



African Population and
Health Research Center



Improving girls' education and wellbeing in Senegal

The place of parents in girls' schooling

47%

Young population that are not in school.

57.7%

Population under the age of 18 years.

87.58%

Girls in primary school

34.60%

Girls in secondary school

Introduction

Senegal has a predominantly **young population**, with about 57.7% under the age of 18 years. Therefore, Senegal faces a strong demand for education and healthcare, particularly sexual and reproductive health and the upholding of the rights of children, particularly girls. Moreover, it should be noted that out of this **young population**, 47% are not in school. This further complicates the need to ensure that all children receive an education. Even though Senegal has achieved greater equity at the elementary and middle levels, statistics show that the enrolment numbers of girls decrease significantly as they advance in grades. For example, in primary school, **girls' GER stood at 87.58% vs 34.60% in secondary school**, therefore access to school for girls has not been translated into retention and completion at the secondary school level. To tap into this potential, it is important to focus on well thought-out strategies for better educational and health outcomes in order for the country to achieve its goals.

The IGE study

To understand this situation better, the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) implemented a study titled, "Improving Girls Education project (IGE) which sought to improve education outcomes and overall wellbeing of girls in Senegal". The objectives included documenting the status of education and the implications of sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR) for adolescent girls' education in Senegal; analyzing the policy environment around girls' education and SRHR in Senegal; and characterizing the landscape of policy actors and organizations that have worked or are working in the girls' education and SRHR space in Senegal. The perspectives

of different stakeholders were examined in the second phase of this two-part study, including beneficiaries and provided evidence on girls' education and SRHR in Senegal that can be used for policy formulation, refinement and/or better programming.

The link of parents with the microsystem of girls' education

In documenting the place of parents within the IGE program, the **ecological model** is a relevant framework to better comprehend the ecosystem in which the adolescents operate in, as they navigate the education and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Barriers that impede adolescent girls' education and economic empowerment function within multiple levels, including at individual, household and community levels. Without addressing these multiple levels of barriers, interventions may be ineffective and gender equality elusive. Parents at the mesosystem level of the ecological model are critical enablers of adolescents' success in school.

Parenting and policy in Senegal

In Senegal, **Law n° 2004-37, which amends and supplements the Orientation Law of National Education n° 91-22 (1991)**, is unequivocal in its emphasis on the fact that:

- » Education is compulsory for all children of both sexes aged 6-16 years;
- » The State is obligated to keep all children between 6 and 16 years old in the school system;
- » That compulsory schooling is provided free of charge in public schools;

- » Parents, whose children are 6 years old, are required to enroll them in public or private schools;
- » Parents are required to ensure the attendance of their children until the age of 16;
- » Any child under the age of 16 who cannot continue with general education is referred to attend vocational training center.

The law obligates parents and the community to ensure that children aged 6-16 years attend school is paramount. This is also seen in the manner in which the Government of Senegal has shown its commitment to equity and equal opportunities for girls and boys. This commitment has been restated in the "General Policy Letter for the Education and Training Sectors 2018-2030".

According to the policy, the disparities between boys and girls should be eliminated, including discrepancies in socio-economic categories, within urban and rural areas; and at all levels of education. In addition, children with special needs should be included in the education agenda.

Despite the strong call to action by parents through the various policies in place, there is a clear indication that the education system still faces challenges regarding equitable access for all children to quality education. Evidence shows that parents are contributors to this phenomenon.

This they do in the following ways:

1. Preferential treatment for boys

The findings show that parents prefer to take boys to school, at the expense of girls, especially when in tough economic situations. **One ministry actor explained:**

"...The poverty of the population leads to opportunity costs that often mean that the girl is chosen to stay home to work so that the boy's education can be supported". (KII, Ministry actor, Female, 02/10/2020).

