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Barriers to accessing education for girl learners in South Africa

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Introduction

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Constitution) provides everyone with a right to basic education.[1] Read with the constitutional prohibition of unfair discrimination, this means that every child has the right to education without unfair discrimination. Nonetheless, girl learners face significant barriers in accessing education.

According to United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), not even half the countries in the world have reached gender parity at the primary education level. The gap widens at the secondary education level, with only a quarter of countries having an equal education system amongst boys and girls.[2]

Globally, girls not only suffer disproportionately in accessing education but also face gender-specific challenges. Promoting the right to education of girls, therefore, goes beyond mere access; it is about ensuring that girl learners are safe at school and can benefit equally from the opportunities that education should provide.

This research report seeks to provide an overview of the barriers to education of girl learners in South Africa and outlines the impact of poverty, teenage pregnancy, curriculum content, sexual assault, child marriage, household duties, sanitation, scholar transport, and classroom discipline on their right to education.

The point of departure when addressing the barriers to education for girl learners in South Africa is the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Constitution). The following rights are of particular relevance and underlie the recommendations made: (i) the right not to be discriminated against based on sex or gender; (ii) the right to human dignity; (iii) the right to freedom from all forms of violence and degrading treatment; and (iv) the right of the child to have their best interests be of paramount importance in all matters concerning them.[3]

The South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (Schools Act) gives effect to the right to education. In its Preamble, the Schools Act sets out that it aims to "provide an education of progressively high quality for all learners ... [and] combat racism and sexism and all other forms of unfair discrimination and intolerance". Section 3(1) makes it compulsory for children aged 7 to 15 to attend school, with Section 3(5) setting out steps to be taken by Heads of Department in situations where learners drop out or stop attending school.

1 Section 29(1)(a) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996.

2 https://www.unicef.org/education/girls-education. See also: UIS 'New methodology shows that 258 million children, adolescents and youth are out of school' UIS Fact Sheet No. 56 (September 2019) http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/new-methodology-shows-258-million-children-adolescents-and-youth-are-out-school.pdf (accessed 21-09-2021).

3 Sections 9, 10, 12(1), and 28(2) of the Constitution.

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Poverty

In general, children born into poverty face a range of challenges that their wealthy peers do not. The effects are visible in school attendance and dropout rates, and in access to tertiary education and employment.[4]

Research from the World Bank show that, globally:

Poverty is one of the most important factors for determining whether a girl can access and complete her education. Poor households lack resources to pay for schooling and associated costs (e.g. for textbooks, uniforms, school supplies, and transportation). Poor households with multiple children may choose to invest in boys' education rather than that of girls while also relying on girls to help with household chores and care for younger siblings and other family members. Studies consistently show that girls who face multiple disadvantages — such as low family income, living in remote or underserved locations or who have a disability or belong to a minority ethno-linguistic group — are farthest behind in terms of access to and completion of education.[5]

The separate and unequal societies created by apartheid meant that black people were not only impoverished, but also did not have access to quality education. Almost three decades into democracy, most black people still suffer the negative effects. In 2018, The Borgen Project cited poverty as "the greatest demobilizer for girls 17 and younger, as more than 13 million children who live in poverty [in South Africa] do not have consistent access to education".[6] The Annual Household Survey lists no money for school fees as the biggest contributing factor to learner dropout, with girls more likely than boys[7] to drop out, for this reason.

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) launched the Keeping Girls in School programme in 2013, with Phase I running from October 2013 to March 2016, and Phase II from April 2016 to March 2019. Phase I focused on strengthening academic, emotional, and social support for girls - to increase matric completion. Phase II aimed to decrease new HIV infections in girls, decrease teenage pregnancies, and increase the retention rate of girls in school until matric.[8] According to the DBE, the programme was successful in reducing HIV and teenage pregnancies amongst girls and increasing school attendance.[9] However, it is unclear whether the programme is still ongoing.

