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EMPOWERING HER FUTURE: THE IMPACT OF UNICEF'S INTERVENTIONS ON GIRL-CHILD EDUCATION IN THE GAMBIA

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ABSTRACT
The dispositions of societies and governments in Africa to girl-child education has raised some concerns. This is occasioned by the value placed on a girl-child by some religions and traditions across the continent. This article investigates the impact of UNICEF intervention programs on girl-child education in The Gambia. The article examines the interventions, evaluates the effects, and identifies the challenges of girl-child education in the country. Using Krejcie and Morgan's formula, a sample of 257 respondents was drawn from a population of 777, employing stratified, proportionate-to-size, and random sampling techniques.

Keywords: UNICEF, Girl-child education, Intervention programs, Community participation, and Gender Equity.

Introduction
Improving girl-child education has long been a major concern, particularly in Africa, where gender inequities persist. According to the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) (2014) Gender Development Index (GDI), females in The Gambia receive significantly fewer years of schooling than boys, with an average of only two years compared to 3.7 years for boys. Education provides children with

essential knowledge, skills, and expertise that benefit them throughout their lives. Investing in education fosters national prosperity, especially when both boys and girls have equal opportunities. In The Gambia, females represent a slight majority of the population (Gambia Bureau of Statistics, 2013), underscoring the importance of addressing their educational needs for the nation's advancement.

According to the UNDP (2014), only 17.4% of Gambian women over 25 years have completed secondary education, compared to 31.5% of men. Additionally, women comprise 72.2% of the workforce, compared to 82.9% for men. Females' lower educational attainment contributes to restricted decision-making participation, lower household income, and limited efficacy as national development partners. Education postpones the age at which girls marry and have their first child, but in a traditional patriarchal society like The Gambia, financial restrictions frequently cause parents to prioritize boys' education over girls'. As a result, female education is routinely overlooked.

Education has a transformative impact on females, especially when it leads to employment, as it provides direct entry into the labour force and empowers women. In The Gambia, female illiteracy significantly affects their later lives, with adult male illiteracy at 36.1% and female illiteracy at 52.8% (World Bank, 2015). Among youths aged 15 to 24, the illiteracy rate is 33% for girls and 26% for boys (UNICEF, 2016). Women are often overrepresented in vulnerable or unpaid jobs. In agriculture, for example, women and their daughters primarily work in rice farming using outdated methods, which results in low productivity. Despite their substantial contributions, women lack land ownership and management rights, access to finance, and influence in decision-making.

The Gambia's girls confront considerable inequality in education and other areas. Women now hold only 9.4% of parliamentary seats (World Bank, 2016), falling short of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) objective of 33%. Regarding education, only 16.9% of adult females had graduated from at least secondary school by 2013, compared to 31.4% of men. Maternal health remains a serious issue, with 360 deaths per 100,000 deliveries, well behind the MDG target of 263 (UNDP, 2014). Girls' education is further hampered by their lack of qualifications, which forces them to concentrate on household responsibilities, childcare, and elderly care.

Significant gaps persist in reaching vulnerable children, with 31.6% of girls aged 7 to 15 out of school in 2010. The most severe cases are found in rural areas, where poverty restricts girls' access to secondary education due to the financial struggles faced by their families (World Bank, 2010). The

MDGs aimed for universal primary education and gender equality by 2015, but Gambia's progress report showed that while primary enrollment reached 95.3%, retaining girls in secondary and higher education remained challenging, with literacy rates for girls and boys aged 15-24 at 63% and 70%, respectively (MDG, 2014).

Gambian women, particularly those in rural areas, face major challenges to accessing decent healthcare, adequate income for economic activities, and participation in community decision-making, highlighting persistent gender disparities (World Bank, 2010). According to a survey conducted by Meth, William, and Willis (2014), women with lower levels of education are more likely to accept domestic violence, less likely to engage in family planning, and less likely to receive sufficient antenatal care or give birth in medical facilities.

