

A group of Pacific girls in school uniforms (pink shirts and blue skirts) standing outdoors, holding hands in a circle with their arms raised, against a clear blue sky. The girls are seen from behind, looking towards the center of the circle.

OUR EDUCATION OUR FUTURE

Pacific girls leading change to create greater access to secondary education: Solomon Islands

FOREWORD



“POWER FOR WOMEN STARTS WITH POWER FOR GIRLS.”

**Ella Kauhue, Program Manager,
Plan International Solomon Islands**

Education is crucial for girls' empowerment.

It is the first step to give a girl the power to choose the way of life she wants to lead – for herself, but also for her whole family. When a girl is educated, able to get a job and receive a salary, she can manage her own money and is respected more by her family.

One of Plan International's key advocacy goals is to advance all girls' ability to access and complete primary and secondary education. This is an issue that Plan International is seeking to address in the Solomon Islands also, because we know there are too many girls here not completing 13 years of education.

This research is important because it has directly engaged girls in the process from the very beginning. The photovoice project has also provided the girls the opportunity to learn and demonstrate their photography skills; the girls have used photographs to portray certain barriers that hinder them from completing secondary education. Plan International does not seek to speak on behalf of girls but to amplify their voices. This report models this commitment: it is the girls' voices, it is their perspective.

Young adolescent girls are one of the most vulnerable groups of people in our society. They are not included in any decision making process in their families, communities and the nation as a whole.

The empowerment of our girls is critical. They are our leaders for the future. As adolescent girls become leaders, they will contribute immensely not only to the development of our nation, but also to raise their family's standard of living. To start to promote and to empower young girls as leaders will produce credible and honest leaders in the future. Power for women starts with power for girls.

As stakeholders reading this report, it is important to start thinking about sustained and coordinated actions to respond to the needs of adolescent girls concerning their education in Solomon Islands.

We look forward to working with you.

ABOUT PLAN INTERNATIONAL

Plan International is a global independent development and humanitarian organisation. As one of the oldest, largest and most experienced organisations in our field we work alongside children, young people, supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the injustices facing girls and the most marginalised children.

In the Solomon Islands, Plan International is committed to advocating on children's rights and equality for girls. As part of this mandate, this research has been carried out to identify the barriers that stop girls from completing their secondary education. Relevant stakeholders such as the Ministry of Education, Human Resource Development and the Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs have been consulted in the process.



**Cover photo: “Leadership” by
adolescent girls in West Guadalcanal**

“This photo symbolises the potential strength, power and confidence of the many girls in Solomon Islands if we are given the chance to complete our secondary education.”

GIRLS' STATEMENT

We, adolescent girls and young women of the Solomon Islands, need to have the chance to go through and complete our secondary education.

We want all adolescent girls and young women to be able to achieve and to succeed, so that we can move forward to a better and brighter future.

A future where we are equal.

A future where we are confident and bold.

A future where we can speak up and out.

A future where we, adolescent girls and young women of the Solomon Islands, are leaders:

- in our families;
- in our communities;
- in our churches;
- in our schools;
- in our nation.

We respectfully ask you to listen to what we think, and listen to how we feel.

**HEAR OUR VOICE. STAND WITH US.
TOGETHER WE CAN MAKE A CHANGE!**

ABOUT THIS STATEMENT

Certain phrases jumped out multiple times from the workshops and peer surveys related to adolescent girls' strong sense of why they want and need improved access to secondary education, what they aspire to, and the change they want to see, to such an extent that an overarching statement began to emerge. As such, a group statement was developed, verified and edited across each location. This statement is the result of that process.

“Love” by girls in Honiara.

“This photo is a reminder that loving everyone equally and respecting girls can help girls to achieve their dreams and encourage them to complete their secondary education.”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Secondary education enables adolescent girls to learn and attain the skills they need to succeed in life and work.

Every year of secondary education completed has a number of powerful, positive and truly transformational benefits for adolescent girls, their families, their communities and for the nation's prosperity and development. A quality, inclusive secondary education can place adolescent girls on a path towards employment and financial stability, towards empowerment and better health and wellbeing. For instance, adolescent girls who are in secondary school are less likely to be at risk of child marriage and early pregnancy, and more likely to achieve gender equity at home and in their relationships.

Education is a fundamental right of all children and young people as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Globally, there has been important progress made in increasing girls' enrolment in, and completion of, primary education. While improving the quality of basic education remains paramount, we know that primary education is not enough; completing 13 years of schooling is critical to harness education's full power and benefits.

Adolescent girls are all too often blocked from completing these 13 years of education; barriers either stop them from making the transition from primary to secondary education, or cause them to drop out while at secondary school.

If governments are serious about unlocking the potential of the half a billion adolescent girls in the world, there must be a global effort to remove the barriers that stop adolescent girls from accessing and completing inclusive, equitable and quality secondary education.

Achieving universal secondary education requires an understanding of the barriers that are specific to girls' age, gender and other intersectional issues that further marginalise them. Adolescent girls face unique challenges with the onset of puberty, such as limited access to school toilets and sanitary products during menstruation. Girls are also at greater risk of gender-based violence (GBV) at home and when travelling to and from school, as well as school-related GBV. In addition, gendered norms and circumstances manifest as the prioritisation of boys over girls; child, early or forced marriage; early and unplanned pregnancies; and the burden of domestic work.

This report shines a light on the specific barriers stopping adolescent girls in the Solomon Islands – one of Australia's nearest neighbours in the Pacific region – from accessing and completing secondary education.

It is time for these barriers to be removed. It is time for everyone to listen to these girls' voices and actively work to enact the change they seek; so that they can learn, lead, decide and thrive.

Barriers to secondary education identified by adolescent girls in the Solomon Islands:

- School fees
- Relationships, marriage and early pregnancy
- Travelling to school
- Culture
- Family problems
- Bullying and peer pressure
- Quality education and inclusive infrastructure
- Lack of disability inclusive education

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Our Education, Our Future provides a policy and contextual analysis to the adolescent girls' report *Stronger Together*. Both reports are a clarion call issued by adolescent girls in the Solomon Islands to increase their access to secondary education. This is their research, their voice, their call for change. They are calling on governments, donors, schools, communities and families to create the conditions that will bring about transformative change in their lives, their families, their schools, their communities, and their nation – by removing the barriers that stop girls going to and completing secondary education.

This report builds on Plan International's evidence base from *Half A Billion Reasons* and *It's Our Time*. Having painted a picture of the lives of adolescent girls globally and in our region, this report highlights the national context in one of our nearest neighbours.

Conducting this research via the photovoice methodology is strongly aligned with Plan International's guiding principles for child protection, programming and advocacy in the best interests of the child, and gender transformative programming and influencing.



SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Education should be available and accessible to all children and young people on the basis of equal opportunity and non-discrimination. Every child must be able to access and complete an inclusive, quality pre-primary, primary and secondary education in order to meet global commitments. If the 2030 Agenda (achieving the Sustainable Development Goals) is not met for the most disadvantaged, then the global community will have failed.

It is unacceptable that adolescent girls in all their diversities are prevented from being able to access and complete 13 years of schooling due to the barriers they have identified throughout this report. Such barriers are discriminatory and must be tackled through effective policies and adequate funding.

Each barrier represented in this report is followed by a “what’s the solution?” section, with recommendations stemming from the change sought by adolescent girls as described through the workshops and their photo captions.

The number one recommendation to enable all girls in the Solomon Islands to access and complete secondary education is:

The Ministry of Education, with the support of the international donor community, should extend the Fee Free Basic Education Policy to ensure free senior secondary education by 2020. They should also work with and financially support schools to reduce or eliminate gap fees at all levels of education.

The priority recommendations from adolescent girls for the other barriers identified are:

- The Ministry of Education, Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs, and Ministry for Health should support families and educators to embrace children’s learning about their bodies, relationships and sexuality from early childhood and particularly throughout adolescence to allow children and young people to explore, clarify and form life-long healthy attitudes and practices, free from coercion, violence and discrimination.

- The Ministry of Education and schools should provide free school transportation services, e.g. a school bus or truck.
- The Ministry of Education should support young mothers to continue their education by introducing a second chance policy.
- The Ministry of Education should develop and adopt a Gender Equality in Education policy, in consultation with adolescent girls
- The Government, civil society organisations and donors should fund and promote trainings for community, religious and political leaders to be allies and supporters for gender equality and girls’ right to education.
- The Ministry of Education and Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs should work to empower adolescent girls with the skills, knowledge and choices to be agents of change so they know what to do when they are affected by family problems, including gender-based violence.
- The Government, civil society organisations and donors should fund and promote programs with adolescent boys and young men to challenge sexism and promote respectful relationships.
- The Ministry of Education and schools should take a whole-school approach focusing on student safety and wellbeing, particularly in relation to bullying.
- The Ministry of Education and schools should encourage more women teachers into the profession, enabling them to progress in their careers, and to take on leadership positions.
- The Government should ratify the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
- The Government, civil society organisations and donors should consider the specific needs of adolescent girls in all policies and programs, including consulting directly with adolescent girls.
- The Government, civil society organisations and donors should promote girls’ leadership by investing in promoting and developing girls’ leadership capabilities and encouraging women in leadership to include girls.

A note on terminology: girls, young women, youth

It should be noted that ‘young girl’ in Solomon Islands equates to adolescent or teenage girl. ‘Young woman’ is a girl of the same age, but who is married and/or has children. Young people (‘youth’) are more broadly defined as 15–34 years of age. Secondary school-aged students (Forms 1–6, or Grades 7–12) are generally 12–18 years of age, with two key categories: junior or lower secondary (three years of schooling, 12–14 years of age) and upper or senior secondary (four years of

schooling, 15–18 years of age). However, it is possible for secondary students to be older if they have repeated school years and/or had absences from school.

Throughout this report we refer to ‘young girls’ and ‘young women’ (12–19) as ‘adolescent girls’ to keep terminology consistent with what is understood in Solomon Islands and Australia. We use the broader ‘youth’ or ‘young people’ term when referring to the 15–34 age range.

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ACRONYMS

AIP	Aid Investment Plan	NEAP	National Education Action Plan
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women	NGOs	Non-Government Organisations
CEFM	Child, Early and Forced Marriage	PIA	Plan International Australia
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child	PNG	Papua New Guinea
CSE	Comprehensive Sexuality Education	RTCs	Rural Training Centres
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations	SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals (aka 2030 Agenda)
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade	SI	Solomon Islands
FLE	Family Life Education	SIARTC	Solomon Islands Association of Rural Training Centres
GBV	Gender-Based Violence	SRGBV	School-Related Gender-Based Violence
MEHRD	Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development	SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
NDS	National Development Strategy		

PART I: INTRODUCTION

FOCUS ON SECONDARY EDUCATION



**“Fewer girls in secondary school”
by girls in Honiara.**

“This photo demonstrates how there are lots of girls in primary education, but fewer in secondary education. We want to see more girls educated to the highest levels.”

Secondary education is a basic right, and a key component to enable girls to learn, lead, decide and thrive.

When girls have access to high quality, inclusive and accessible secondary education all around the world, alongside the opportunities to translate their education into productive employment, they have the potential to lift themselves, their families and their communities out of poverty.¹

Women with more education report increased earning power and improved standards of living, as well as greater agency and decision-making.²

Girls who are educated are less likely to be married before they turn 18, have fewer children and do so later in life.³

Education is one of the most powerful ways of improving children’s health, nutrition and wellbeing. Educated mothers are better informed about specific diseases, so they can take measures to prevent them. They can recognise signs of illness early, seek advice and act on it.⁴

Yet, despite the overwhelming evidence that secondary education is truly transformational for girls, adolescent girls in all their diversities are being excluded from secondary education at alarming rates.

“Limited educational opportunities for girls and barriers to completing 12 years of education cost countries \$15-30 trillion dollars in lost lifetime productivity and earnings, according to a World Bank estimate.”⁵

Global statistics reflect a troubling trend of adolescent girls not continuing with their higher secondary education.⁶ It’s a startling reminder that as girls move into late adolescence (from ages 15 to 19), the pressure of child marriage, early pregnancy, gender expectations, the preferential treatment of boys’ education, the burden of domestic chores, gender-based violence in the home, school, and community, and the lack of access to quality, safe and inclusive education pushes girls out of the school system.

Girls around the world are calling on governments to fulfil their commitments to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 2030 Agenda by enabling them to complete 13 years of schooling.

In 2018 Plan International consulted with adolescent girls across the Pacific on behalf of Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development, who identified better and equal access to education as one of the top four solutions to address the issues they face.⁷

The Solomon Islands (SI) have made significant strides in achieving universal primary education, with enrolment increasing remarkably over the past 20 years. In 1999 28 percent of young people had little or no primary education, whereas since 2012 net enrolment has consistently sat between 89–92%.⁸

The challenge now is to see similar progress made in secondary education, since we know that primary education is not enough to harness education's full power and benefits.

