**

The following questions guided the study:

1. What is the influence of physical facilities on girls' retention in schools?
2. What is the influence of guidance and counselling on girls' retention in schools?
3. What is the influence of the learning environment on girls' retention in schools?

### **Methods**

#### *Research Design*

A cross-sectional survey research design was employed to gather information from respondents on the influence

of school environment on girls' retention across different government-aided secondary schools in Sironko District, Uganda.

### *Sample*

The sample for the study consists of 162 randomly selected girls from three government-aided secondary schools in Sironko District, Uganda. In each selected school, 54 girls in the upper class; seniors 4 to 6 were randomly selected, and 18 girls from each level. The selection of girls in the upper class was to tap into their years of experience in the school.

### *Instrument*

A self-developed checklist tagged School Environment and Girls' Retention Questionnaire (SEGRQ) was used as the instrument for the study. SEGRQ was divided into four sections; students were to tick each item that best motivated their stay in school in each section. Section A consisted of questions on the physical facility, questions in Section B were on guidance and counselling, Section C question items were used to elicit information on teaching and learning environment and retention, and Section D questions were used to tap information on retention. A tick on any statement in each section is a "Yes, the statement would make me stay in school till completion" while those not ticked are a "No, the statement will discourage my staying in school". SEGRQ was presented to experts in the field of study for content and face validity, then, the Content Validity Index (CVI) was computed based on the corrections. A validity of 0.82 was established for SEGRQ. The reliability of SEGRQ was generated using the test-retest reliability measure. A sample of respondents from the population of the study was presented with the SEGRQ twice for two weeks and their responses were correlated. The result yielded a reliability coefficient score of 0.87, which confirmed the reliability of SEGRQ.

### *Methods of Data Analysis*

Data was analysed and presented with simple frequency counts and percentages.

## **Results**

Nine question items on SEGRQ were used to elicit information on the first research question, which examined the influence of physical facilities on girls' school retention. Respondents were requested to identify facilities, which motivate their staying in the school. Results presented in Table 1, show that there were adequate physical facilities in the schools. Responses to all the question items have a percentage of 53.1% and above. There is an indication that the classrooms are relatively adequate 53.1% but well-ventilated 91.5%. There are sufficient learning materials at 72.8% and clean toilets at 80.9% with changing rooms at 80.2%, which motivates girls to remain in school.



**Table 1: Responses on Physical Facilities and Girls' Retention**

Items	No	Yes
The school has a sickbay with a qualified nurse and it is adequately equipped	71(43.8)	91(56.2)
There are enough desks, chairs and tables to sit and write	44(27.2)	118(72.8)
There is access to safe clean water and hand-washing facilities	30(18.6)	132(81.5)
The school has separate toilets for boys and for girls	32(19.8)	130(80.2)
The dormitories for girls are clean, spacious and adequate	23(14.2)	139(85.8)
There is a changing room in the girls' toilet.	40(27.4)	122(75.3)
The classrooms are not crowded	76(46.9)	86(53.1)
The classrooms have enough windows and are well-ventilated	8(4.9)	154(91.5)
The school' toilets are always kept clean	31(19.1)	131(80.9)

The results presented in Table 2 are the responses of participants on the influence of guidance and counselling on girls' retention.

**Table 2: Responses on Guidance and Counselling and Girls' Retention**

Items	No	Yes
There is a functional guidance and counselling department in the school	38(23.5)	124(76.5)
The counsellors provide adequate counselling services	41(25.3)	121(74.7)
The school counsellor always organises career talks for students	21(13)	141(87)
The counsellor has weekly counselling sessions for students	58(35.8)	104(64.2)
The counsellor usually invites parents for discussion on students progress and performance.	75(46.3)	87(53.7)
The school counsellor usually follows up on students with specific problems.	47(29)	115(71)

Counselling activities appeared to be a key motivating factor for girls' retention, 74.7%. Respondents were motivated to stay in school because there were functional counselling departments 76.5% with different counselling programmes, such as the career week 87%, weekly counselling 64.2% and individualised counselling 71%.

The results presented in Table 3 show participants' responses on the influence of the learning environment on girls' retention. Unlike the previous two school environment factors, the learning environment is not motivational despite the availability of qualified teachers. Most respondents did not find any motivational activity in the classroom 91.5%. Teachers do not give individualised instruction 83.3%, no good rapport 77.8%, minimal use of instructional material 84.6% and lack of varied support for girls to learn 75.9%.