Educating and employing girls in The Gambia is critical to tackling many of the country's difficulties. Education reduces poverty, lowers new born and maternal death rates, reduces inequality, enhances family health and well-being, and enables women to make autonomous and active decisions. The persistent challenge of female empowerment in poor nations, particularly The Gambia, is highlighted by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2015–2025. The fifth Sustainable Development Goal strives to achieve equal opportunities for and empowerment of women and girls. This study investigates the impact of UNICEF interventions on girl-child education in The Gambia.

Education enhances a developing country's capability to embrace new technologies and support independent growth and development. However, data from The Gambia show that girls have significantly less access to formal education compared to boys (Meth, William, & Willis, 2014). The 1997 constitution of The Gambia declares that basic education is a right and should be free, mandatory, and open to both sexes. In response, the Gambian government has aligned its education policies, including the current 2016-2030 education policy, with Sustainable Development Goal 4, which highlights accessible, equitable, and inclusive quality education for all children.

UNICEF has been supporting the Gambian government through the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MoBSE) to attain these education policy goals. Their measures are guided by the UNICEF Country Programme Document 2017-2021, which strives to create an inclusive education system for all children, specifically concentrating on girls. The Gambian government is legally and morally bound to enforce the Sustainable Development Goals 2030, particularly Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Goal 10 (Reduced Inequality).

Despite government actions and collaborations with UNICEF to

facilitate and increase education for girls, substantial improvement has not been achieved. Therefore, this research investigates the impact of UNICEF initiatives on girl-child education in The Gambia.

The following questions guided the study: i. What are the intervention activities used by UNICEF to encourage girl-child education in The Gambia? ii. What are the effects of UNICEF intervention activities on girl-child education in The Gambia? iii. What are the challenges militating against UNICEF intervention activities in The Gambia? The broad objective of the study is to assess the effect of UNICEF intervention activities on girl-child education in The Gambia. The specific objectives of the study are to: i. examine the intervention activities used by UNICEF to encourage girl-child education in The Gambia; ii. evaluate the effect of UNICEF intervention activities on girl-child education in The Gambia; and iii. investigate the challenges militating against UNICEF intervention activities in The Gambia.

The following hypothesis was formulated for the study: H0: UNICEF intervention activities have no significant effect on girl-child education in The Gambia. The study examines the influence of UNICEF's initiatives on girl-child education in The Gambia, concentrating on the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MoBSE), the Directorate of Education in Central River Region South, and UNICEF The Gambia. The Directorate of Education in Central River Region South is tasked with managing, monitoring, and supervising educational activities under MoBSE's guidance. The study targeted senior and middle management staff from MoBSE, the Directorate of Education in Central River Region South, and UNICEF The Gambia due to their roles and inter-relationships, which provided them with the expertise to address how UNICEF's interventions affect girl-child education in The Gambia. This investigation covers the period from 2015 to 2023, chosen based on data availability and the need to evaluate the influences of UNICEF's efforts on girl-child education within this timeframe.

Regional Perspectives of Child Education, Gender Equality, and Government Interventions

Socioeconomic development is significantly influenced by education; however, in sub-Saharan Africa, obstacles to girls' education still exist. In order to provide comparative insights into the difficulties and government initiatives to advance gender equality in education, this section examines the experiences of Ghana, Nigeria, and The Gambia. These countries were selected for their shared socio-cultural dynamics and unique approaches to addressing gender disparities in education. Ghana's community-driven projects, Nigeria's varied policy environment, and The Gambia's legislative frameworks all offer insightful viewpoints on how governments and foreign interventions—especially those carried out by UNICEF—can improve education for girls in West Africa.

Nigeria's demographic variety and sociopolitical issues make it an intricate but informative case study when it comes to girl-child education. Nigeria, home to more than 200 million people with a wide range of ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds, has unique geographical inequalities, particularly regarding girls' access to school. Due to issues with culture, economy, and security, northern Nigeria, in particular, has lower enrolment and dropout rates.

UNICEF has been crucial in addressing these challenges through policy advocacy, school rehabilitation, and girl-child scholarship programs. As highlighted by Nwozor and Okhillu (2022), these interventions have notably improved retention and completion rates in northern Nigeria, where traditional and security barriers to education are most pronounced. Moreover, UNICEF's support has been essential in driving awareness and providing resources to underserved areas, further contributing to girls' education in these regions.