Together with Papua New Guinea (PNG), the Solomon Islands have the lowest levels of secondary school enrolment in the Pacific.⁹ However, while PNG is seeing an upward trend in enrolment levels, progress in SI has stagnated and is particularly lacking for girls.¹⁰

Most young people in SI are currently not accessing or completing either secondary school or vocational education¹¹, and a significant number are pushed out between junior and senior secondary school.¹² Transition rates have declined and, without interventions to improve them, particularly for Year 6 and 9 students, it is likely that these rates will continue to drop.¹³

Notably, the percentage of students completing primary school – making it from prep through to and finishing year six – is 70%, but those completing secondary school – making it through to and finishing year 12 – is only seven per cent.¹⁴

This contributes to low levels of human development and to poverty,¹⁵ as well as lost lifetime productivity and earnings.¹⁶

KEY STATS¹⁷:

1 IN 5 GIRLS COMPLETE JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL

7 IN 100 GIRLS COMPLETE SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL

1 IN 2 GIRLS DROP OUT DURING SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL

For girls, this outlook is even bleaker. While some progress on gender parity in education has been achieved, completion rates for girls in particular are low and dropout rates are high – and increasing

rather than declining.¹⁸ More girls are leaving school aged 14-15 than boys, especially in urban areas, and less than half of rural girls complete secondary education in comparison to boys.¹⁹

Figure 1: Girls enrolled in lower and upper secondary school



Indeed, gender has been identified by the SI government as one of four significant factors that account for levels of inequity in education throughout the country.²⁰

The Solomon Islands has a unique opportunity to move from being left behind to becoming a leader in the Pacific on gender equality and secondary education. With a number of commitments already in place, the Government's new term is a key moment for further formulating, enhancing and implementing key policies to remove the barriers identified by adolescent girls that are standing in their way. In particular, the next five-year National Education Action Plan is to be drafted from mid-2019, and the Gender Equality in Education Policy is due to be revised after it was rejected by the National Education Board in 2018.

The Australian Government – as the biggest donor in the Solomon Islands and contributor to the Solomon Islands education budget – also has a key role to play. The SI Aid Investment Plan is due for renewal in 2019, alongside the Country Investment Plan and Education Sector Program within that. Each of these key documents urgently need to reflect the Ministry of Education's commitment to and focus on gender equity and inclusion in secondary education.

This photovoice project captures the specific barriers identified by adolescent girls in the Solomon Islands that stop them from accessing and completing secondary education, alongside the change they want to see.

While many of the individual barriers are familiar, this is an important evidence base that highlights what adolescent girls think and feel about each issue. It also provides unique insight into the interlinking nature of the barriers, painting a full picture of girls' lives and the challenges they face to stay in school. It makes a compelling case for why we need to consider adolescent girls' needs specifically, why we need to do more, and why we need to act now.

METHODOLOGY

Globally, within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (and beyond), there is a growing call to listen more carefully to what adolescents have to say, both about what it would mean to achieve their potential and how to get there, by determining what support and interventions they believe would be most effective in enhancing contextualised adolescent development trajectories.²¹

The primary data source and findings outlined in this report are the result of a feminist participatory action research (FPAR) photovoice project conducted in 2018–9 by Plan International with adolescent girls across three locations in SI – Honiara, the Settlements (villages on the outskirts of Honiara) and a community in West Guadalcanal. This data was validated with these groups and a group of girls and young women with disabilities.

Secondary data was obtained through a focus group discussion with teachers in West Guadalcanal and key stakeholder interviews in SI, together with a broader literature review.

A separate, in-depth and transparent analysis of the photovoice process used to conduct this research is available as a learning tool.

This project demonstrates the value of youth-led research; of hearing directly from – rather than simply about – adolescent girls. These are girls' photos, their words, their experiences – their voice.

Research objectives

- Recognise, honour, make visible and amplify the voices and experiences of adolescent girls' and young women's subjective experience(s) related to access to and completion of secondary education in the Solomon Islands;
- “Reflect the community back upon itself” and reveal social, political, cultural, economic and personal realities related to access to and completion of secondary education in the Solomon Islands; and to
- Facilitate critical and analytical discussion of the above realities and their root cause issues, especially with decision-makers who have the power to remove those barriers.

A note on diversity and inclusion

All the adolescent girls in this research self-identify as adolescent girls or young women, which is the terminology used throughout this report. However it should be noted that young people may identify as men, women or other genders, and their gender identity may or may not reflect the sex that they were assigned at birth. While sexual and gender diversity did not come up in this research, this is likely reflective

Research Limitations

The locations chosen for this project provide a comparison between different socio-economic areas, as well as rural, semi-urban and urban settings, and reflects the majority of the student population.²² In addition, several of the participants had migrated from other provinces.

15–20 adolescent girls participated in the workshops in each location, with 49 in total across all three locations. A further 164 adolescent girls were reached through peer surveys, plus 11 girls and young women with disabilities who participated in the validation workshop. This is therefore a significant though small sample size.

As such, where quantitative data has been analysed and presented it should be noted that this is indicative rather than representative, and does not seek to establish prevalence.

Although the participants were primarily adolescent girls of secondary school age (11–19), the adolescent girls from the Settlements fell into the broader “youth” age range of 15–34. This was beneficial in that it gave voice to young mothers, girls with disabilities and girls who had either dropped out of school or taken alternate education pathways.

While the adolescent girls came from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, it was through the peer surveys we were able to reach more disadvantaged young people, particularly those who had dropped out of school. It should be noted that we did not interview girls in boarding schools, who may have particular vulnerabilities. Further research in this area would be of interest.

Research question:

What makes it hard for all young women and girls in the Solomon Islands to have the chance to go to and complete secondary school or have a second chance to complete informal education? What are the stumbling blocks or barriers?

of the broader SI context. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and people of other gender and sexual minority groups are rarely open about their sexual orientation or gender identity due to extensive stigma and the illegality of homosexuality.²³ Research on how this creates additional barriers to young people accessing and completing education is recommended.

THE PROMISES THE SOLOMON ISLANDS AND AUSTRALIA HAVE MADE TO PROTECT AND PROMOTE THE RIGHTS OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS TO ACCESS AND COMPLETE **SECONDARY EDUCATION**

GLOBAL



Transforming adolescent girls' lives through the 2030 Agenda

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are an ambitious set of goals and targets that 193 countries, including Australia and the Solomon Islands, signed up to in September 2015. The SDGs are a road map to tackle the global challenges that the world faces today such as ending poverty, providing access to education, achieving gender equality, and promoting universal health care by 2030.

The catch cry of the SDGs is leave no one behind, which makes it all the more important that nations prioritise helping the most marginalised and excluded. The SDGs are a tool to hold governments to account, ensuring that the needs of the most vulnerable, such as adolescent girls, are front and centre in government policies and investments. Each barrier presented in this report highlights the related SDG targets.

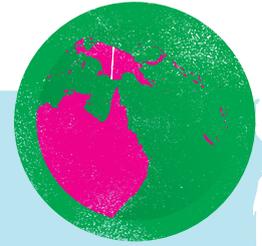
Protecting adolescent girls' rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) recognises that people under the age of 18 years old need special care and protection that adults do not. It recognises education as a basic right for all, including that all children should be encouraged to go to school to the highest level they can. At its very heart, the CRC preserves every child's right to life, survival, development and non-discrimination. It places a responsibility on governments to act in the best interests of children and to respect their views. Given that adolescent girls are routinely denied their rights because of their gender and age, and are regularly subject to discrimination, the CRC is a powerful tool for holding governments to account. Both Solomon Islands and Australia are signatories to the Convention.

