



REPORT ON A NATIONAL DIALOGUE ON THE SCHOOL RE-ENTRY POLICY FOR GIRLS



The STAR Ghana Foundation belongs to the people of Ghana. We create platforms for ordinary people, particularly the most marginalised in society, to become active citizens who demand positive change in their lives and communities.

Our vision is to see a well-informed and active Ghanaian citizenry able to contribute to transformational change that advances democracy, accountability and social inclusion.

We want to increase the effectiveness of citizens and civil society to achieve an equitable, inclusive society by convening inclusive dialogue and collaboration; catalysing active citizenship and collective action; coordinating and supporting strategic partnerships, and facilitating continuous learning to fuel wider scale change.

Our ultimate goal is to ensure all citizens, regardless of gender, disability, age or location, are empowered to participate in decisions and raise concerns. We will continue to support a vibrant civil society to engage constructively with the government and drive forward a transformative development agenda that will leave nobody behind.

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Introduction & Opening

The moderator, Shamima Muslim welcomed all participants to the meeting. She highlighted the importance of the conversation and reiterated that, the COVID pandemic has exposed new variants of inequalities and deepened existing ones, and also increased vulnerabilities of school girls to sexual violence and abuse. She highlighted on some statistics on teenage pregnancy, from the Central region alone, which stood at 3,198 between January and May 2020, and findings from research which indicated that one out of three girls dropping out of school within the same period, due to pregnancy and could not return to school when schools re-opened. She reiterated that the imperative for collective actions to support these girls to return and stay in school.

With support from UNICEF, the Ghana Education Service in 2018 started the implementation of the school re-entry policy for girls. The national dialogue, convened by the STAR Ghana Foundation was therefore to explore with the stakeholders within the education sector the following.

- i. What has been organisations experiences with the implementation of the policy, in other words what has worked and need reinforcement and what has been some of the challenges against the smooth implementation of the policy that will require new thinking and new strategy.
- ii. What needs to be done to create more awareness to ensure better uptake of the policy and what strategies should be adopted for this?.
- iii. How do we deepen and strengthen stakeholder partnerships and collaborations on all levels to ensure the governance around the policy is effective.

Opening Remarks by the Executive Director OF STAR-Ghana Foundation

The dialogue was organized by the STAR-Ghana Foundation in partnership with SONGTABA and the Africa Education Watch. He thanked all participants for joining to participate in the dialogue.

The dialogue focuses on one of the myriads of challenges that face the girl child with regards access to quality education. In 2020, STAR Ghana commissioned a rapid assessment on the impact of covid on sexual gender-based violence. The report flagged the high numbers of teenage pregnancies across the nation due to the lockdown due to covid. The issue of stakeholder action on securing re-entry for girls was highly recommended.

Following from the dialogue, the Foundation organized three zonal dialogues in Mankessim (Central Region), Asesewa (Upper Manya Krobo) and Tamale (Northern Region) to better understand the contexts and emerging issues on the school re-entry policy for girls.

The findings and recommendations from the zonal and districts convenings have fed into the national dialogue which seeks to examine the implementation of the GES guidelines on re-entry of student mothers. His expectation was that the conversation will help develop recommendations to influence the implementation of policies and practices and develop mechanisms to improve the policy implementation at all levels.

Remarks from UK Aid: education advisor and representative of the British High Commission