2. Early marriage

Faced with problems such as delinquency, reduced interest in schooling and engagement in risky sexual behavior, some parents take extreme actions on the adolescent girls such as abandonment and early marriage, to deal with the situation. For instance, to mitigate against unintended pregnancy, some parents decide to marry off their female children when they reach adolescence. **A program actor narrated,** *"Completion is really about keeping children in school... As for girls, the major problem is marriage because, at a certain age of adolescence, parents are torn between the desire to let them continue their studies and the desire to prevent unwanted pregnancy. So, they give them away in marriage before these kinds of situations arise. This is really what compromises the completion rate," (KII, Program actor, Male, 3/11/2020).*



Early marriages are more frequent in some regions like Louga because of a high number of male immigrants (Modou Modou¹) who are often perceived to be better off.

"...As soon as they reach the first cycle of the secondary (referring to the first year), it's as if girls are sifted through a sieve. At the end of the cycle in 4th grade, there are almost no girls left. We can blame early marriages at this level... we have seen that in the Niambour area (another name of the Louga region), there are people who go abroad and come back home at a certain period of the year, and this is when parents give the daughters in marriage to these "Modou Modou" (Senegalese living abroad)...," (KII, Program Actor, Female, 20/09/2020).

3. Impact of insecurity on girls' education

In Koussanar, within Tambacounda region, girls face insecurity risks due to distance between their homes and schools. Girls often require transportation and accommodation when they move to middle and higher classes.

¹Name given to returnees (from Diaspora)

"...When we take the example of Koussanar, the last time we raised questions about the risk of dropout, the answer was that when the girl is at secondary school level, she has to travel miles to and from school. This poses a problem of insecurity. It also poses a problem of host families...There is also the problem of transport. This usually demotivates the child and does not encourage parents to let their daughters continue their studies," (KII, Program Actor, Female, 30/09/2020).

4. Sociocultural beliefs on the place of girls

Parents and community members rationalized early marriage of girls in the belief that girls' education is not sustainable as 'they usually end up in the kitchen'. This is reinforced by the sociocultural barriers enforced by gender norms. **A female parent said,** *"...This is more common among girls. When they don't get the Primary Education Certificate, their parents ask them to drop out on the pretext that girls' education is not sustainable and that sooner or later they will end up in the kitchens...For example, not long ago, a girl aged 15 or younger was given in marriage and was to go to her marital home in Touba. In any case, the main cause is early marriage," (IDI, Female Parent, Dakar, 8/10/2020)*

5. Issuance of birth certificates

Parents and adolescents also touched on the problems of birth certificates which schools often require. Many children both in rural and urban areas are often not registered at birth and often regularize their documentation later in life, since it is required at the end of the primary school examination. Those who do not are often forced to drop out. **A female parent explained:**

"...For a child who goes up to the upper grade of primary school, to take the exam without a birth certificate is impossible. So he drops out at the level of studies...The fault lies with the parents because of not declaring one's child at birth...This is an obstacle for the child when he reaches the upper grade of primary school and is asked every day by his teacher to tell his parents to bring his birth certificate, or is sent back to go and tell his parents to get him a birth certificate, will this child be able to continue his studies...?" (IDI, Female Parent, Ziguinchor, 14/10/2020).

How can parents enable learning?

Despite the drawbacks of learning occasioned by parents, parents are enablers of learning for their children, particularly for adolescent girls, and their support is critical for the schooling success of their children. Some of the ways in which parents can enable learning include:

- » Inclusion of parents and community members in the programming of girls. Parents and community members need to be included in education programming for girls since they are key decision makers. This is particularly in regards to encouraging their daughters to go to and stay in school. They also influence early pregnancies and marriage. *"...the major problem is when they reach secondary education level, i.e., all along the Fouta river in the north of Senegal or in the east of the country around Kolda, Tambacounda and Kedougou, it is from 4th grade of junior high school onwards that they (referring to girls) drop out of school. The problem has just become widespread in the Fouta area, and the cause is early marriage and a lady called me (the policymakers) from Matam to tell me: "you don't have to sensitize girls, because, above all; we parents have to sensitize families," (KII, Ministry Actor, Female, 7/10/2020).*