Driving gender equality for adolescent girls with the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

Both Solomon Islands and Australia are signatories to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which sets a clear agenda for the achievement of gender equality and non-discrimination for all women and girls. The Convention seeks to end discrimination in all areas of employment, political and public life, marriage and family life. It promotes equal access to education and vocational training at all levels, and the reproductive and health rights of women and girls. CEDAW is a road map for achieving gender equality for adolescent girls.

REGIONAL



2012 Pacific Leaders' Gender Equality Declaration

The Solomon Islands, through this Declaration, is committed to encouraging gender parity in secondary education; ensuring the reproductive and health rights of women and girls; ending violence against women; implementing gender-responsive government programs and policies; increasing women and girls' leadership, participation and decision making; and removing barriers to women and girls' economic empowerment.

2009 Pacific Education Development Framework

Endorsed by Pacific Islands Forum Education Ministers in 2009, this Framework confirms the political recognition of education as a fundamental building block for development, as well as the need to remove the barriers that stop girls from accessing and completing their education.

NATIONAL



National Education Action Plan (Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development) and National Development Strategy (Ministry of Development, Planning and Aid Coordination)

The Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development (MEHRD) National Education Action Plan (NEAP)'s overarching strategic goal is to provide universal access to quality secondary education for all children by 2030, including by emphasizing equity, inclusion and gender equality. This is supported in the National Development Strategy (NDS), which is strongly aligned to the SDGs. It reiterates the overarching strategic goal for secondary education, including by refocusing education sector expenditure.²⁴ One of the four key strategies to achieve this goal is to focus on "Emphasizing Equity, Inclusion and Gender Equality", including a focus on removing the barriers to girls' access and completion of secondary education.²⁵

The current NEAP (2016-2020) includes a focus on reducing gender exclusion, with the objective of better understanding the related barriers in order to design affordable actions to address them in the next NEAP.

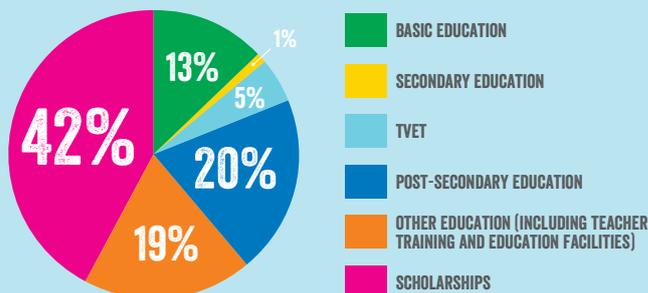


Australia's investment in the Solomon Islands

The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)'s investment in education in the Solomon Islands – which equates to around five per cent of the Solomon Islands' education budget – primarily focuses on primary education, TVET, school infrastructure projects, professional development for educators, and tertiary scholarships.²⁶ This is reflected in the current Aid Investment Plan's related performance benchmarks. There is also a commitment to working with MEHRD on its Disability Inclusive Development policy and strategy.

DFAT is committed to its funding being "linked to complementary Solomon Islands Government funding contributions for agreed priorities"²⁷ and targets being aligned with the SI NEAP. There is however a clear gap in reflecting the NEAP's commitment to, and focus on, achieving universal quality secondary education and gender equality and inclusion. The current AIP ends in 2018/9; the upcoming renewal is a key moment for these gaps to be addressed.

Figure 2: Proportion of Australian Education Official Development Assistance spending in the Pacific, 2017-8²⁸



PART II: RESEARCH FINDINGS

The barriers stopping adolescent girls in the Solomon Islands from accessing or completing secondary education

This section of the report presents the outcomes from the photovoice project: the photographs taken by adolescent girls and their accompanying captions, which represent the barriers they identified that are stopping themselves and their peers from accessing and completing secondary education, and the change they want to see. Each barrier is presented according to adolescent girls' thematic grouping of the issues, including a number of sub-issues that they feel are important aspects to consider within the specific theme.

According to this research, adolescent girls are pushed out of school at the transition from primary to junior secondary, and then at every year level throughout junior and senior secondary, with a slight spike at the transition from junior to senior secondary. The earliest year at which respondents dropped out was mid-primary (year 3), and the latest was in the final year of senior secondary.

The two biggest barriers to remaining in school were school fees and relationships, marriage and pregnancy; after that, each barrier was more or less of equal importance. However it should be noted that each issue is interlinked, and the cross-cutting theme of gender inequality was given high importance throughout the workshops.

Interestingly, the answers given did not significantly change according to level of education, or specifically whether individuals had dropped out of school or not. This indicates the proximity of the issue to everyone involved; everyone has friends and family members who have dropped out of secondary school, and therefore understand the barriers and feel the impacts of this keenly.

Steps of the photovoice project:

1. Adolescent girls co-designed and brainstormed answers to the research question.
2. Adolescent girls interviewed up to five peers and family members to discuss the barriers to girls' education and further inform the answers to the research question.
3. Adolescent girls were trained on taking reality, symbolic and arranged scene images, and then spent up to one week creating and taking their photos individually and in small groups; all photos in this report were taken by the girls without any external input.
4. Adolescent girls selected their best photos and captioned them to explain what the photos represent, why they took them and what change they want to see.
5. Data validation workshops were held three months' later, where the adolescent girls viewed and commented on the draft report, and validated the findings and policy recommendations.

THE MESSAGE IS CLEAR: THIS ISSUE TOUCHES EVERYONE, AND GIRLS WANT TO SEE THINGS CHANGE

A note on "lazy to learn"

At a number of points during this research, both adolescent girls and stakeholders discussed how they believe a small number of girls are less interested in getting educated because they cannot see the long-term benefits, or simply are not clever or capable enough, or are lazy and actively choose to stay home, for instance to spend more time on social media. On the latter, some girls wanted to see stricter rules on using mobile phones, whether in school or at home, whereas others wanted to understand how to use social media responsibly and safely, and in particular how to respond to cyberbullying.

Evidence suggests that the majority of students are capable of succeeding when provided with a supportive and enabling learning environment ²⁹.



"Lazy to Learn" by girls from the Settlements, including White River and other areas.

This report goes some way to illuminating reasons why adolescent girls in particular may become disillusioned or disengaged from learning, and ways in which these issues can be addressed. Our assumption would be that this would positively impact on the number of adolescent girls engaged in, completing and succeeding in their education at all levels.

