

PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY AND EQUITY IN EDUCATION

Taking Collective Action to Ensure Girls' Attendance, Retention and Completion (GARC) in Schools in Liberia

POLICY BRIEF

Educate HER

Promoting Gender Equity and Equality in Education



Helping Our People Excel, Inc



CAREFOUND - Liberia

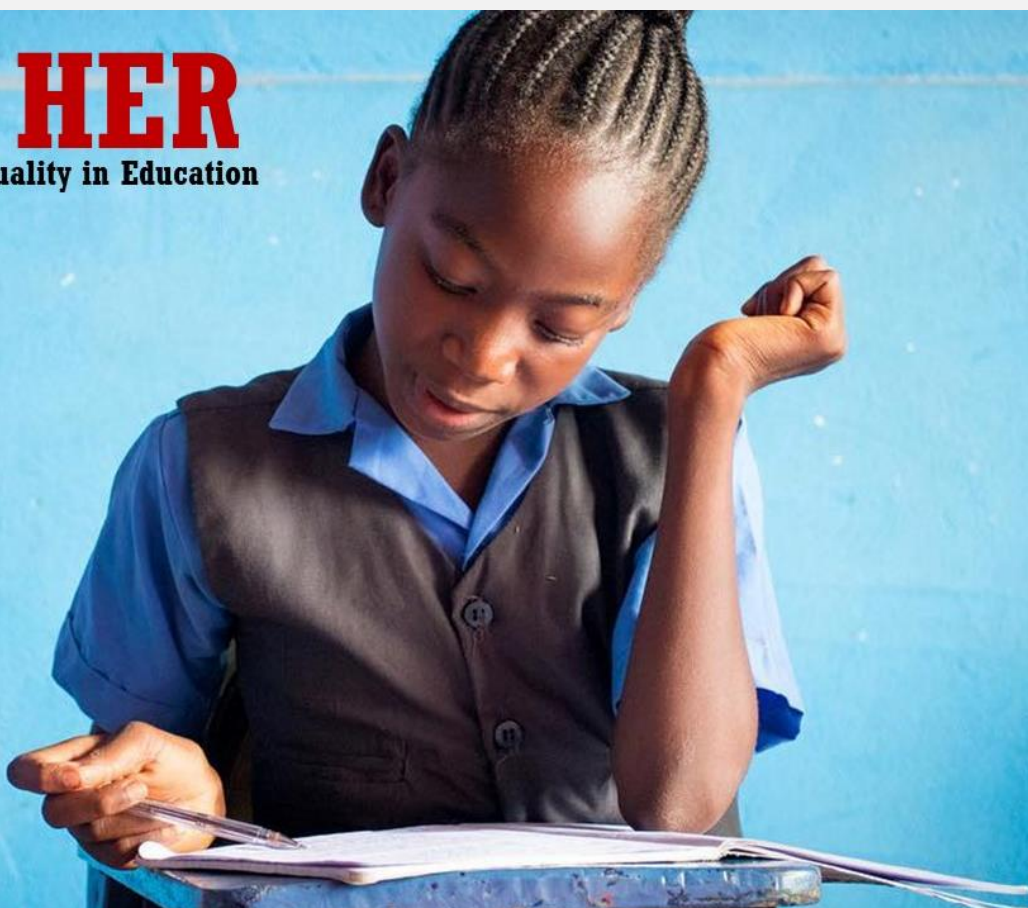


Paramount Young Women's Initiative

EDUCATION OUTLOUD
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Government of Liberia through the Ministry of Education has over the years taken major actions to improve Liberia's education system. Several international and domestic policies on education have been sanctioned as well key strategies developed to promote and protect the right to education for all including boys, girls, women, persons with disabilities and marginalized groups. Of critical importance, Sustainable Development Goal 4 and Incheon 2015 Declaration were endorsed by government. Government also passed into law New Education Reform Act of 2011, the National Policy on Girls' Education, Inclusive Education Policy among others. In addition to these policy frameworks on access, equality and inclusive education, Article 6 of the Constitution of Liberia backed "equal access to educational opportunities and facilities for all citizens to the extent of available resources". However, financial, logistical, and other resources and efforts needed to fully implement them have been limited, thereby hindering the right to education, especially for women and girls. Women and girls have disproportionately been lacking behind in terms of boys' and girls' ratio at all levels of the education system including primary, secondary and tertiary education in Liberia. This is a longstanding problem due to traditional practices such as preferential treatment for boys over girls, forced marriages and domestic labor duties imposed on girls and women as well as others social and economic barriers that continued to deprive them access to equal education. As a result, there are considerable inequalities of girls' access to education because of gender disparities, rural-urban locality as well as income inequality, with poor rural girls and women being the most affected.

Addressing these barriers to girls' school attendance, retention and completion will require collective actions, at national and local levels, with all stakeholders (government, development partners, civil society, communities, private sector, traditional leaders, etc.) involved. In particular, national government must take the lead to ensure full implementation of the national policy on girls' education, national gender policy, inclusive education policy and other key policies developed to promote gender equality, equity, and mainstreaming in education. In part, this entails focusing on gender specific issues and needs especially for girls/women while increasing budgetary allocation and support to education squarely disaggregated to address those necessities. In addition, national government should ensure that school environments are free of discrimination and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence. Also, initiate constructive engagements with traditional leaders to minimize harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation, domestic labor, and early and forced marriages while working with educational partners and stakeholders in key program areas designed to increase girls' enrollment, attendance, retention, and completion in schools.