According to Emechebe (2012) and Oluyemi & Yinusa (2016), the Universal Basic Education Programme (UBE) has been a major national project that aims to promote education for everyone, including girls. Although the program has made advancement in closing the gender gap in education, challenges like minimal community involvement, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of funding have prevented it from reaching its full potential. The UBE is nevertheless a crucial foundation for attaining educational parity in spite of these problems, especially for girls living in underprivileged areas.

However, gender-specific challenges persist as a challenge. Cultural expectations for girls' roles, the effects of instability, and the frequency of child labour are highlighted in studies by Offor et al. (2021) as enduring issues that impede girls' access to education. These socio-cultural factors, combined with economic difficulties, continue to limit the effectiveness of national educational initiatives in achieving gender equity. As a result, while Nigeria has achieved a lot in the education of girls, the country's socio-political challenges, demographic variety, and regional inequalities need specialised interventions and ongoing assistance from the government as well as international agencies like UNICEF.

In Ghana, the continued quest for fair education, through government policies and support from foreign supporters, makes it a good regional contrast to other West African countries. The country has made major advances in enhancing educational access for girls-child, supported by strategic initiatives and partnerships with organisations like UNICEF.

Particularly in the Garu-Tempane District, the CAMFED support system, as described by Akanbang et al. (2023), has significantly influenced girl-child education. By showing how focused

interventions can overcome local obstacles and advance educational results for girls in underprivileged areas, this strategy has successfully handled enrolment, retention, and academic performance concerns.

Ghana's educational development has also seen significant involvement from UNICEF. UNICEF's cooperation with local organisations has helped adolescent girls' education by means of an investment in the more general development of the nation, as underlined by McAsey & Bazerkovska-Sander (2022) and UNICEF USA (n.d.). These alliances have pushed for policy changes giving gender equality in education first priority and improved access to education.

Significant structural reforms have also been implemented to advance the transition from primary to secondary schooling, especially for girls in marginalised communities. The study by Sefa-Nyarko et al. (2018) talks about these changes and how they are meant to make education fairer and more open to everyone. These changes are very important to make sure that girls stay in school and get the help they need to finish their education at higher levels, even if they face problems.

Finally, Ghana is a significant model of how to achieve gender equality and educational balance in West Africa. This is because the country's method of educating girls is anchored on suitable measures that are backed by foreign collaborations and government policies. These measures from the government have made it possible for more progress to be made and will help close the education gap and gender imbalance.

The experience of girl-child education in The Gambia demonstrates the intricate interactions between international, policy, and sociocultural elements that influence the nation's educational system. Government-led strategic plans and programs to make schools fairer for girls and boys include the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (2016–2030) and the Women's Act (2010). These initiatives tackle gender imbalances in registration and retention, demonstrating the government efforts in equal education for both genders.

In The Gambia, UNICEF has been instrumental in expanding females' access to education. UNICEF's Country Report for 2012-2016 and Progress for Children in The Gambia (2015) both emphasise the organization's successful implementation of gender-sensitive education, community outreach, and infrastructural upgrades. A more encouraging learning environment for girls has been made possible in large part by these measures. Additionally, the UNDP's economic outlook and the Gambia Bureau of Statistics' (2013) demographic data highlight the significance of these efforts in removing the obstacles that girls encounter in their pursuit of an education.

There are still issues despite these attempts. Major obstacles encompass early marriage, socioeconomic limitations, and disparities between rural and urban areas, as highlighted by Drammeh (2017). Girls' educational opportunities are nonetheless restricted because of these conditions, especially in rural regions where access to excellent education is poor. Nonetheless, several opportunities for enhancement are available owing to the support of international partners, including the World Bank and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) framework. External resources can improve gender equality in The Gambia's educational system and eliminate systemic barriers to learning.

In summary, The Gambia's girl-child education system continues to face significant challenges, despite recent progress. Advancements in gender parity in education continue to be facilitated by national programs, supported by domestic legislation and external partnerships such as UNICEF.