Although recognising the impact of poverty on girls' education is important, the response cannot be to address overall poverty given South Africa's economic climate. Instead, programmes like Keeping Girls in School should be expanded on. as they can be valuable in promoting learner attendance and providing support to girls to ensure that they can, in fact, benefit from the opportunities education provides. In the absence of such programs, there is a risk that more girl learners will continue to dropout from schools.

4 https://www.unicef.org/southafrica/education
5 World Bank 'Girls' Education' (08-03-2021) https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/girlseducation#1 (accessed 21-09-2021).
6 N C Kellog 'Recent advances in girls' education in South Africa increase access' (11-05-2018) https://borgenproject.org/girls-education-in-south-africa/ (accessed 21-09-2021).
7 STATSSA 'General Household Survey' (2015) https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P03182015.pdf; STATSSA 'General Household Survey' (2016) https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P03182016.pdf; STATSSA 'General Household Survey' (2017) https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P03182017.pdf; STATSSA 'General Household Survey' (2018) http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P03182018.pdf; STATSSA 'General Household Survey' (2019) http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P03182019.pdf.
8 MIET 'Keeping Girls in School' https://mietafrica.org/projects-programmes/youth-development/keeping-girls-in-school-kgs/ (accessed 29-09-2021).
9 MIET Africa 'Report: Keeping girls in school programme' (2016) http://www.nacosa.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/KGS-database-and-school-stats-analysis.pdf (accessed: 29-06-2021).

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Teenage pregnancy

The DBE published the 'Draft National Policy on the Prevention and Management of Learner Pregnancy in Schools' in 2018. The policy outlines guiding principles to prevent and manage learner pregnancies, which includes access to Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), pregnancy prevention, and sexual and reproductive health services. It further envisages counselling, care, and support, and addresses issues of stigma, discrimination, and confidentiality surrounding learner pregnancies.[10] The policy has not yet been finalised or adopted.

The previous national policy, in the form of the 'Measures for the Management and Prevention of Learner Pregnancy', promoted the idea that learners who fall pregnant should take a leave of absence from school, for up to two years, for caretaking reasons.[11] This allowed School Governing Bodies (SGBs) to implement pregnancy policies that automatically excluded pregnant learners. In the case of Welkom High School and Harmony High School, two schools in the Free State, the impact of these policies was that learners could not return to school in the year that they gave birth, and were required to repeat that grade, amounting to expulsion.[12] The schools' policies were considered by the Constitutional Court, who found that the differentiation in treatment towards learners based on sex and pregnancy amounted to unfair discrimination and infringed on the right to education of learners who fall pregnant.[13] The Constitutional Court's judgements in these two matters highlight the importance of adopting a national policy on how schools handle learner pregnancies.[14]

According to statistics released between April 2020 and March 2021, the Gauteng Health Department recorded 23 226 pregnancies of girls between the ages of 10 and 19. The Western Cape Health Department, however, recorded 11 303 pregnancies of girls in the same age range over the same period. At the national level, South Africa recorded the highest number of teenage pregnancies in the past four years. These statistics are alarming and clearly indicate that girls are at a high risk of falling pregnant while still in school, which could result in these girls not completing their education.

Of particular concern is that an increasing number of girls between the ages of 10 and 14 are falling pregnant. In terms of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act of 2007, no child between the ages of 12 and

10 DBE 'Draft National Policy on the Prevention and Management of Learner Pregnancy in Schools' (2018) https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Policies/Draft%20Pregnancy%20Policy%202018.pdf (accessed 29-09-2021).

11 DBE 'Measures for the Management and Prevention of Learner Pregnancy' (2007) https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/learnerpregnancy0.pdf (accessed 29-09-2021).

12 L Draga, C Stuurman, and D Petherbridge 'Pregnancy' in F Veriava, A Thom, and T F Hodgson (eds) Basic Education Rights Handbook: Education Rights in South Africa (2017) 166.

13 See: Head of Department, Department of Education, Free State Province v Welkom High School and Another; Head of Department, Department of Education, Free State Province v Harmony High School and Another (CCT 103/12) [2013] ZACC 25; 2013 (9) BCLR 989 (CC); 2014 (2) SA 228 (CC) (10 July 2013).