**BARRIER:
SCHOOL FEES**



“NO MONEY, NO EDUCATION”
– BY GIRLS IN HONIARA

“THIS PHOTO REPRESENTS THE MANY LEVELS OF EDUCATION THERE ARE TO FINISH, WITH NOT MUCH MONEY AVAILABLE TO SUPPORT GIRLS TO COMPLETE HER EDUCATION – WHETHER DUE TO LACK OF INCOME, OR GIRLS’ EDUCATION NOT BEING PRIORITISED.”



SCHOOL FEES AND LACK OF INCOME



**“No money for school fees”
by girls in Honiara.**

“This photo represents that many families do not earn enough money to survive. A lack of income limits girls’ access to school, because there is no money left for her.

“Our country should help those who are poor and financially broken. Help employ parents, help provide free education for our citizens.”

Since 2009, under the Fee Free Basic Education policy, the SI government only applies fees for senior secondary (years 10–12). In order to achieve this, the Ministry of Education provides grants to all schools to cover their running costs, from equipment and resources to infrastructure and utilities. Australia supported this initiative through its aid program.³⁰

In reality, MEHRD recognises that the grants it allocates to schools are not enough and that there is a funding gap. This means schools have to fill that gap by charging additional fees.³¹ These steadily rise with each year level; annual fees range from a few hundred Solomon dollars in rural areas to several thousand in Honiara.³² These are approved and charged by School Boards.³³

Adolescent girls across all locations were extremely aware of the financial cost of their education and the barrier this represents to accessing and completing secondary school. They also reflected that almost all other issues link back to and intersect with this barrier.

Limited or no family income clearly places pressure on families who want to send their children to school. While the number of Solomon Islanders living under the national poverty line has dropped from 22.7% (2005) to 12.7% (2013)³⁴ – one of the lowest rates in the Pacific region³⁵ – the most recent SI Poverty Profile reveals two out of three households struggle to have enough income for school fees,³⁶ with just under half of all parents indicating that the Fee Free Basic Education policy has helped “a little” but that education is still expensive, and just under one in ten saying it has not helped at all.³⁷

This is further exacerbated in certain provinces, with significantly higher poverty incidence and prevalence in the Makira and Guadalcanal provinces as well as in Honiara,³⁸ or as the age of the head of the household increases and particularly if they exceed 50 years.³⁹ This is important given adolescent girls spoke about the difficulty of paying school fees in households headed by older relatives where parents have died.

**“TWO OUT OF THREE HOUSEHOLDS
STRUGGLE TO HAVE INCOME FOR
SCHOOL FEES.”**



INVESTING IN BOYS OVER GIRLS



“No school fees for girls” by girls in Honiara.

“This photo shows that lots of students are unable to pay their school fees, and that most girls in particular don’t complete secondary school because of school fees.

“I want those individuals who are able to attend school but aren’t interested in taking their studies seriously to realise they have a big opportunity to finish education rather than others who really want to complete secondary school but find it difficult to pay their fees.

“There are lots of things to make change happen, for example school fees should be cheaper, so that it is easier for everyone, and our country should have lots of different jobs so that most parents have work and can help pay their children’s school fees.”

All adolescent girls were painfully aware that paying for boys’ education takes priority over girls’ education, particularly in households that can only afford to pay for a select number of children. Many spoke of how, in a big family, boys will “come first” and be sent to school, whereas the girls will be kept home.

Reasons given for this prioritisation varied from: investing more in boys because they will look after aged parents, whereas girls will get married and look after her husband’s family; strong patriarchal systems in most provinces; and a perception of a lack of awareness – or acceptance – of the importance and value of girls’ education. For secondary education in particular, many spoke of a “what’s the point?” attitude that exists in relation to the question “Why educate a girl if she is going to become a wife or mother?”

School fees were seen as the biggest barrier identified that is stopping girls from accessing and completing secondary education in the Solomon Islands.

WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

Adolescent girls were unequivocal on the solution to this barrier: the ultimate goal is for the SI Government to “ensure free education for all citizens at all levels.”

In the first instance this would require an extension of the Fee Free Basic Education policy to cover senior secondary. Secondly, it would be important to assess the gap between grants provided to schools and school running costs, in order to assess whether grants should be increased and/or efficiencies can be made.

The conditions for effective roll-out of fee-free education for upper secondary school are fourfold:

1. Political stability.
2. Low or declining levels of population growth.
3. Steady and increasing economic growth.
4. High rates of access and learning at pre-secondary levels⁴⁰

With a two percent population growth rate, 3.2% GDP growth, near universal primary enrolment rates and a relatively stable government, the Solomon Islands fulfil these necessary preconditions.

We commend the SI government for their Fee Free Basic Education Policy, and note that there is a Strategy for achieving free universal education access by 2020. We call on the Government to deliver on this commitment by extending the Fee Free Basic Education Policy to ensure free senior secondary education for all by 2020. Further, the next National Education Action Plan (2021–2025) should enshrine this free universal education access and map out the required resourcing, infrastructure and teacher training needed for this increase in enrolment for years 10–12. We're also calling on the SI Government to work together with donors to support schools to eliminate gap fees at all school levels, and to ensure families can afford to send all their children to school.

It is abundantly clear to all stakeholders that policies are not enough; they need to be matched by adequate funding and implementation, otherwise schools will continue to charge additional fees to fill the funding gap. Adolescent girls suggested a range of solutions to either assist in affording these gap fees, or to eliminate them altogether.

To *afford* the current gap fees, adolescent girls recommend community-based and financial solutions including: assisting parents with finding employment and creating a Fund for Girls that would specifically enable adolescent girls to remain in secondary education.

To *reduce* gap fees, it was thought that better administration and auditing of the current grant system could work, and only awarding school grants to those who provide detailed breakdown (budget and strategy documents) on how the money is spent, by getting government approval for the fees they want to charge (i.e. the gap).

We note MEHRD recently commissioned a report into the persistence of school fees.

We recommend the report is released publicly and recommendations are discussed with students and families, as well as adolescent girls specifically, and an implementation plan is created.

Recommendations:

- MEHRD to extend the Fee Free Basic Education Policy to ensure free senior secondary education by 2020, and work with schools to reduce or eliminate gap fees at all levels of education, reflected in the next five year National Education Action Plan;
- In the interim, MEHRD and donors to create a fund for girls – particularly focusing on those most likely to be excluded. For example, if a family can only afford to send some children to school and are prioritising boys, the school can waive the fee for girls through the grant received;
- The SI Government, together with donors and civil society, assist parents with finding employment for example through Economic Empowerment programs;
- MEHRD to ensure greater transparency, accountability and reporting related to school grants; and
- MEHRD to release the school fees report and consult with adolescent girls on the related actions to create an inclusive implementation plan.



