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## Golden Jubilee Uganda

Girl's education has improved, some challenges not addressed Publish Date: Jul 31, 2012



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*For decades, educating the girl-child was a luxury. However, from a handful of women who went to school in the 1950s, in 2010, girl's enrolment stood at 49.9% **Carol Natukunda** writes*

BY CAROL NATUKUNDA

Let's go back to the 1920s. On a chilly morning, a boy dressed up in a white shirt and khaki shorts dashes through the thick mist to school. His younger sister dressed in a lesu trudges on with a hoe in her hands. She is heading to the garden to harvest the day's meal.

For decades, education for the girl-child in Uganda was a luxury. There were schools established by the Church Missionary Society, as early as 1890s, but for some reason, educating a girl was never a priority.

Even when a girl's only school —Gayaza Junior was established in 1904, the wealthy village chiefs did not see why they should send their girls to school when they had to get married.

"A good woman had to stay home, be taught how to cook, wash, dig, to prepare for marriage," observes former education minister Namirembe Bitamazire.

By 1950, the few women who went to school were the ones who had their parents that had the passion for education.

There were 53 schools for the Africans, although they were run by the whites. The Government operated only three of the schools for Africans. Still, parents chose to keep their precious little girls at home.

"I owe my education to my parents," says Bitamazire, "They valued education for every one of us, whether you were a boy or a girl. It was not because they were literate, but it is something they loved and valued."

She recalls that by the time she completed her primary education, they were only a handful of girls in her P6 class.

At university, a girl who made it to Makerere was seen as an iron woman. "Uganda got independence when I was at university and I think we were about 40 girls at university," Bitamazire says.

The situation worsened during the 1970s and early 1980s as the economy deteriorated and violence increased owing to the infamous regimes.

Even when there were some role models to look up to, like Sarah Ntiro, education for the girl-child was still a dream. Those who went to school often dropped out as fast as they had joined.

It was in 1986, when the NRM Government took over power that girl's education for the first time in the history of Uganda came to the fore.

Law reforms in favour of girls education In an effort to reform, the education sector set up the "Education Review Committee" in 1987. This review resulted in the 1991 publication of a Government White Paper on Education which outlined a major education reform programme for the next 25 years.

By 2000, the Government had developed the National Strategy for Girls' Education aimed at eradicating barriers that hindered girls from attending school.

Furthermore, in 2007, the Government introduced the Gender in Education Policy, which was designed to ensure that the needs to the girl-child was met. The major issue at stake was that there were more boys than girls in school.

### Enrolment increased

Coupled with universal primary education, intense sensitisation and media campaigns by women activists, Uganda had achieved gender parity with respect to enrolment in primary schools between 1999 and 2007, according to UNESCO's Global Monitoring Report of 2010. Enrolment for girls was 49.9% and boys 50.1% in 2008.

In the secondary education, boys' enrolment was higher than that of girls, with 83 girls enrolling for every 100 boys.

At the secondary education level, the completion rate for girls at senior four was 31% compared to 39% for boys, while the transition rate to senior five was 43% for boys and 31.1% for girls, according to the 2008 education ministry statistics.

### Challenges

Menstruation remains one of the reasons girls drop out of school in Uganda.

According to statistics from the Ministry of Education, one in 10 schoolgirls miss classes or drop out completely due to their menstruation periods and substitute pads for less safe and absorbent materials such as rags.

The ministry in 2006 rejected a proposal to give free sanitary towels to girls saying it would be an expensive venture. "Girls miss school not simply because they fear being teased by their classmates if they show stains from their period, but also because they are not educated about their periods, and their need for safe and clean facilities is not prioritised," observes Martha Muhwezi, the chairperson of the Forum for African Women Educationalists.

She says improvements in sanitation can go a long way to combating the problem. In particular, building toilets in schools enables girls to manage their periods more easily.

For instance, UNICEF's attempts to provide "girlfriendly" schools with clean toilets with running water in Kyenjojo have met with significant improvements in girls' education

In some cultures and rural areas, where enrolment rates are among the lowest, the pressure on girls to drop out during puberty is particularly high, according to Akello. "There is an assumption that if the girl is puberty, then she is ready for marriage.

We have also received reports of sexual harassment from male teachers," Akello says. She adds that there is need to subsidise sanitary towels for the under privileged pupils.

Besides, the teenage unwanted pregnancies are too high. According to the demographic survey, one in every four pregnancies occurs in the teenagers. Experts call for the need to provide sex education in schools on why they need to delay child bearing.

Moving over to university education, the girls are still lagging behind in sciences. More girls still perform poorly in sciences compared to the boys yet the government scholarships give priority to science students.

For instance, in last year's Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education examination results 4.4% of boys got As in Mathematics compared to only 2.6% of girls scored Grade A. [Makerere University](#) is aware that the science focus might put girls at a disadvantage. The university, is therefore, working out a new formula for fair representation of women in Government sponsorship.

The university's actingvice-chancellor, Prof.Venansius Baryamureeba, says management is ready to support a proposed scheme in which 40% of Government sponsorship slots in arts and 30% in sciences are reserved for female students.

Additional reporting by Conan Businge



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