INTRODUCTION

This Policy Brief has been developed by the Educate HER Coalition, as part of Educate Her Project funded by Global Partnership for Education (GPE). It provides relevant information and as well empower educational stakeholders with the requisite tools needed to meaningfully participate and influence decision-making and also advocate for the full implementation and on the right to education in Liberia. It also highlights key policy commitments of the Government of Liberia on the right of girls' education and sheds light on harmful traditional practices and well as social, cultural, economic, and other barriers to girls' access to quality education in Liberia with workable recommendations for address.

Main Objectives:

- To enhance strategic partnerships among education stakeholders and holistically address barriers to girls' education and increase school enrollment, retention, and completion of girls in Liberia;
- To facilitate and drive advocacy efforts for the Liberian Government to allocate at least 20% of the national budget to education to address constraints faced by the sector and make school environment conducive for learning, especially for girls; and
- To campaign for the full implementation of the National Policy on Girls' Education and other gender-related policies and strategies to increase girls' attendance, retention, and completion at all levels of schools in Liberia.

POLICY COMMITMENTS AND LEGAL FRAMEWORKS ON GIRLS' RIGHT TO EDUCATION IN LIBERIA

The Government of Liberia has demonstrated some level of political commitment to ensure access, equality, and equity in the education sector. Key among them are the passage of the Education Reform Act (ERA, 2011) and Children's Law of Liberia (2011) as well as the development and adoption of the Education Sector Plan (2010-2020), the National Gender Policy (2009, 2018), National Sexual & Reproductive Health Policy (2010), the National Policy on Girls' Education (2006, 2009, 2013), Pro-Poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development (PAPD), and the most recent being the proposed Liberia National Girls' Education Strategy 2021- 2026.¹

While this may be laudable, development of these policy documents has not substantially narrowed the gender gaps and imbalances in education. Women and girls in Liberia still face major social, cultural, economic, and others challenges at all levels in education. Also, financial support to fully implement these policies and strategies remains limited, while key international instruments such as Sustainable Development Goal 4 and Incheon 2015 Declaration, which are intended to promote access, quality, and equity in education are yet to be fully actualized by the Government of Liberia.