**BARRIER:
RELATIONSHIPS, MARRIAGE
AND PREGNANCY**



**“SCHOOL LIFE, OR HOUSE WIFE?
LOSING MY FREEDOM”**

— BY GIRLS IN HONIARA

“This photo sends the message that giving up on education and freedom at teen age is a mistake.

“IT SHOWS A YOUNG BRIDE HOLDING A UNIFORM SHIRT, WHICH IS THE LAST THING SHE HAS TO TAKE OFF BEFORE GETTING MARRIED. SHE HAS TO STOP SCHOOL FOR TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE.

“SOME GIRLS ARE PRESSURED TO GET MARRIED AT A YOUNG AGE. TRADITION IS STRONG IN SOME AREAS, AND GIRLS DON'T HAVE A CHOICE WHEN IT COMES TO TRADITION.”



Typically, country-level estimates suggest up to one in three girls who drop out of school do so because of early marriage or pregnancy.⁴¹ This research indicates that in the Solomon Islands this is significantly higher, with two in five (44%) adolescent girls dropping out of school for these reasons.

All spoke of the “full stop” this places on a girl’s education, and how it is closely linked to school rules – which are based on Abstinence-Only Education – and social stigma.

No other issue so clearly meant the end of girls’ education and of their hopes, dreams and aspirations for the future.

Figure 3: Two in five adolescent girls drop out due to pregnancy or CEFM.



EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE

The age of marriage in the Solomon Islands is 18 years (without parental consent) and 15 years (with parental consent); one in five girls are married by the age of 18.⁴² Many adolescent girls spoke of marriage before the age of 18 as “traditional marriage”, whereby it is organised by the family rather than by couples requesting their permission. In these instances, finances (to receive the bride price, and so the girl is no longer the financial responsibility of her family) or stigma (if the girl is pregnant) were the top two reasons mentioned for the practice. Early marriage is more common among girls than boys at every age between 15 and 18, and the rate of early marriage in SI exceeds the East Asia and Pacific average.⁴³

In contrast to pregnancy, however, this appears to be more about the expectations of the families rather than school rules; once a girl is married, her role is to be a wife and mother. Adolescent girls spoke of the need to break down these norms and restrictive roles, questioning why it is not possible for a young woman to return to school.

“THIS IS A BAD PRACTICE IN OUR COUNTRY. I WOULD BE HAPPY IF WE DID NOT ALLOW TEENAGE MARRIAGE IN SOLOMON ISLANDS.”

Adolescent girl

TEENAGE PREGNANCY

Adolescent fertility rates (15–19 year olds) in SI have been steadily reducing over the past 30 years. While this is promising progress, adolescent fertility rates are nonetheless double that of women over the age of 20 and exceed the world average.⁴⁴

“I FEEL ANGRY ABOUT THE BOYS WHO GET THE GIRLS PREGNANT AND THEN LEAVE ALL THE WORK FOR THE GIRL.”

Adolescent girl

Where barriers to accessing and completing secondary education already exist due to simply being a girl, they turn into a brick wall when a girl falls pregnant.

Adolescent girls and stakeholders alike acknowledged that this is due to “School Rules.” While these rules are not detailed in the Education Act, all agreed they rarely differ between schools and always include expulsion on the grounds of pregnancy. This is predominantly related to societal beliefs that pregnant girls will “influence others to get in trouble” and disrupt the ability of schools to enforce disciplinary standards if young mothers return to school.

This produces deeply ingrained and internalised feelings of guilt and shame in adolescent girls, which in turn can stop a young mother from returning to school even if that opportunity is presented to her.

Further, everyone agreed that if a girl falls pregnant it is a full stop to her education but rarely to the father’s. They may get suspended, and potentially will have to move schools, but they can continue.

Choice and control

There was a general air of resignation when adolescent girls and stakeholders talked about women and girls falling pregnant and becoming mothers as teenagers or early in their 20s. Most talked about teenage pregnancy as being the girl’s fault – due to “bad influences, bad decision making and peer pressure.”

They did however also state that the majority of young mothers did not want to get pregnant in the first place. This perhaps reflects the fact that only one in four women aged 15–49 have access to contraceptives of any method.⁴⁵ Adolescent girls spoke about how access is dramatically lower in rural areas, and how the cost is prohibitive wherever you are. Yet, if the need for modern contraception and quality care is met, evidence suggests unintended pregnancies would decrease by 70% and unsafe abortions by 74%.⁴⁶



**“Teenage pregnancy stops young girls from going to school”
by girls in Honiara.**

“This photo presents a student who is hiding her face because she is ashamed that she got pregnant. She is letting go of her school bag: high school life is over.”

Adolescent girls also reflected on the lack of access to comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), explaining how CSE or Family Life Education (FLE) is currently not taught in all schools, or only certain topics. Girls in Honiara mentioned that sometimes external educators come into schools to provide some of this education, but they “only come once to give one talk and then disappear.” This is despite the “impressively comprehensive, age-appropriate and complete” FLE curricula that exists in SI.⁴⁷ The Education Strategic Framework however calls for increased investment in health curricula and teaching and learning materials, indicating a gap between commitment and implementation.⁴⁸

“IT IS NOT A GIRL’S CHOICE TO GET PREGNANT AND EXPELLED FROM SECONDARY SCHOOL.”

Adolescent girl

“EARLY PREGNANCY CAN CAUSE SHAME AND HATRED TO OURSELVES AND FROM OTHERS. WHEN THIS HAPPENS, GIRLS STAY HOME TO LOOK AFTER THEIR BABY, SHUTTING THEMSELVES FROM COMPLETING SECONDARY SCHOOL.”

Adolescent girl

RELATIONSHIPS



**“Relationships”
by girls in West Guadalcanal.**

“This photo shows relationships are happening in many of our schools. They stop us from concentrating, they lead to teenage pregnancy and marriage, and they stop us from completing our education by getting us expelled.”

Being in a relationship was seen as a precursor to teen pregnancy, and is often against school and community rules.

Adolescent girls spoke about how boys are free to “enjoy themselves” – whether hanging out with friends or being in a relationship – whereas girls feel they have to “prove themselves worthy” of being sent to school and demonstrate that they will not get distracted by boys or peer pressure, because if they do the consequences are clear.

While some of the girls we spoke to determined they would do everything possible to not get distracted, others spoke of resenting the double standards and wanting to be able to have fun too.

WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

Adolescent girls are asking for comprehensive sexuality information and education. It is crucial that adolescent girls and boys, in all their diversities, have access to comprehensive, age-appropriate and inclusive sexuality information and education (CSE) in school and outside of school. CSE can delay the start of sexual activity, reduce the number of sexual partners and increase the use of protection against unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease.⁴⁹ Rights-based and gender-sensitive CSE can also strengthen gender equality and reduce the risk of gender-based violence among adolescents.⁵⁰ In alignment with the Solomon Islands National Population Policy (2017–2026), which includes provisions on improved access to reproductive health services for youth, we recommend the MEHRD fully fund and support the implementation of the Family Life Education curriculum. This should be supported by all relevant stakeholders, such as the Curriculum Development Division, aid organisations who provide educational resources such as UNICEF and NZAID, and curriculum resource writers such as Pearson and Oxford University Press.