Global and Theoretical Contributions

Foundational theories that provide important insights into the structural unfairness and economic issues impacting educational investment in girls form the basis of theoretical contributions to understanding girl-child education. A sociological lens through which to examine how cultural practices and social norms sustain gender-based educational inequality is provided by Bourdieu's (1990) work on structures, habitus, and practice. Similarly, Schultz (1960) frames education as a crucial component of human capital development and highlights the financial benefits of funding education, especially for girls. According to his school of thought, educating girls has long-term benefits for individual empowerment and overall socioeconomic development.

Apart from these fundamental theories, comparative development geography is crucial in placing the difficulties the global south faces in tackling gender and educational concerns in perspective. According to Meth et al. (2014), analysis of developing world geographies presents an insightful understanding of ways in which political and socioeconomic variables interact with educational institutions in these areas. Their analysis draws attention to the differences in girls' access to and quality of schooling across the global south. Williamson (2013) examined the continuity and discontinuity in educational structures, further contributing by offering a comparative framework for understanding how various countries, especially those in the global south, manage the intricate relationships between gender, education policy, and development.

These theoretical and comparative perspectives help frame the global and regional experiences of girl-child education, presenting an understanding of how structural barriers hinder educational progress for girls and the

policies needed to overcome them. Combining economic, sociological, and geographic theories enables a thorough understanding of the global challenges and opportunities in advancing girl-child education.

Methodological Approach

The study adopted a mixed method. This study involved 777 individuals comprising 14 senior and middle management personnel from UNICEF Gambia, 87 from the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education, 11 from the Directorate of Education in Region 5, and 665 executives from 95 Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) in the Central River Region South, verified during a pre-field visit in April 2024.) The questionnaires were distributed using a multi-stage sampling strategy that involved stratified, proportionate-to-size, and random sampling techniques. Using Krejcie and Morgan's formula, a sample of 257 respondents was selected from a total population of 777. This sample comprised 5 employees from UNICEF, 29 from MoBSE, 4 from the Directorate of Education, and 219 Community-Based Organisations executives, the latter chosen through snowball sampling. The Directorate of Education and UNICEF were purposefully selected due to their pivotal roles in education administration and government collaboration, respectively. CBOs executives were purposefully selected to complement data obtained from the governmental structure. The study used primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were obtained through questionnaires and interview guides. Interviews were purposefully conducted with three senior and middle management personnel from UNICEF Gambia, three representatives from the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education, three individuals from the Directorate of Education in Region 5, and five executives from Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) in the Central River Region South of The Gambia. Secondary data was collected from textbooks, academic journals, online materials, and official publications. This study concentrates on two main variables: the independent variable being UNICEF intervention activities, and the dependent variable being girl-child education. The indicators for UNICEF intervention activities include the availability of educational resources, training programs for teachers, community engagement initiatives, and health and nutrition support. The metrics for girl-child education are enrolment rates, attendance rates, academic performance, and retention rates. Summative content analysis was used to examine the interview responses for objectives one and three, while Multiple Regression Analysis was used to test the study's hypotheses aligned with objective two.

Empirical Evidence of UNICEF Intervention Activities and Girl-Child Education in The Gambia.

During the study, 257 questionnaires were distributed. Of these, 248 were returned, resulting in a 96% response rate. The remaining nine

questionnaires, representing 4%, were not returned. The following hypothesis was formulated and tested for the study based on the retrieved questionnaires.

The quantitative and qualitative findings present a multidimensional insight into the influence of UNICEF intervention activities on girl-child education in The Gambia. Both strands of data, though diverse in approach, offer converging and diverging perspectives that reinforce each other and reveal complexities across regional and global experiences, drawing attention to significant theoretical contributions.