In addition, it was deemed necessary to include community members' views in designing and implementing programs targeting adolescent girls. Involving the communities was seen as one of the ways of ensuring the sustainability of these programs. In this way, programs initiated by the national government would not be perceived as political projects but as genuine community initiatives endorsed at the local level. **One program actor observed that:** *"... many initiatives have been developed, but unfortunately...we do not see the involvement of these local elected representatives because often it is purely political. The challenge of sustainability is going to arise and it is only the State that is capable of ensuring the sustainability of projects both at the central and decentralized levels". (IDI, Program actor, Male, 7/10/2020).*

To put it into perspective, the importance of parents and community involvement was underscored by education stakeholders who summed up the role of parents and the community: *"These initiatives need to be led by the community together with parents and adolescents. Parents should be motivated to be*

more involved in projects. This could be seen as the missing link in the implementation of most SRHR initiatives. Parents can approve for their children to be part of initiatives, but they too need to take part for these projects to serve the adolescents better. Collaborating with parents is key to the fight against early marriage and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and would lead to girls' success in school."

- » One of the key findings was that parents should have candid discussions with their daughters about the need to take education seriously. Amongst themselves, parents intimated on the need to be close to their daughters by engaging in constant communication and providing requisite support. **The female parents intimated,** *"As a parent, you need to talk to your children and advise them to take school seriously. For the school supplies, you have to buy them in full so that the child can be in good condition to succeed..."* (IDI, Female Parent, Diourbel, 29/09/2020).
- » In terms of motivation and support, the adolescents' parents were urged to play their part by supporting and motivating them by rewarding those who do well. Adolescent girls felt that parents must motivate and support them for them to succeed in school and be able to navigate the SRHR challenges. **One girl said this about their expectations of parents:** *"Parents must accompany, supervise and encourage their children to study, discuss with them and encourage them. They must supervise and control their children. And above all, they must reward their children who do well. For example, if your child comes out top of his class in the semester evaluation, you should give him a gift; that way he will be happy and will want to continue to work well in class. And if the child shows this gift to his classmates, they will want to work better in class and be rewarded by their parents,"* (IDI, Adolescent Girl, Diourbel, 28/09/2020).
- » Parents did espouse what in their view would characterize ideal education programs that would respond to the needs of adolescents. They mentioned three characteristics of such programs; balancing modernization and community values, enabling young people to cope with future demands and challenges, and parents being involved in the conceptualization and implementation of such programs.

- » Parents felt that they preferred a program that was rooted in their culture with some religious foundation while at the same time remaining open to the world. A program that does not confuse nor disorient children; rather, one that is adapted to the realities of the Senegalese people. **As one parent explained:** *"Well, I would say that a program centered on education should form a well-trained citizen; someone rooted in the culture of his country but also open to the modern world...The program should really have religious foundations; this is also often necessary in the programs, but they are often ignored and for me it is an important link that can really play on the balance, especially in the future of these young people,"* (IDI, Parent Male, Sédhiou 7/10/2020).
- » Other parents sought programs that would enable young people to cope with future demands and challenges. Such a program should enable young people to thrive while being able to solve the challenges in their respective environments. **A parent stated:** *"An ideal project must be useful to the community- it must raise the young people's awareness and also have a projection into the future so that they can have a way out, in order to avoid certain future constraints... For girls, such a program should enable them to avoid early marriages, early pregnancies and thus be pushed to continue their studies so that they can help their parents also themselves,"* (IDI, Parent Male, Ziguinchor, 9/10/2020).
- » Parents also explained that exceptional education and SRHR programs would be those which involve them in the design of programs and interventions so that they could also provide their input on relevant content, especially on education and health. **A parent intimated,** *"...it will be a project with themes for discussion among the children. Parents will meet there to share their ideas, choose the most relevant ones for a better running of the program; to help the children more in the fields of education and health".* (IDI, Parent Male, Ziguinchor, 15/10/2020).

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