14 Draga et al (2017) 167.

16 can consent to any sexual act. As such, their pregnancy automatically constitutes statutory rape.

On 7 September 2021, the Basic Education Committee announced that, in general, 30% of girls between the ages of 10 and 19 fall pregnant and that 1 out of 3 of these girls do not return to school.[15] Given that teenage pregnancies have increased since the start of the national lockdown in March 2020 to the time of writing in September 2021, it is anticipated that this number will increase in the coming year. This should also be viewed against the backdrop of family commitments (pregnancy, marriage, childminding) being some of the greatest causes of girl learner dropout - just behind dropouts due to the inability to pay fees and poor academic performance. Between 2015 and 2019, 17.3% of girls left school as a result of family commitments, in comparison with 0.5% of boys. [16]

The high rate of learner pregnancy and subsequent dropout show that learners are not provided CSE, and that girl learners who fall pregnant are not given the necessary support to return to school and complete their education after giving birth.

Considering the above, it is crucial that:

- *Communication channels be created between the Departments of Education and Health, as well the South African Police Service, to ensure that statutory rape cases are reported and that the perpetrators are brought to book;*
- *The teenage pregnancy policy is implemented;*
- *CSE be rolled out at all schools nation-wide;*
- *Girl learners are taught what constitutes statutory rape or statutory sexual assault; and*
- *A mechanism is created to help schools locate and assist girl learners1 who do not return to school after pregnancy, to return to school.*[17]

The issue of teenage pregnancy in the context of girl learner education cannot be overstated as pregnancy being the main reason that girl learners dropout of school in South Africa.[18] This is since childrearing responsibilities often affect a girl child's attendance at school.[19]

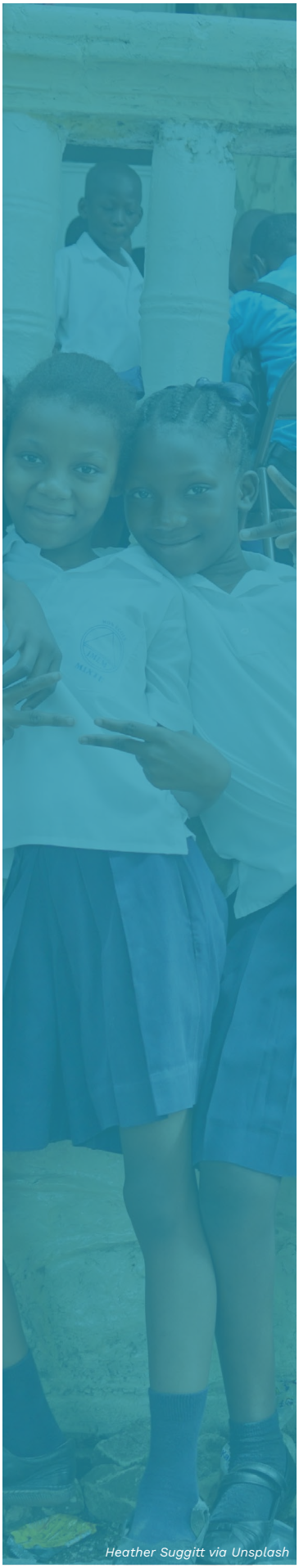
15 DBE 'Teenage Pregnancy & Comprehensive Sexuality Education' (7 September 2021) https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/33580/ (accessed 20-09-2021).

16 STATSSA 'General Household Survey' (2015) https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P03182015.pdf; STATSSA 'General Household Survey' (2016) https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P03182016.pdf; STATSSA 'General Household Survey' (2017) https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P03182017.pdf; STATSSA 'General Household Survey' (2018) http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P03182018.pdf; STATSSA 'General Household Survey' (2019) http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P03182019.pdf.

17 LRC 'Open letter to the Department of Basic Education: High rates of teenage pregnancy and learner dropout rates (21 September 2021).

18 Nokuthula Nkosi & Edmarie Pretorius 'The Influence of Teenage Pregnancy on Education: Perceptions of Educators at a Secondary School in Tembisa, Gauteng' (2019) at 108.