BRIEF ANALYSIS OF CHALLENGES IN ACCESS TO GIRLS' EDUCATION IN LIBERIA

The education sector in Liberia has experienced appreciable gains over the years, yet significant challenges still exist. Issues surrounding enrollment from early childhood to secondary education have witnessed some level of improvement. In 2015, the sector recorded a total enrollment of 1.4 million students, up from 303,186 in 1981², representing 348% rise. Also, education attainment climbed from 27.1% in 1980 to 52.7% in 2015, although about 47.3% of the nation's population remains grossly illiterate, peaking above the regional average of 34%. However, the gains experienced in the sector have not been equally distributed among boys and girls, with females being largely disadvantaged. Simply put, there are gross inequalities in education owing to gender, rural-urban locality, and income inequality in Liberia, with poor rural girls and women being the most affected.

Liberia tops the list of postwar countries with the highest number of out-of-school children (21.36%)³. Among Liberians 15 years and older, the literacy rate is 62.7% for males and 34.1% for females.⁴ 30% of women have no education at all, compared to 13% of men.⁵ The gender gap widens while racing to

¹ Educate Her Coalition's 2021 GARC Research

² MOE 2015 EMIS Data

³ World Bank, Collection of Development Indicators, 2017

⁴ UNESCO. 2017. Liberia Country Profile. <http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/l>

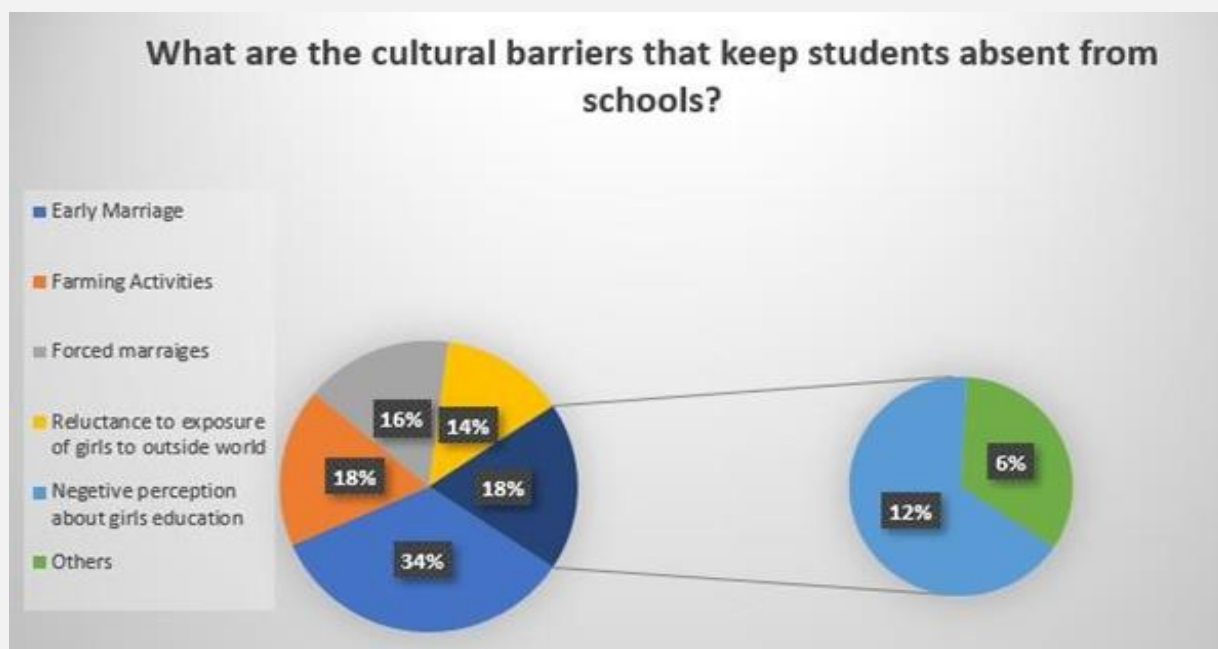
⁵ Liberia Demographic Health Survey (2019-20), LISGIS