First, the quantitative and qualitative results converge on the positive impact of educational resources on girl-child education. Statistically, the multiple regression model highlights a significant positive correlation between resource availability and educational outcomes (B = 0.229, p = .000). This empirical evidence is echoed in the qualitative narratives, where all informants stress the importance of free textbooks, school supplies, digital learning tools, and infrastructural investments in enhancing attendance and academic performance. Similar convergence is found in Ghana, where Akanbang et al. (2023) affirm that resource incentives from organisations like CAMFED significantly boost enrolment and progression. Globally, the theory of human capital (Schultz, 1960) supports this pattern, positing that investment in educational inputs directly enhances learning outcomes and national productivity. Theoretically, Bourdieu's concept of habitus further illuminates how improved school environments and accessible resources reconfigure social dispositions and norms in favor of girls' education.

However, divergence is observed regarding the effects of teacher training and community engagement. Quantitatively, teacher training exhibits a negative relationship with girl-child education (B = -0.214, p = .008), contrasting sharply with qualitative data where informants unanimously highlight improved gender-sensitive pedagogy and classroom inclusivity due to teacher capacity-building programs. This discrepancy stems from implementation challenges not captured in the survey data—possibly the misalignment of training content with local pedagogical needs or lack of follow-up support. A similar challenge is noted in Nigeria, where Nwozor and Okhillu (2022) argue that while training programs are designed to be empowering, they often lack contextual relevance and practical classroom application, resulting in unintended outcomes. This divergence underlines the need to move beyond program design to examine delivery efficacy, especially in varied socio-educational contexts.

Likewise, community engagement reveals a stark divergence. While quantitatively, community engagement initiatives negatively impact girl-child education (B = -0.524, p = .000), qualitatively, stakeholders strongly

praise community forums, girl empowerment clubs, and grassroots mobilisation efforts as transformative. Informants mention community champions, PTA collaborations, and mothers' clubs as effective in advocating for girls' rights and shifting cultural attitudes. This mismatch could be attributed to two factors: first, the persistence of deep-rooted patriarchal norms that may resist external interventions, and second, the possibility that poorly coordinated or sporadic engagement generates backlash or reinforces traditional stereotypes, especially in conservative settings. In contrast, in Ghana and Nigeria, evidence shows that sustained and locally owned community interventions foster better outcomes (McAsey & Bazerkovska-Sander, 2022; Offor et al., 2021). Therefore, the divergence indicates that while community engagement is crucial, its impact depends heavily on design, duration, and cultural sensitivity. In this area, theoretical insights from Bourdieu's sociocultural framework help unpack the clash between imposed structures and lived realities.

Additionally, health and nutrition support present a convergence in both findings as having a negligible or secondary role. Quantitatively, it shows an insignificant statistical impact (B = -0.022, p = .789), and qualitatively, it is often bundled with broader educational efforts rather than highlighted as a standalone driver. Nonetheless, stakeholders acknowledge its contribution to overall well-being, indirectly supporting educational continuity. The global literature also agrees that nutrition and health services are foundational but more impactful when integrated with educational programs, especially in low-resource settings (UNICEF, 2015; UNDP, 2014).

Moreover, both data sets converge in identifying structural and cultural barriers—poverty, poor infrastructure, early marriage, and gender norms—as significant constraints to the success of UNICEF interventions. These issues are deeply rooted in local realities and are consistent with regional experiences. In Nigeria, Emechebe (2012) and Oluyemi & Yinusa (2016) report similar cultural and economic barriers, while in Ghana, traditional expectations continue to curtail girls' access to consistent schooling despite growing institutional support. The Gambia Experience, as presented in Drammeh (2017) and EFA-Gambia (2015), echoes these concerns, confirming that cultural attitudes still frame educational aspirations differently for boys and girls. These findings also align with Bourdieu's theory of practice, which illustrates how entrenched beliefs, values, and social capital shape educational outcomes, often resisting short-term interventions.

On a global level, the findings underscore the importance of context-specific, multi-pronged strategies for girl-child education. While quantitative data offers generalisable patterns, the qualitative data provides depth, nuance, and explanatory richness. They

reinforce the need for adaptive programming that bridges strategic intent with contextual realities. According to Meth et al. (2014), the global south's unique social geographies demand interventions that are not only innovative but also locally embedded.