19 110.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Gender inequalities in curriculum content and teacher behaviour

Although the number of girls in a school can be viewed as one benchmark of gender equality in schools, the quality of girls' learning experiences is more telling of how gender inequalities in curriculum content and teacher behaviour presents a barrier to education for girl learners.

According to Rarieya, Sanger, and Moolman, negative stereotypes about girls' abilities to perform well, discouragement from pursuing studies in mathematics and science, and the gendered norms regarding keeping classrooms clean undermine girls' achievements and contribute to their decision to drop out of school.[20]

Research by the World Bank proffers that limitations in teacher training and learning materials mean that often, gender biases are reinforced and not adequately addressed.[21] Teachers are, ultimately, influenced by their own perspectives of gender, which reflects in their interactions with learners.[22] This, in turn, affects learners' aspirations and their confidence in their potential. Interestingly, national studies show that girls consistently achieve better results than boys across subject areas, grades, and attendance.[23]

Gender inequality in schools translates into continuing inequalities in the workplace and underrepresentation of girls in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) careers. This raises questions about the efficiency of gender policies, both in education and in general.[24]

It is important to think around how teacher training and curriculum content can be adjusted to facilitate a more equal learning environment in every sense of the word. Although this barrier may be viewed as less tangible than those discussed previously, girls should not be made to feel less than their male peers based on their sex or gender. Moreover, a more gender-equitable educational environment is likely to decrease instances of school-related gender-based violence[25] which are further contributing factors to girl learners dropping out, as identified in the 'sexual assault' section below.

20 J Rarieya, N Sanger, and B Moolman 'Gender inequalities in education in South Africa' (2014) http://www.hsrc.ac.za/uploads/pageContent/4991/Gender%20inequalties%20in%20education%20in%20South%20Africa.pdf (accessed 29-09-2021).
21 World Bank 'Girls' Education' (08-03-2021) https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/girlseducation#1 (accessed 21-09-2021).
22 Rarieya et al (2014).
23 T L Zuze and U Beku 'Gender Inequalities in South African Schools: New Complexities' in N Spaull and J D Jansen (eds) South African Schooling: the Enigma of Inequality (2019) 228.
24 Rarieya et al (2014).
25 UNICEF 'Girls' education' available at: https://www.unicef.org/education/girls-education.

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Sexual assault

In 2011, the United Nations Committee on the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women expressed "grave concern about the high number of girls who suffer sexual abuse and harassment in [South African] schools ... [at the hands of] both teachers and classmates".[26] Studies have shown that, whereas boys are at a greater risk of bullying and physical violence, girls are at a much greater risk of sexual violence in schools.[27] However, quantifying girls' risk for sexual assault is complex due to underreporting.[28]

The South African legislative and policy framework aimed at addressing educator and peer sexual misconduct is comprehensive. Relevant legislation and policies include the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Act 32 of 2007, the Children's Act 38 of 2005, the Employment of Educators Act 76 of 1998, the South African Council for Educators Act 31 of 2000, and the 'Protocol for the Management and Reporting of Sexual Abuse and Harassment in Schools'. Although there are many different laws and policies related to the prevention of sexual misconduct in the school environment, there are still serious shortfalls. In addition to their shortfalls, the different laws and policies do not complement each other.[29]

Some examples include:

> *Principals may choose not to report to the DBE's district office and the South African Police Service (SAPS), an allegation of sexual misconduct committed by a teacher against a learner, if they do not deem the complaint to be "sufficiently serious".*
>
> *Employees in public schools must apply to the Department of Justice and Correctional Services for a certificate confirming that a prospective teacher is not registered as a sex offender. Although the Criminal Procedure Act 51 of 1977 requires this, it does not guarantee that schools will consult the register when employing an educator.*
>
> *An educator who commits a common law or statutory offence in terms of Section 18 of the Employment of Educators Act 'may' be dismissed. This suggests that an educator who commits rape or statutory rape against a learner may not necessarily be dismissed.*

The examples above indicate how confusion can arise around the obligations of SGBs, educators, the SAPS, and other stakeholders.