**Table 3: Responses on Learning Environment and Girls' Retention**

Items	No	Yes
The school has qualified teachers for all subjects	19(11.7)	143(88.3)
The teachers provide varied opportunities to aid students' success	123(75.9)	39(24.1)
There is a good rapport between the teacher and the students in the class	126(77.8)	36(22.2)
The teacher introduces a variety of activities that aid learning	154(91.5)	8(4.9)
Teachers use different instructional materials for teaching	137(84.6)	25(15.4)
Teacher gives attention to individual students in class	135(83.3)	27(16.7)

The results presented in Table 4 are the responses of participants on retention. Participants were asked to identify issues on the list concerning girls' retention. The results show an increase in girls' enrolment 81.5%, completion 97.5%, an increase in the number of girls compared to boys 85.8%, increase in number of girls returning to school each term 64.2%, and the decision to complete schooling 50.6%, which is relatively low and marginal.

**Table 4: Responses on Girls' Retention**

Items	No	Yes
The number of girls who remain in school after enrolling in S.1 has increased	30(18.5)	132(81.5)
The number of girls completing their studies in the school has increased	4(2.5)	158(97.5)
The number of girls in the school is more than that of the boys	23(14.2)	139(85.8)
Girls in the school are determined to complete their education	82(50.6)	80(49.4)
In my class, all girls return to school at the beginning of every term	58(35.8)	104(64.2)

### Discussion And Conclusion

The study aimed to examine the influence of school environment-based factors on the retention of girls in schools. The assumption as earlier stated was that with the different policies and interventions from the government, MoES and different non-governmental organisations, equality in education between girls and boys would have been achieved, especially with NSGE interventions. Expectedly, the results of this study showed that school environment-based factors are good predictors of girls' retention. Although, completion relatively remained a challenge for girls in this study with an average score of 50.6%. However, the 2013 NSGE interventions have been achieved. The findings of this study on the influence of physical facilities and girls' retention is a confirmation of NSGE 2013 achievement, the provision of adequate physical facilities was a factor of the school environment identified. Precisely, as found in this study, the provision of girl-friendly clean toilets was one of the 4th focused areas of the intervention (UNICEF, 2014). Results showed that there were adequate physical facilities in the schools. The classrooms were well-ventilated with learning materials and clean toilets with changing rooms. Kalembe and Emojong (2020) already assert that the availability of toilet facilities with running water is a retention factor for the girl child because she always needs to change her sanitary pad and sometimes clean up. The efficacy of an adequate physical environment in promoting performance, retention and

completion in schools was emphasised in different studies (Kalembe and Emojong, 2020; Mackatiani *et al.*, 2022).

The findings of this study on guidance and counselling and girls' retention corroborate the positions of Auf, and Arinaitwe (2022), Sulaiman *et al.* (2015; 2017), and UNICEF (2014) who stated that the essence of guidance and counselling in schools is to facilitate appropriate decision-making and worthwhile adjustment. Guidance and counselling services are key factors motivating girls' retention in schools as in the result of this study. Respondents were encouraged to stay in school because there were functional counselling departments with different counselling programmes and more importantly individualised counselling interventions. Hence, this affirms Sulaiman's (2015) position that counselling effectively prepares and equips young girls with developmental skills in behavioural change and problem-solving.

Surprisingly, the learning environment in this study was not girl-friendly and effective despite the efforts of the government and MoES. Nevertheless, the presence of highly qualified teachers confirmed the level of commitment of the government and MoES efforts to ensure implementation. Unfortunately, teacher's attitude towards girls in the classroom is crucial for retention (Orira, 2016). The teacher inspires learning by developing a good student-teacher relationship, with the use of different skills, knowledge and attitudes, which motivates learners to enjoy all the activities within and outside the classroom. In addition, Mackatiani *et al.* (2022) stated that students predict their attitude towards schooling based on their perception of the classroom learning environment, which explains the overwhelming 91.5% lack of activities in classroom response. Adzongo and Olaitan (2019) aver that effective teaching and learning entails active involvement and participation by students, students must be actively involved in the teaching and learning processes with teachers taking into consideration the peculiarities of each learner.

### **Recommendations**

In addition to various government policies on gender equality, the government should enact policies that will enforce schooling to completion for girls and improve school supervision and monitoring.

The government should also develop enlightenment programmes through the media, the school, and the community leaders to educate the populace on the importance of not just educating the girl child but also ensuring that she remains in school till completion. Also, the government may have to build more schools, the 53.1% score for crowded classrooms is an average score, which suggests relative inadequacies.

Teachers in this study were not committed to duty. The Schools' Management Board and Director of Schools should be more committed and responsive to monitoring and inspection of schools and, more importantly, the inspection of teachers' activities to enhance effective service delivery.



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