Adolescent girls also want to be able to talk to their parents or caregivers and receive good information and guidance. Working with teachers and parents to break down taboos regarding CSE is a key aspect of ensuring access to high quality education and information.

While some adolescent girls and stakeholders spoke of single-sex classes and schools being the answer to stopping girls from being in relationships and falling pregnant, others noted that co-ed schools can work if their peers – and boys in particular – are respectful of girls, and that Respectful Relationships Education – which promotes and models respect, positive attitudes and behaviours, and teaches children how to build healthy relationships, resilience and confidence – would be important to enable this to happen.

Adolescent girls also want to have choice and control over their bodies, and the chance to be able to go back to school or access other education pathways after pregnancy, for instance through a “second chance” education policy. In addition, high quality, youth friendly sexual and reproductive health services can encourage more adolescent girls to access them at an early stage of pregnancy or when they first become sexually active, including access to contraceptives. Youth friendly services must respect girls’ rights to confidentiality, privacy and informed consent. It is also critical that national and local laws and policies that limit girls’ access to family planning and criminalise abortion are challenged and removed, and that service providers on the ground are aware of these changes and make adjustments in practice accordingly.

Finally, adolescent girls are also calling for an end to child, early and forced marriage (CEFM). Education and empowerment interventions are the most effective ways of eliminating CEFM, including engaging communities and traditional and religious leaders, as well as children and young people themselves.⁵¹

Recommendations:

- MEHRD to fully fund and support the implementation of the Family Life Education curriculum, together with the Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs and Ministry for Health;
- MEHRD, Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs, and Ministry for Health should support families and educators to embrace children’s learning about their bodies, relationships and sexuality from early childhood and particularly throughout adolescence to allow children and young people to explore, clarify and form life-long healthy attitudes and practices, free from coercion, violence and discrimination;
- Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs, and Ministry for Health work to ensure contraceptive services are provided free of discrimination, stigma and coercion, and free of spousal, parental, guardian or judicial consent, and in accordance with the evolving capacities of the person in question;
- MEHRD and School Boards should assess and change School Rules to ensure they do not include the expulsion of girls if they are in a relationship or fall pregnant. This would need to be coupled with community education to reduce stigma and discrimination, including reducing bullying in school of young mothers;
- MEHRD, together with Schools and the Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs, should work to challenge gender discriminatory norms and end sexual violence against girls, for example through implementing Respectful Relationships Education; and
- The SI Government should work to end child, early and forced marriage through education and empowerment interventions, including engaging communities and traditional and religious leaders, as well as girls and boys themselves, in order to challenge and change norms to eliminate this practice.



**BARRIER:
TRAVELLING TO SCHOOL**



“IS YOUR ROAD TO SCHOOL SAFE?”
— BY GIRLS IN HONIARA

“THIS PHOTO SHOWS TWO DRUNK BOYS FOLLOWING A GIRL ON HER WAY TO SCHOOL AND THE DANGERS OF HER WALKING ALONE. SHE HAS NO CHOICE THOUGH, BECAUSE HER PARENTS CAN’T AFFORD TO PAY HER BUS FARE.”



FINANCIAL BURDEN



“No money to get to school” by girls in Honiara.

“This photo symbolises the impact of not having enough money to pay for transport: having to walk a long way to school. This is one of the main reasons girls end up not going to school.”

Adolescent girls talked about the cost of transport being a barrier to getting to and from school as a ‘hidden’ education cost; if a family can afford to send a girl to school, they may not have the additional money available to then spend on these extra items. The choice is then to walk or stay home.

The multiple fares charged for short-bus routes in Honiara were a particular issue, with adolescent girls speaking of having to get three or four buses to get to school despite it being only a relatively short distance, or being charged multiple fares even when staying on the same bus.

LIVING FAR FROM SCHOOL



“The long road home” by girls in Visale, West Guadalcanal

“This photo shows how girls get tired, sweaty and hungry before we reach school because we have to walk so far to school.”



“Distance to school” by girls from the Settlements, including White River and other areas.

“This photo shows how traffic in Honiara makes girls late for class and late home to do homework and housework.”

There are fewer secondary schools in rural areas, which means young people have to walk long distances each day (2–4 hours) in order to attend secondary school.⁵² This was the case for many of the adolescent girls in West Guadalcanal. Weather was raised as a specific related issue, with adolescent girls talking about having to walk long distances in strong heat or the rain, or having to stay home. This contributed to fatigue and absenteeism.

By contrast, in urban areas traffic jams were the main factor in drastically increasing the journey time to and from school.

SAFETY



“It’s not safe for girls to walk far to school” by girls in Visale, West Guadalcanal

“I took this photo to remind teachers and others in the community that they can help us, by providing a school bus for girls’ safety.”

Adolescent girls in all locations spoke about how travelling to/from school is unsafe, whether by bus, taxi or walking. They spoke of how they can be followed by boys, especially drunk boys who try to “catch us girls.” Sexual harassment, rape and murder were all mentioned. It is especially unsafe in areas where there aren’t many people around; one positive was that girls noted bystanders are likely to intervene if they see something happening. Consequently, parents often pull girls out of school entirely.⁵³

“IT IS VERY DANGEROUS FOR GIRLS TO WALK A FAR DISTANCE BY HERSELF [DUE TO] STUPID BOYS THAT HAVE BAD OPINIONS WHO WILL INTERACT WITH THEM ON THEIR WAY HOME.”

Adolescent girl

CULTURE SHOCK: MOVING TO HONIARA TO STUDY



“The eye can fool you” by girls in Honiara

“This photo symbolises the culture shock experienced by girls who move to Honiara from the provinces for school. When she comes to town for the first time, she is shocked by all the things in town and forgets about her education.”

Most of the national secondary schools are concentrated in the capital, which drives migration to Honiara. Adolescent girls spoke about how family members and teachers often assume they will “just know” how to handle all the changes and navigate the city and its “modern life”; whereas, in reality, this is often not the case.

In addition, many students who migrate to Honiara stay with extended family. The hidden story revealed through this research is that, often, girls become disengaged with education and more vulnerable to peer pressure because their personal needs are not met. This includes both the support needed for the transition to city life, as well as the emotional and wellbeing needs of adolescent girls in general, with many adolescent girls speaking of the lack of respect and care shown to adopted children.

WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

Adolescent girls are clear on the solutions they would like to see in order to make their journeys to school more manageable, safer and cheaper.