The fact that the applicable laws and policies do not seem to complement

26 in F Veriava, A Thom, and T F Hodgson (eds) Basic Education Rights Handbook: Education Rights in South Africa (2017) 315.
27 Zuze and Beku (2019) 230.
28 230.
29 For a comprehensive discussion on the identified gaps and shortcomings of legislation and policies relating to educator sexual misconduct, see the LRC internal memorandum by Z Mhahlo and C Kreuser of 14 June 2021.
30 Veriava et al (2017) 324.

each other hinders implementation. As a result, learners often do not know how or where to report sexual misconduct, or do not trust that the mechanisms in place will protect them if they bring forth a complaint.[30]The insufficient legislative framework complicates the task of ensuring a safe school environment for girl learners.

Ultimately, the DBE should align the different legislation and policies, working with the Department of Health, South African Council for Educators (SACE), and the SAPS, to ensure comprehensive protection for girl learners from sexual assault in the school environment.

Beyond putting the necessary legislative mechanisms in place to both prevent and address sexual misconduct towards girl learners, the school curriculum also has a role to play in terms of educating on the matter. In this regard, CSE becomes important for teaching learners - in an age-appropriate and incremental manner - about their bodies, consent, navigating and challenging gender norms, and what constitutes sexual assault. CSE can also assist in addressing the preconceptions of teachers about gender roles, as educators are guided by scripted lessons plans that empower them to discuss topics that might otherwise be avoided due to their discomfort with the subject.

Currently, CSE is only being implemented in a few schools across South Africa. In 2020, it was reported that CSE was being piloted in 1 572 schools across Free State, KwaZulu Natal, Mpumalanga, and the Western Cape provinces.[31] It is necessary that it be expanded to all schools to ensure that learners have access to accurate information about consent and sexual misconduct, informed by the human rights focused lens of the Constitution.

Such interventions need to be implemented urgently as sexual assault is a major barrier to education for girl learners. Indeed, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation has found that sexual assault profoundly effects the educational outcomes of girl learners and leads to dropouts.[32]

31 Question NW1969 to the Minister of Basic Education (1 September 2020) https://pmg.org.za/committee-question/14490/.
32 UNESCO 'School-related Gender-based violence' available at: https://en.unesco.org/themes/school-violence-and-bullying/school-related-gender-based-violence.

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Child marriage

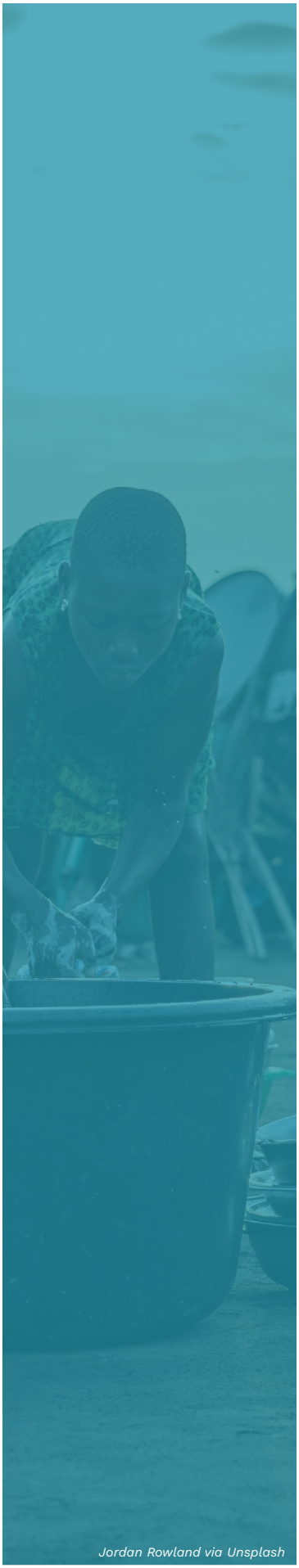
It is estimated that every year, 15 million girls around the world are married before the age of 18.[33] Child marriage is, unequivocally, a violation of the fundamental human rights of children. Girls are disproportionately affected by child marriages. [34]