the top of the educational ladder--transitioning from pre-primary to primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. While there is near gender parity in national enrolment in primary and secondary schools, the gap between male and female completion rates is greater for each stage of the educational ladder. According to UNESCO's 2013 world Inequality database on education, 36% of males compared to 32% of females complete primary school; 28% males compared to 23% females complete lower secondary⁶, and 17% of males compared to 9% of females complete upper secondary⁷. When comparing urban to rural dimensions, the gaps widen. In upper secondary, the completion rate for urban males is 23% compared to 13% for urban females, and 6% to 2% for their rural counterparts respectively.⁸

These stats are not only glaring about the imbalances girls face in school attendance, retention, and completion in Liberia, but illustrative of the urgency with which the problem needs to be tackled by Government, working collaboratively with other stakeholders and partners. Also, it is indicative of broader political will and capacity issues government has to address to ensure that women and girls practically enjoy the inclusion, equality, and equity provided for in key national and international frameworks and strategic documents and policies, chiefly the national policy on girls' education.

FACTORS IMPEDING GIRLS' ATTENDANCE, RETENTION AND COMPLETION IN SCHOOLS

The main barriers to girls' attendance, retention, and completion in secondary schools in Liberia are multi-dimensional. Primarily, there have been traditional beliefs, norms, and practices related to gender needs and roles that give preference to boys' education over girls. In rural settings and households, girls take on increased domestic labor such as cooking and caretaking. Besides, many girls miss a significant amount of school days due to limited access to sanitary products, medication, and nurses at schools during menstrual cycles. As seen in the below figure, girls are at higher risk of dropping out of school due to cultural norms and harmful traditional practices such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), bush schools and forced marriages.



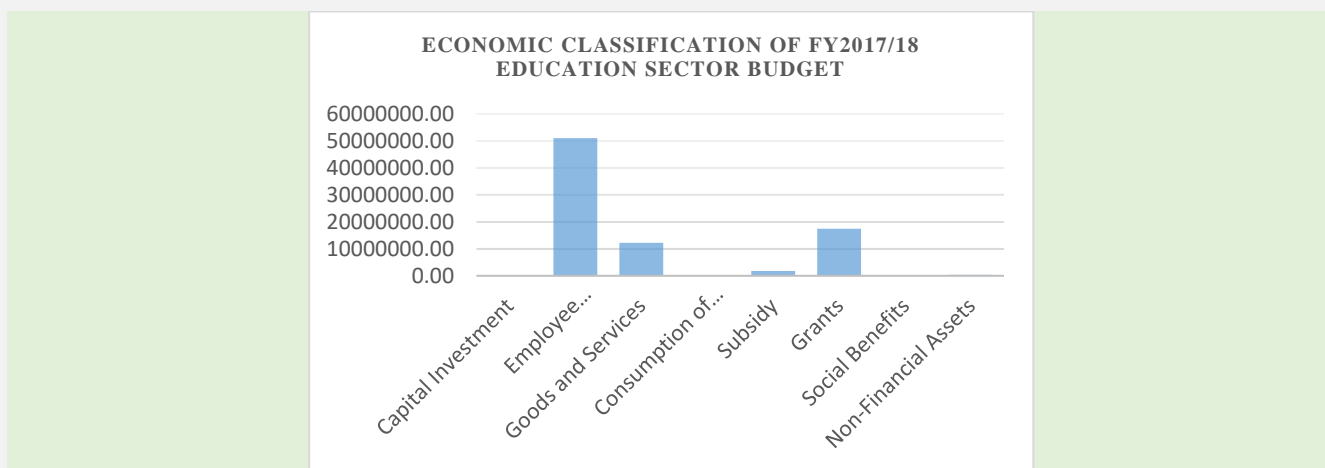
Source: Educate HER Coalition GARC Research, 2021