- i. She mentioned this dialogue was a critical one, with UNICEF estimated that about 10% of Ghanaian students which is 1 million students have not returned since the re-opening of schools; with few girls returning than boys.
- ii. She said the UK was committed to working with the government and CSOs to collectively support more girls returning to school. However, the policy will need collaboration across all sectors, youth, and parents of the teenage mothers. She provided instances where the UKAID had supported to get about 25,000 girls re-enter schools in January 2021 following the re-opening of school after the lockdown.
- iii. Education for women and girls is a smart investment; it supports individual, community, and national growth. It is very vital for levelling up society.
- iv. The pandemic added extra levels of challenges and therefore pregnant girls need extra support to overcome stigma and re-enter school. She commended the GES for developing the guidelines to facilitate girl's re-entry after childbirth and the national rollout of the policy.
- v. She further highlighted the need for teenage mothers to know they could return to school to continue their education; whilst ensuring that their colleagues are better equipped to support them in school. Also ensuring that school management committees and district assemblies understand the guidelines and are trained to engage PTAs, the community, and parents of student-mothers to support them or facilitate their re-entry into school and the need for better data reporting system support government in their planning is critical.
- vi. She also called for a stronger collaboration between GES, GHS, and the department of social welfare in implementing the policy.

Presentation of Discussion Paper on Examining Implementation Experiences of the policy in the covid 19 pandemic era

- i. The re-entry policy is essential for gender sensitive empowerment which is very critical for national development. It is the reason we need to allocate scarce resources to address the underlying challenges to women's empowerment
- ii. Closure of schools has been linked to a surge in teenage pregnancies globally. According to the Northern Regional Education Director in the zonal convening held in Tamale, many girls did not write BECE because of pregnancy related issues.
- iii. Africa is the hardest hit with teenage pregnancies with about 40-60% of pregnancies unintended, thereby interrupting the lives of many girls especially with their schooling.
- iv. The Covid pandemic made the roll out of the policy more difficult because of the lockdown and closure of schools. This has created a double jeopardy for girls; first from the loss of school protection and loss of home support as parents and guardians lost their jobs and sources of livelihood.
- v. GES streamlined guidelines to offer direction for districts and CSOs on how to handle pregnant schoolgirls and teenage mothers especially because the topic is delicate and there is the challenge to transition from opposing teenage pregnancies to supporting the girls who may have gotten pregnant. The key objective of the policy is to implement measures to prevent schoolgirl pregnancies and standardise procedures for managing school pregnancy and re-entry to school for girls who become pregnant. GES envisages broad partnerships across public and private agencies as well as communities.

vi. Challenges impeding the effectiveness of the policy includes the ineffectiveness of the school management committees, low commitment of district offices and faith-based organizations leadership, sporadic media engagements. There is also low documentations of trends around teenage pregnancy and re-entry in the EMIS data system. Another challenge encountered was with the generalizations of these girls; not regarding the differences (background, financial situations) that might exist between them which will require a modified approach in re-enrolling them in schools.

vii. Recommendations to support the policy include having a multi-agency leadership across public and private sectors and community agents such as building effective school management committees and making district offices more committed to the policy. Inciting the media to be more committed to the policy and intensify public awareness. There is a need to have a more rigorous data management in an existing MIS system.

Highlights of Panel discussion

The panel shared their experiences, from the perspectives of civil society and from the government. The experiences highlighted the key challenges, what had worked, and which aspects need reinforcements. The panellists were:

- Mrs Benedicta Seidu, Director, Girls Education Unit, Ghana Education Service.
- Mr Kofi Asare, Executive Director, African Education Watch.

Overall experiences:

- The GEU Director stated that in September 2019, GES wrote a circular through the regional directors to promote the re-entry policy. They also trained stakeholders across the country and distributed the policy document to schools in the 16 regions both private and public."
- During the back-to-school campaign, and the training for district task force, the re-entry policy was one of the thematic areas that the team was sensitized on.
- Since the roll out of the policy in 2018, according to the education management information system (EMIS) in 2017/18 about 2720 girls returned to school nationally. In 2018/19, 3212 girls returned. Due to the pandemic, there has been a delay in the collection of data for the 2019/20 academic year. Data collected on the re-entry has been inputted in the EMIS data.
- Mr Asare commended the GES for their efforts in data collection, tracking, and the capacity building for district offices, schools and stakeholders across the country to enhance efforts of these stakeholders to support student mothers to re-enter school. He noted some of these challenges undermining the effectiveness of policy implementation.
- social perceptions of communities entrenched by religion and culture, giving rise to gap in acceptance of communities to support girls who get pregnant to go back to school. Child marriage appears to be the next option for these girls as often times, these girls are married off.