Following a study on child marriages globally, the World Bank found that the practice not only violates the rights of millions of girls every year, but also brings "significant development impacts at the individual, community, and society levels." [35]

In 2010, Statistics South Africa (STATSSA) reported 785 girls and 57 boys were minors at the time of marriage. In comparison, there were 174 marriages of girls and 14 of boys who were under the age of 18 years in 2011.[36] The number of registered marriages of those married before the age of 18 decreased to 118 girls and 13 boys in 2012.[37] An overwhelming decrease is further found in 2013, with a recorded number of 79 girls and 9 boys under the age of 18 years at the time of marriage.[38] A further reduction was seen in 2019, with 68 girls and 3 boys marrying before their 18th birthday. 60 of the 68 girls married that year were married for the first time.[39]

The statistics demonstrate a correlation between poverty, learner dropout, and child marriage. Girls who marry young often drop out of school and are subsequently denied an education, which further perpetuates gender inequality and leads to higher levels of poverty.[40]

33 Girls Not Brides 'About Child Marriages' (2021) http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/about-child-marriage/ (accessed 20-09-2021).
34 UNICEF 'Child Marriage' available at: https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage#:~:text=Child%20marriage%20is%20often%20the,disproportionately%20affected%20by%20the%20practice.&text=Girls%20who%20marry%20before%2018,likely%20to%20remain%20in%20school.
35 J Parsons & J McCleary-Sills 'Preventing Child Marriage: Lessons from World Bank Group Gender Impact Evaluations' (2008) http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/Gender/enGENDER%20IMPACT%20-%20Research%20Brief%20Early%20Marriage%2008.07.pdf (accessed 20-09-2021).
36 STATSSA 'Marriages and divorces' (10 December 2012) http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0307/P03072011.pdf (accessed 20-09-2021).
37 STATSSA 'Marriages and divorces' (15 December 2014) http://beta2.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0307/P03072012.pdf (accessed 20-09- 2021).
38 STATSSA 'Marriages and divorces' (30 April 2015) http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0307/P03072013.pdf (accessed 20-09-2021).
39 STATSSA 'Marriages and divorces' (18 March 2021) http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0307/P03072019.pdf (accessed 20-09-2021]
40 World Bank 'Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: Global Synthesis Report' (2017).



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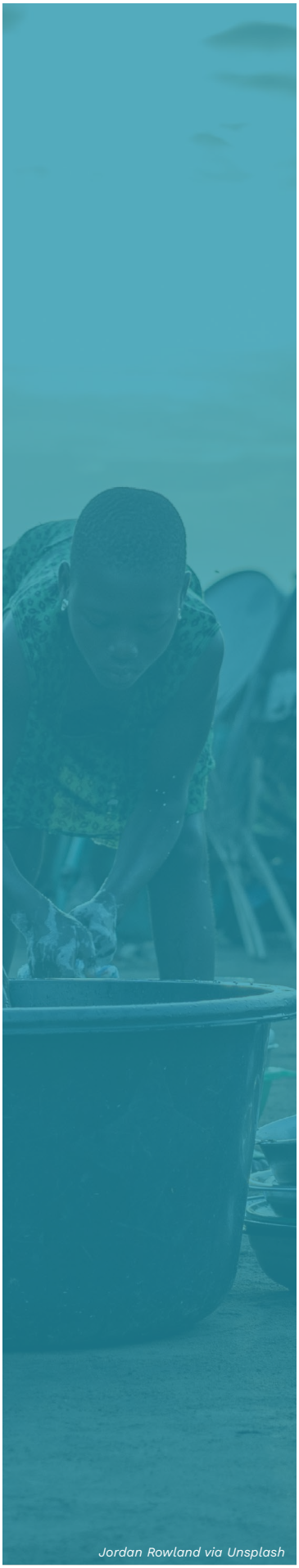
Household care duties