⁶ UNESCO. 2013. World Inequality Database on Education. <https://bit.ly/3qJ3Qhw>
⁷ UNESCO. 2013. World Inequality Database on Education. <https://bit.ly/3eHXyfo>
⁸ UNESCO. 2013. World Inequality Database on Education <https://bit.ly/2OQxcgF>

There is apparently a ban on girls’ participation in the Sande bush, but this is often violated, especially in rural areas. Lack of sexual and reproductive health services and rights also mean high teenage pregnancy rates, particularly in rural areas, thus affecting their ability to access education. Liberia’s teenage pregnancy rate is one of the highest in the world, with 33.5% of young women ages 15–19 bearing children. Discrimination of pregnant students is also pervasive in Liberia, as most school policies don’t allow pregnant teens to complete the school year. Though the legal age for marriage is 18, customary law allows early marriage, and 36% married before the age of 18. This is often viewed as a form of protection for girls as they reach puberty, but it undermines their education prospects and increases their level of vulnerability and dependency in society.

At the national level, additional challenges exist and exacerbate the situation. The National Policy on Girls’ Education (NPGE) was developed in 2006 (revised 2013 and 2018) to address barriers to girls’ education. The NPGE recognizes gender disparities in the education sector and the need to prioritize gender mainstreaming and take affirmative action for girls’ education. The effective and efficient administration of the NPGE could have significantly reduced barriers to girls’ education in Liberia. However, fifteen years after its adoption by the Ministry of Education, it is yet to be effectively implemented.

This is compounded by low budgetary allocation. Liberia is heavily dependent on external funding to provide basic services including education. To date, the Government of Liberia is yet to appropriate 20% of the national fiscal budget to education, as required by the Incheon Declaration (2015) and the Dakar Framework (2000) to which Liberia is a signatory. Moreover, out of total FY2017/18 MoE budgetary allocation, wages account for 79%. When combined, salaries and goods and services chomp a staggering 94% of the Ministry’s budget. The situation leaves little or no provision for curriculum development, monitoring and evaluation, development and improvement of education infrastructure, or teachers training which are essential to quality education system.



Source: Liberia National Budget FY2017/18

GENDER GAPS AND DISPARITIES FACED BY GIRLS AND WOMEN IN LIBERIA

The challenges women and girls face in education have so many implications in terms of their representation in strategic positions and meaningful participation in key decision-making processes in Liberia. This negative trend has lingered for many years, and its effects are glaring across all sectors of society. For example, according to the National Democratic Institute, in the 2017 elections, 984 candidates contested the elections for the 73 seats within the House of Representatives, of which only 156 women participated.⁹ Of the 73 winners, only 9 were females representing (13%). Out of 30 Senators, there are only two females, constituting just 7% of the entire membership.

The trends also extend to the labor market, where young men are more likely to access and retain good-paying jobs, compared to young women. According to the 2013 Labor market transition survey by the International Labor Organization, one in every three young persons in the labor force is unemployed, with half of the young people working, but the quality of employment is very low. Young men who have completed their transition to the labor market have a much higher probability to attain stable employment than young women (81.2% and 18.8% respectively). This means that once women and girls continue to be discriminated against, they are more likely to have low labor transition rate.

This affects women's economic empowerment and employability in the labor market, which gravely subjects them to low-level paying jobs and as well impinge on their abilities to compete with males in the labor market. In addition, it limits women's ability to meaningfully participate in national decision-making processes or vial for strategic leadership positions.

THE BENEFITS OF PRIORITIZING GIRLS' EDUCATION

The need to holistically address gender inequalities and imbalances in education is not only imperative but necessary to bridge all forms of disparities and gender gaps in education, especially for girls. This will increase the attendance, retention, and completion rates of girls in schools. It is essential to note that women//girls' rights are human rights too. Therefore, their rights to quality education must be regarded as enshrined in national and international instruments to ensure that women and girls have equal access to education just as their male counterparts.