In conclusion, the findings affirm educational resources' significant influence, while exposing implementation gaps in teacher training and community engagement efforts. Convergence and divergence across the Gambia, Nigeria, and Ghana Experiences emphasise the importance of localised strategies, sustained community involvement, and culturally informed program delivery. Theoretically, this study advances the discourse by applying Bourdieu's sociocultural lens and Schultz's human capital theory to understand better the interplay between structural constraints and educational opportunities for girls in emerging economies.

Discussion of Findings

UNICEF's intervention programs, which include educational resources, teacher training, community participation, and health support, have demonstrated great potential. Firstly, as Drammeh (2017) highlights, scholarships, mentorship programs, and secure learning spaces are among initiatives aimed at removing educational hurdles. Additionally, re-enrollment campaigns, community outreach, and after-school activities have targeted dropped-out girls. Collaborations with community-based groups have been critical to implementing grassroots initiatives that directly benefit girls and their families. Consequently, the effectiveness of these initiatives is evident in improved attendance, performance, and enrollment rates. For instance, gender-sensitive teacher training has reduced biases and fostered inclusivity (Oluyemi and Yinusa, 2016). Moreover, community support through PTAs and school-community partnerships has strengthened the educational environment, ensuring more girls receive the education they deserve (Offor, Anadi, Ego, and Chukwuemeka, 2021).

Nevertheless, significant challenges persist. Cultural resistance, funding limitations, and logistical issues impede progress. Poverty, inadequate infrastructure, and teacher shortages remain pervasive obstacles. Geographic isolation, early marriages, and high dropout rates further complicate efforts to keep girls in school. Additionally, the lack of community buy-in and coordination issues hampers the effectiveness of intervention programs. Resource allocation issues exacerbate these challenges. Logistical difficulties and discrepancies in distribution delay the timely implementation of educational programs. Centralized resources and data inaccuracies contribute to delays, affecting the quality of education. The difficult terrain and insufficient transport infrastructure in remote areas complicate resource distribution.

Furthermore, inequitable distribution and storage/security issues lead to disparities in educational opportunities.

Cultural and societal factors significantly impact UNICEF's intervention activities. Traditional beliefs and early marriage practices continue to hinder girl-child education. To counter these, UNICEF implements community sensitization programs and policy advocacy. Engaging local women's groups and promoting successful female role models helps shift attitudes and demonstrate the benefits of educating girls.

On the hypothesis H0, stating that UNICEF intervention activities have no significant effect on girl-child education in The Gambia, was tested using multiple regression analysis. Firstly, the key findings reveal a positive relationship between the availability of educational resources and girl-child education (B = 0.229, p = .000), indicating their critical role. Conversely, the analysis reveals a negative impact of teacher training programs (B = -0.214, p = .008), implying the necessity for reevaluation and restructuring of these initiatives. Furthermore, there is a strong negative correlation between community engagement initiatives and girl-child education (B = -0.524, p = .000), necessitating urgent reform to avoid detrimental effects. Meanwhile, health and nutrition support reveals a negligible impact (B = -0.022, p = .789), although its essential role in overall well-being justifies its continued integration with educational initiatives.

Moreover, the ANOVA results reinforce the effectiveness of the regression model in explaining variations in girl-child education, with a substantial F-statistic (F = 69.608, p < .0001) indicating a robust explanatory power. Additionally, the breakdown of Sum of Squares shows that a significant portion of the variation in education scores is attributable to the predictors included in the model. This distinction between predictable variability and random fluctuations is important for comprehending the model's overall fit and reliability. Furthermore, examining the degrees of freedom and Mean Squares offers an understanding of the model's precision and capability to capture underlying trends versus inherent data variability.

In conclusion, these findings affirm that UNICEF interventions significantly impact girl-child education in The Gambia. Therefore, there is a need for targeted and adaptive strategies to maximize the positive impacts of resources, reevaluate training programs, reform community engagement, and continue integrating health and nutrition support.