Beyond the impact of child marriage on girl learners' access to education, girls are often forced to either drop out of school or attend school on an irregular basis in order to care for ill family members, raise younger siblings, and take on household keeping responsibilities.[41] For example, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) published research in 2016 showing that '[g]irls aged 5–14 years already spend 40% more time doing household work than boys do'.[42]

Although the Borgen Project and UNESCO report that girls are adversely affected by household duties and care responsibilities, data from STATSSA's 2015 Survey of Activities of Young People show that there is not much difference amongst boys and girls in their participation in household chores. For example, in 2010, 83% of girls were involved in household chores, whereas 78% of boys were involved. In 2015, 81% of girls were involved, whilst 77% of boys were involved

Despite girls being more involved in household work than boys, the bigger difference seems to be amongst racial groups. Black (2010: 84%; 2015: 82%) children are far more likely to help with household duties than Coloured (2010: 76%; 2015: 76%), Indian (2010: 60%; 2015: 53%), and White (2010: 45%; 2015: 45%) children.[43]

41 N C Kellog 'Recent advances in girls' education in South Africa increase access' (11-05-2018) https://borgenproject.org/girls-education-in-south-africa/ (accessed 21-09-2021).
42 UNICEF 'Girls spend 160 million more hours than boys doing household chores everyday' (07-10-2016) https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/girls-spend-160-million-more-hours-boys-doing-household-chores-everyday (accessed 21-09-2021).
43 STATSSA, Survey of Activities of Young People (2015) http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0212/P02122015.pdf



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Sanitation and access to hygiene products

Safe sanitation in South African schools has been an issue for decades. The 2016 and 2020 deadlines set for providing safe and efficient water and sanitation, in terms of the Regulations Relating to Minimum Uniforms and Standards for Public School Infrastructure, have passed without compliance.[44] As a result, many schools are still without reliable water access and use pit latrines or other forms of outdoor ablution facilities. The National Education Infrastructure Management System (NEIMS) standard report of August 2020 showed that 25% of schools in South Africa have an unreliable water supply and still use pit latrines.[45] These facilities are unsafe, both in terms of physical use and exposing girl learners to a heightened risk of sexual assault.[46] This is the reality despite decisions from the High Court ordering that all pit latrines must be replaced with a sufficient number of toilets that are both safe and accessible, provide adequate privacy, and promote health and hygiene.[47]

The Independent Expert on the Issue of Human Rights Obligations related to Access to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation sets out the normative criteria that should be met for states to comply with their obligations regarding water and sanitation. Speaking on the right to education, the Independent Expert explained that lack of access to appropriate sanitation facilities contributes to illness and dropout rates. In particular, attention was drawn to the importance of segregating toilets in schools because "where toilets are not sex-segregated, girls often drop out of school, notably at the age of menstruation". [48]

In this regard, research has hypothesised the connection between a lack of access to female hygiene products, adequate water and sanitation facilities at school, and school attendance.[49] Crankshaw, Strauss, and Gumede surveyed 505 girl learners with a median age of 17. It was found that the 46% of girls who had insufficient hygiene products, over a three-month period, were more likely to be reported missing from school than those who had sufficient products (22.5%).[50]

The Department of Women, Youth, and Persons with Disabilities adopted a Menstrual Health Management (MHM) response in 2019. The MHM sets out a framework for (i) access to sanitary products; (ii) water supply, sanitation, and hygiene; (iii) procurement; (iv) manufacturing; (v) distribution and storage; as well as (vi) sanitary waste disposal.[51]