- Little to no collaboration between GES and custodians of tradition and culture and faith-based organizations. Communication efforts, to combat stigma and promote acceptance of policy, have limited the participation of traditional and religious authorities, who have influence in cultural practices, and could become champions if they are supporting this initiative.

From the panel discussion, these suggestions were raised;

- i. Repositioning the re-entry policy to ensure the acceptance of the policy and buy-in of traditional and faith-based leaders. This should include engaging traditional and faith leaders to play a leading role in communication and dissemination of information and facilitating conversation in communities that will lead to changes in attitudes and behaviour of the communities towards the girls.
- ii. Strategic media collaboration for public campaign and advocacy on the policy.
- iii. Inclusion of pregnant girls data into the national EMIS report. This could be done with support from teachers from community schools. Publishing data on pregnant girls from the school and district levels will serve as proper evidence to make accurate policy decisions.
- iv. Enforce strategic coordination and collaboration among NCCE, Gender department, Department of Social welfare in the communities.

Open forum: contributions and recommendations

The open discussion invited contributions from stakeholders particularly on strategies for communication and advocacy to combat stigma; promoting multi-stakeholder coordination; and data management. The following observations were raised;

Data Management

- i. The importance of data for information and decision making cannot be overemphasized. World Education suggested that 'the GES should approach data gathering and analysis from an inclusive perspective and should include analysis of rural urban data patterns to identify what influences the rates of pregnancies in these areas.' Plan International mentioned 'the need to make data on teenage pregnancies easily access for stakeholders.' Intentional data collection to aid planning and implementation of the policy to serve as evidence to back the facts. This will also help track progress being made.
- ii. 'Mainstreaming of indicators within the national development planning framework is critical to secure higher level commitment to re-entry and tracking of annual progress. The National Development Planning Commission has invited the GES to the ongoing planning process to better integrate re-entry.'

Communication, advocacy and sensitization

- i. GES and partners should adopt national communication strategy for the policy. This strategy should encompass sensitization of traditional authorities and faith-based organizations to secure buy into the policy. It should also target teenage mothers to educate them on the policy and their right to return to school after childbirth. Involving girls (who have successfully returned to school after childbirth) as champions of the policy to share their experiences and motivate other young girls to return to school.
- ii. World Education recommended 'communication strategy should integrate reproductive health rights education, as a mechanism to preventing pregnancy among teenage girls.' Plan International Ghana also highlighted 'the need to include boys in the reproductive health rights educations as a mechanism to reduce the high rate of teenage pregnancy.'

Next Steps

1. Report on convenings- zonal and national to be made available to stakeholders, and matters arising presented to the Ghana Education Service.
2. STAR Ghana will facilitate and coordinate actors around some key recommendations, for example around the mainstreaming of indicators into the national development planning framework currently ongoing.
3. Collaborate on testing approaches around communities involvement and investment into solutions to their issues and priorities.

Additional Information

Feedback from district and zonal dialogues.

Districts and zonal dialogues were convened on the Ghana Education Service Guidelines for the prevention of teenage pregnancy and the Re-entry for Girls into school after childbirth. The purpose of the dialogues was to create platform for discussion and collaboration among stakeholders to strengthen the implementation of re-entry for girls.

Overall, stakeholders included Girls Education Officer of the Girls Education Unit from each of the districts and zones, traditional authorities (chiefs and queen mothers), PTA members, National Commission for Civic Education Representatives, district assembly reps, civil society organizations, Department of social Welfare, Ghana Health Service, teachers, media.