Conclusion

This study confirms that UNICEF's intervention activities significantly influence girl-child education in The Gambia. The positive impact of educational resources on enrolment and performance underscores the need for

continued investment in these areas. However, the negative correlations identified with teacher training programs and community engagement initiatives imply the necessity for critical re-evaluation and restructuring to better align with educational objectives. Additionally, while health and nutrition support have a negligible direct effect on educational outcomes, their role in overall well-being justifies their continued integration with educational initiatives. These findings suggest that targeted and adaptive strategies are essential to improve the effectiveness of UNICEF's interventions and guarantee that girls in The Gambia receive the education they deserve. Addressing cultural, logistical, and resource allocation challenges will be crucial in achieving these goals.

Policy Implications

The convergence and divergence in the quantitative and qualitative findings reveal essential policy implications that must be addressed to improve the effectiveness of UNICEF's interventions and ultimately advance girl-child education in The Gambia and comparable contexts.

Firstly, the negative impact of teacher training on girl-child education, as evidenced by the regression results, necessitates a fundamental redesign of training programs. There is a clear need to restructure training curricula emphasising gender-responsive pedagogy, inclusive classroom management, and localised content delivery. Policymakers at the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education should collaborate with development partners to design continuous professional development programs that are contextually relevant and informed by global best practices.

Secondly, the significant negative coefficient associated with community engagement efforts calls for a critical reassessment of engagement models. While qualitative insights affirm grassroots enthusiasm (e.g., Mothers' Clubs, Girl Power Clubs), the statistical divergence suggests a misalignment between intentions and implementation. Thus, policies should mandate evidence-based community mobilization strategies, incorporating participatory planning, feedback loops, and cultural mediators to ensure alignment with community values and expectations.

Thirdly, the strong positive relationship between educational resources and girl-child education underscores the necessity for transparent, data-driven resource distribution policies. The Ministry should adopt geospatial mapping and real-time school census data to ensure equity and efficiency in distributing textbooks, digital tools, and classroom materials—particularly in rural and hard-to-reach areas. Incorporating school-level accountability mechanisms will also minimize leakages and ensure effective use.

Furthermore, although health and nutrition support showed limited

statistical influence, its qualitative relevance for girls' holistic development cannot be ignored. There is a policy need to strengthen the integration of health and education policies, especially through the School Health and Nutrition (SHN) strategy. Government and partners should ensure that every educational intervention includes a nutrition and reproductive health education component, especially for adolescent girls.

In addition, with infrastructure and safety highlighted in interviews as key retention factors, policymakers must prioritize investment in gender-sensitive school environments, including safe latrines, sanitary facilities, and secure commuting options. This should be enshrined in national infrastructure guidelines, especially under the MoBSE's 2016–2030 Education Policy Framework.

Furthermore, the qualitative results highlight enduring sociocultural obstacles such gender norms and early marriage. Consequently, a national policy directive on cultural sensitisation is required. This entails expanding community education initiatives via storytelling, theatre, community radio, and conventional and religious platforms. To close the gaps between traditional beliefs and the values of modern education, the government and non-governmental organisations should also institutionalise intergenerational conversation initiatives.

The discrepancy between program design and results, particularly in training and community interventions, is as significant and emphasises the pressing need for strong monitoring and evaluation (M&E) mechanisms. All UNICEF-partnered initiatives should be required by policy to use adaptive learning frameworks and real-time effect tracking. This will enable data-driven decision-making and iterative improvement.
Additionally, drawing from the Ghanaian and Nigerian experiences, there is value in adopting regional learning frameworks. For instance, Ghana's CAMFED model of scholarships and mentorship and Nigeria's focus on legal and institutional reforms (e.g., child rights laws) offer replicable strategies. The Gambia can institutionalise regional policy dialogues and adopt adaptive innovations from these contexts to refine its national approach.

Consequently, the funding limitations that have been showed that government policies need to transcend reliance on donors. This asks for promoting public-private partnerships (PPPs) and mainstreaming education for girls in national budgets. It is possible to ensure sustainability and impact continuation by establishing a minimum percentage of the education budget for activities aimed at girls.

Lastly, government actors must strengthen legal enforcement of school dropouts brought on by early marriage, child labour, and abuse in accordance

with the Women's Act (2010) and current gender policies. To guarantee a rights-based and safe environment for all girls, a stronger synergy between the legal, educational, and social protection frameworks is necessary.

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