44 GG 37081: 920 (29 November 2013).
45 NEIMS 'National Education Infrastructure Management System Standard Report' (August 2020) https://equaleducation.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/DBE-NEIMS-REPORT-2020.docx.pdf (accessed 30-09-2021).
46 N C Kellog 'Recent advances in girls' education in South Africa increase access' (11-05-2018) https://borgenproject.org/girls-education-in-south-africa/ (accessed 21-09-2021).
47 Komape and Others v Minister of Basic Education (1416/2015) [2018] ZALMPPHC 18 (23 April 2018). See also: Z Pikoli 'Court orders Limpopo education dept to devise workable plan for abolition of school pit toilets' (17-09-2021) https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-09-17-court-orders-limpopo-education-dept-to-devise-workable-plan-for-abolition-of-school-pit-toilets/ (accessed 21-09-2021).
48 Para 30.
49 L Haberer 'Menstruation and School Girls in South Africa: An Intervention Study' https://crownschool.uchicago.edu/menstruation-and-school-girls-south-africa-intervention-study (accessed 30-09-2021).
50 T L Crankshaw, M Strauss, B Gumede 'Menstrual health management and schooling experience amongst female learners in Gauteng, South Africa: a mixed method study' (2020) 17 Reproductive Health https://reproductive-health-journal.biomedcentral.com/ articles/10.1186/s12978-020-0896-1 (accessed 30-09-2021).

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Although the MHM response can be praised for its aims, the implementation has been plagued by administrative issues. As such, most sanitary products distribution programmes have been run through provincial or private initiatives. Crankshaw et al. argue that although the steps taken thus far are commendable, the lack of research into the connection between access to female hygiene products, adequate water and sanitation facilities at school, and school attendance means that it is difficult to propose a practical national response.[52]

Scholar transport

The National Household Travel Survey (NHTS) of 2020 revealed that the most commonly stated purpose of travelling amongst South Africans was to get to educational institutions. The NHTS of 2013 reported that 11 million learners walk the entire way to school, without using any form of transport. Similarly, the NHTS of 2020 reported that 10.1 million of a total 18.5 million learners walk the entire way to school.[53]

Relying on the NHTS and National Household Surveys of 2002 and 2017, Children Count reports that two-thirds of learners walk to school, while only 3% of learners get to school using government-provided scholar transport.[54] This is despite the adoption of the National Learner Transport Policy in 2015, which aimed to provide state-funded transport to learners who have to travel long distances to school.[55]

Although all learners face risks to their safety when walking to school, girls are at an increased risk of the following factors that increase dropout rates: gender-based violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking. Because more learners from rural areas have to walk long distances to attend school, these girls are most at risk.

51 Department of Women, Youth, and Persons with Disabilities 'Sanitary Dignity Framework' (2019) http://www. women.gov.za/images/Sanitary-Dignity-Framework---June-2019-9-07-2019-without-highlights.pdf accessed 30-09-2021).
52 Crankshaw et al (2020).
53 STATSSA 'National Household Travel Survey 2020' (2021) http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0320/P03202020.pdf (accessed 30-09-2021).
54 K Hall 'Children living far from school' (2019) http://childrencount.uct.ac.za/indicator.php?domain=6&indicator=46 (accessed 30-09-2021).
55 GG 39314: 997 (23 October 2015)

Discussion and conclusion

There have been important developments in addressing the barriers to education for girl learners in South Africa. By way of example, the Girls' Education Movement has worked at a grassroots level at promoting equal access to education for girls, enhancing the quality of education in rural areas, building safer schools and reducing violence against girls, and providing gender-responsive school material.[56]

Despite the contributions from public interest organisations and increasing promises and interventions from the DBE, girls still face significant barriers in access to education. However, it is difficult to quantify the impact of many of these barriers, because the data does not always show exactly how many girls are affected by them. In the case of the General Household Survey, which arguably contains the most reliable information on learner drop-out rates in South Africa. Dropout rates are listed as percentages of categories and split along gender lines. The issue with reporting this data in this manner is that it is unclear (or difficult to calculate) how many boy and girl learners are represented, respectively.

This report sought to outline the barriers to education for girl learners. It aimed to provide an overview of the challenges that girl learners face, both in the school environment and in accessing education. The discussion shows that the types of obstacles that girl learners face are multifaceted and that, although some progress has been made, the implementation of existing plans has been insufficient thus far.

56 N C Kellog 'Recent advances in girls' education in South Africa increase access' (11-05-2018) https:borgenproject.org/girls-education-in-south-africa/ (accessed 21-09-2021).

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