Fulfilling those policies commitments remain crucial to achieving gender equality and equity in education and also addressing the educational needs of girls because to ensure unrestricted access to quality education. Because when girls and women are given good quality and life-long education, they are more likely to attain economic empowerment, which is critical to meeting other basic and fundamental human rights and needs. Not only will they personally benefit, but their families, communities, and larger society also stand to benefit.

More broadly, women's empowerment their abilities to contribute not only to the labor market but also socioeconomic development just as male counterparts. An increase in girls' attending and completing higher education will ultimately lead to increase in women's empowerment and labor mobility in the workforce of society which is key to socioeconomic empowerment. Qualitative and quantitative studies have also shown that education has impacts on self-confidence, aspirations, communication skills, and decision-making power. This is why girls' secondary school attendance, retention, and completion should be given keen attention to enable their transition to tertiary level and beyond, eventually forming an integral part of the labor force and other productive sectors of the society.

⁹ National Democratic Institute, Final Report on the 2017 Liberian Elections

THE KEY PLAYERS AND ACTORS

To achieve equity and improved girls' access to education, especially secondary school enrollment, retention, and completion rates, a strong partnership is needed amongst key educational stakeholders in Liberia. This can be put into six (6) broad categories: government; development partners; private sector; civil society and media; traditional leaders and communities; and women and girls. Their roles may differ in some respect but are mutually reinforcing and complementary to each other.

National Government--- State actors, headed by the Presidency have greater roles in eliminating all barriers to girls' education and school attendance, retention, and completion in Liberia. Thankfully, appreciable policy and legal frameworks and commitments exist, including the National Policy on Girls' Education and New Education Reform Act of 2011. What's needed is the required financing, especially increased gender sensitive and disaggregated budgetary support to Education in Liberia. Also, overseen by the Legislature, the Executive through the Ministries of Education, Gender, and other relevant state actors should properly coordinate and harness efforts to ensure implementation of national policies and strategies on gender equality and mainstreaming in education. Additionally, they should collaborate with development partners, civil society, and traditional leaders to ensure that cultural, economic, and other barriers to education are holistically and sustainably addressed through combined efforts.

Community and Traditional Leaders— Apart from the national government and state actors, they are the most critical players relative to finding lasting solutions to social and cultural barriers to girls' education in Liberia. Their influence at the local level can be leveraged, through constructive engagement to support national efforts and priorities aimed at abolishing traditional barriers and fully promoting, protecting, and realizing girls' rights and educational needs, just as their male counterparts.

Civil Society and the Media—This includes feminist movements, women-focused organizations, community-based organizations, and pressure groups as well as other non-state actors with financial and non-financial resources to support the process.

More broadly, they should forge partnerships and consolidate efforts to advocate for gender-responsive and sensitive public budgeting for education as well as implementation of key national and international policies and strategies on gender mainstreaming in education to ensure a safe, conducive, and inclusive gender-sensitive learning environment for all. Also, undertake other well-meaning efforts to address sensitive needs of girls, mainly provision of sexual and reproductive health products and education in schools. Moreover, engage with government as well as communities and traditional leaders to abolish harmful practices that tend to impair girls' school attendance, retention, and completion especially in rural settings of Liberia.

Development partners –bi-lateral and multi-lateral partners as well as international non-governmental organizations have been long-standing players in the country. Thankfully, the Swedish, Finnish, American, European among others have strong feminist policies in place. Also, organizations such as UN Women, UNICEF, UNDP, Global Partnership for Education have been and continue to play key roles in Liberia's recovery and development process. Continuing and increasing their financial, logistical, and technical support will be extremely critical to increase and retain girls' enrollment, retention, and school completion, especially at the secondary level.