Implementation experiences/ Success stories on re-entry

Mankessim District

A teacher noted that:



"they had recorded the successful re-entry of two girls after childbirth. On the girls return, they had not faced stigmatization of any sort because the school had oriented the classmates, and the entire school on the need to support their colleagues."

Asesewa District

CSOs such as Plan International embarked on orientation and a sensitization of the policy among girls in the community. They also used celebrative days like international day of the girl child to motivate the girls to return to school.



- Girls Education Unit observed that during monitoring, 3 nursing mothers had returned to school. There was also a case of a girl who had dropped out of school to cohabit with a man, but after several interventions, the girl returned to school.
- Before the COVID pandemic, the Girls Education Unit embarked on organizing camps for the girls, celebration of international days and cultural activities. After re-opening of schools, the unit organized training for stakeholders to form a taskforce.
- The training of the taskforce centred around teenage pregnancy, re-entry of girls and its benefits, creating a safe school (welcome environment from friends and teachers). The advocacy task force moved to about 50 communities, employed the use of the radio stations, local public address system, church, markets, and the PTA. The training covered both boys and girls.

Northern Zone

- i. The GES supported by ActionAid undertook sensitization in collaboration with Community Anti Violence Team (COMBACT) in schools and communities.
- ii. They helped to identify pregnant girls, track them, and facilitate their return to school. In the schools there has been the creation and promotion of safe spaces. ActionAid has created the Girls Platforms at the basic level in 58 schools to build the self-esteem and self-confidence of the girls.
- iii. ActionAid also constructed 2 schools in each region in the North specifically for the teenage girls to get back to school. Statistics show that every year not less than 50 teenage mothers enrol in these schools. It was observed that once the policy was made community based, parents were committed to support them and they received training.

Matters Arising

- Policy Accessibility: Awareness among schools and communities on the re-entry guidelines is weak, even though the GES does a level of sensitization. Wider dissemination of the policy, and if possible in local languages is critical for an effective uptake.
- Involvement of traditional authority, and byelaws: The influence of traditional authorities in shaping community values cannot be over-emphasized. Queen mothers can become a great ally in the dissemination of this policy within communities, and the GES and partners should explore this strategy. Secondly, bye-laws have a place in sanctioning behaviours and mitigating social activities that predispose girls to teenage pregnancy. It was suggested for a tripartite collaboration between GES, traditional leaders and district assemblies to introduce additional measures, such as byelaws to protect girls from being exposed to practices that could result in teenage pregnancy.
- Involvement of Faith-based organizations to incorporate a 'gospel of the re-entry policy' and using their platforms to educate their congregants on the policy and to encourage them to support re-entry efforts.
- Intensive sensitization: This is critical to address stigma from people in the community, and peers in the school. The strategy of involving pregnant girls who have benefitted from re-entry could assist in the education in communities to encourage other girls. Sensitization should be inclusive to be able to respond to needs of different girls. Sensitization should also target boys and empower parents to engage in sex education for their children.
- Data availability: there was a consensus that data collected was not holistic and as such, it does not always give real time information to work with. . There was no data available to speak to the current numbers of pregnant girls in school or had dropped out to help with tracking. There was a recommendation for a two-tier data system, that both captures the national situation and the district as well. Real time data at the district level will enable rapid analysis response in tracking of girls who may dropout.

- Enabling structures in schools and communities: Resourcing schools with well trained counsellors to provide psycho-social support for the girls is important going forward. Whilst schools currently have guidance and counselling units, most have weak capacities to deliver on their roles respectively. The Regional Director of Education, Northern Region indicated that a short term measure is to integrate re-entry in in service training to enable them to provide a support system. It was also recommended that the Family and welfare system in the community is revamped to provide adequate support for student mothers.
- Coordination among stakeholders: a coordinated stakeholders action has been recommended, with GES tasked to coordinate actors engaging on re-entry to maximize complementarity, learning and impact. GES should initiate a meeting with partners at different levels to agree on ways of working and regular updates.

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the School Re-entry Policy for Girls**