Private Sector Actors – They have been the mainstay in Liberia and key contributors at different levels and in key activities and processes. Their financial and non-financial resources and assets can help to address the practical gender needs of girls, including but not limited to constructing and managing safe homes and spaces for girls; providing tuition-aids and scholarships to girls, ensuring gender sensitive

school environments, among others. Government, development partners, civil society, and traditional leaders and communities should pull their support to find lasting solutions to issues affecting girls' school attendance, retention, and completion in Liberia.

Women and Girls Themselves – nothing can be and work for women without their direct and meaningful involvement. While state and non-state actors collaborate on the subject, women and girls themselves remain critical to addressing their access to education issues. They should take ownership of the process and continue to play their roles by standing up against impediments to their learning.

CONCLUSION

Women and girls are integral parts of the Liberian Society but have been sidelined severally, especially in the education sector. There is a need to build upon existing efforts to reverse the negative trends in education and remediate challenges girls face to enroll, stay, and complete school, especially as they climb the educational ladder. This requires increasing their access to good quality, inclusive, gender responsive, and sensitive education at all levels in order to become relevant and productive citizens and meaningful contributors to their homes, families, communities, and the society at large. It is expected that the Liberian Government, through the Presidency, Ministry of Finance and Development Planning, Ministries of Education, Gender, and Health, as well as the Legislature will take desirable actions and decisions, including but limited to allocating at 20% of the national budget on education (disaggregated based on gender considerations) to undertake specific programs and activities to address women and girls' access to education issues, especially at the secondary level.

More importantly, one of three specific objectives of the national policy on girls' education is "to stimulate collective and concerted efforts, at all levels to eliminate gender disparities in education, training, and management." This is aligned with SDG 5 on gender equality and women empowerment; SDG 4 on inclusive, quality, and life-long education; National Gender Policy of Liberia, among others. Hence, collective efforts are needed at all levels in Liberia to address barriers to girls' education while promoting equal access, quality and conducive education for all Liberians

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Ministry of Finance and Development Planning and others overseeing decision-making process around the national budget should increase budgetary support to education to ensure that government's minimum 20% financing commitments for education is realized and even surpassed. Also, they should ensure that the national budget is gender sensitive and responsive, especially the component on education so that the 5% minimum support required for girls' education related issues in the Ministry of Education's budget can be achieved;
2. The Legislature is extremely strategic in addressing gender inequalities and imbalances in education in Liberia, as it does not only allocate resources to ministries and agencies but ensures that monies allotted are utilized for the intended purposes. Therefore, the Legislature should allocate at least 20% of the national budget to education and ensure that such funding is gender sensitive and responsive enough to address the specific needs of girls, boys and marginalized groups in the sector;
3. The Ministry of Education should develop a gender sensitive and responsive budget that ensures that at least 5% of its annual budget addresses girls and women specific issues, as provided in Chapter 8 of the National Policy on Girls' Education. Also, the Ministry should work with other stakeholders: development partners, media, civil society, traditional leaders, etc. to undertake

meaningful activities that will avail increased financial, logistical, psychological, and other support to girls to increase their secondary school enrollment, retention, and completion across the country;

4. Traditional leaders, parents, and communities should play their respective parts in breaking from the ugly past of unduly prioritizing boys' education over girls. All parties should work together to create the necessary sensitization and awareness and an enabling environment for girls to be motivated to enroll, stay, and complete schools, especially at the secondary level;
5. Strengthen national campaigns to combat stigma and discrimination against early and unintended pregnancies, create clear laws/ policies providing support or interventions for pregnant girls and young mothers, and clearly define the policy on access to education and nondiscrimination when it comes to girls that are pregnant;
6. Provide safe and positive learning environment and space for girls, create and support structures at the community and school level for, of, and by girls for peer support. This will help to eliminate or minimize School Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV)—verbal assaults, unwanted touches, sexual coercion, etc.—and peer pressure, and support sex education for girls; and
7. Civil society organizations must use all available feasible means to engage with state actors to advocate for more funds to education as well as political will to implement the New Education Reform Act of 2011 and the National Policy on Girls' Education, among others.