Ensuring as many schools are located within short walking distances of homes, or offering free school buses, is by far their preference; girls want to live at home but be able to get to school safely and relatively quickly. Where free transportation is not possible, it is recommended the SI Government implement the recommendations from the Parliamentary Inquiry into short-bus route fees, and where it is not possible to have secondary schools available locally, adolescent girls would like to see more boarding schools with infrastructure that specifically meet their needs (e.g. dormitories, ablution blocks).

Providing psychosocial (emotional health and wellbeing) support to girls who have migrated from rural to urban areas is critical to ensuring she feels welcome, safe and included. This can be as simple as providing an orientation to the city and the school; the school ensuring new students are matched with peer mentors; and ensuring teachers are aware that new students may be overwhelmed and experience culture shock.

Recommendations:

- MEHRD to ensure as many schools as possible are located within short walking distances of homes;
- MEHRD and schools to offer free school transport, such as a school bus or truck;
- Relevant Government departments and service providers to implement recommendations from the Parliamentary Inquiry into short-bus route fees;
- Government, local authorities and public transport providers to tackle public safety for girls; and
- Schools to provide psychosocial support to girls who have migrated from rural to urban areas.



**BARRIER:
CULTURE**



“EQUAL RESPONSIBILITIES”
— BY GIRLS IN HONIARA

“THIS PHOTO SHOWS A GIRL CARRYING ONE OF HER BABY SIBLINGS IN HER ARMS, WATCHING HER BROTHER WALK TO SCHOOL. SHE HAS TO STAY HOME TO DO ALL THE HOUSE CHORES INSTEAD OF GOING TO SCHOOL AND GETTING EDUCATED.

“GIRLS SHOULD GET TREATED EQUALLY. EVERYONE SHOULD BE ABLE TO GO TO SCHOOL.”

DOMESTIC CHORES AND GENDER INEQUALITY



“Give space and study facilities for girls!” by girls from the Settlements, including White River and other areas.

“This photo is of a girl laying on the floor to do some school work at midnight, after having finished her house duties. It is dark and she has no space. This can make her reluctant to attend school because she cannot concentrate.”



“Running home” by girls in West Guadalcanal.

“This photo shows a girl running to get home on time to do the housework and to look after her siblings. She might have to leave school early instead.”

“It is unfair for girls to work extra hard like this.”



“Stronger Together” by girls from the Settlements, including White River and other areas.

“This photo symbolises that strong bonds between girls and boys will help encourage girls to continue with their studies. Boys think they have more power than girls and are better than them; but by working together and breaking down the differences, girls will be able to achieve and complete their education.”



“Too tired to take notes” by girls in West Guadalcanal.

“This photo symbolises the impact of living far from school, as there are no notes in the paper and it is blurry because the student feels tired because of the distance to school and having to do all the house duties.”

“Living far from school means girls get tired and sometimes the parents are disappointed with her because she didn’t do her house duties.”

“This stops girls from being able to concentrate in class, which can lead to them stopping school altogether.”



The impact of culture (customs, traditions and social norms or expectations) on adolescent girls' lives and, specifically, on their ability to access and complete secondary education, is far-reaching.⁵⁴ Adolescent girls spoke about its many domains, including how culture relates to the expectations placed on them to perform certain roles (especially completing chores); the prioritisation of boys over girls; and the subsequent lack of support for girls' education. Stakeholders, teachers and parents all agreed, stating that culture "is the biggest domain, still higher than the church, higher than the government." They also talked about how change is possible, and is happening, but that it is often slow.

"GIRLS CARRY TOO MUCH OF THE WORKLOAD BETWEEN HOUSE AND HOMEWORK."

Adolescent girl

Adolescent girls across all locations spoke of the toxic combination of travelling long distances to and from school, having to concentrate at school, and then returning home to help with chores before completing their homework, stating it is simply too much for them.

Globally, girls aged 10–15 spend 50% – or 160 million hours – more time than boys their age on household chores every day.⁵⁵ This research indicates that this figure is significantly higher in Solomon Islands, with adolescent girls spending 75% more time than boys their age on household chores.

This included 15–20 hours of chores each week such as washing clothes, doing the dishes, cleaning the house (sweeping, mopping, dusting), cooking, babysitting/looking after brothers and sisters if they have younger siblings, fetching water (in Honiara, this meant from the outside water tank, whereas in West Guadalcanal it included walking up to one hour for water), going to the shops, gardening, and looking after any livestock (such as pigs). Boys would be more likely to do a handful of hours (one to six) per week, including raking the garden and chopping firewood.

Adolescent girls, teachers, parents and stakeholders alike spoke about how there is a strong cultural expectation that adolescent girls will do this work – because "if not them, then who?" Boys, on the other hand, are freer from these responsibilities and expectations.

"IF SCHOOL FINISHES AT 1.30PM, GIRLS ARE EXPECTED TO COME HOME AND DO CHORES WHEREAS BOYS CAN THROW DOWN THEIR BASKET AND THEY ARE FREE."

Teacher

These demands either prevent girls from attending secondary school at all, or make it difficult for them to concentrate in class, complete their homework and pass their examinations; if they fail their exams, they will most likely drop out. This is due to the school rules related to examinations, as well as to families no longer seeing the value in paying to educate them if they are not going to succeed; whereas if boys fail parents will do everything to get him to the next level. Teachers also recognised that boys are often higher achievers because of the double bind of girls being tired due to the extra work they have to perform out of school, and to teachers then putting more effort into boys' education.

Adolescent girls talked about gender inequality as a fact of life; they experience it from the youngest ages, but particularly once they hit adolescence, stating it is clear that "boys are seen as the priority." For their education, this means that sending boys to school is seen as crucial whereas sending girls to school is a bonus if you can afford it – whether financially, or in terms of losing the extra help around the home. Many adolescent girls translated this as a lack of awareness or appreciation of the importance of girls' education, whereas some stakeholders argued it is less a lack of awareness and more a straight question of prioritisation.

"BOYS ALWAYS HAVE THE BEST OPPORTUNITIES IN OUR CULTURE."

Teacher

WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

Adolescent girls want negative gender norms to be challenged, insisting that girls should get treated equally and everyone should be able to go to school. Gender equality will mean that boys respect girls, house duties are shared among all family members and school rules are applied equally to all students.

This cultural shift can't just come from girls themselves. It will require strong allies as well as gender transformative policies and practice at all levels of society. The girls are calling on Chiefs to be allies for gender equality and girls' right to education, and on the Government to uphold girls' rights by appointing a Minister for Girls' Rights. This new office can help foster and encourage girls' leadership.

These changes are needed in household, school and community practices, as well as in the built environment. Schools and families are to provide time and physical space for girls to study and do their homework, and more school lights and street lights to be installed for girls who are studying at night.

Adolescent girls also want to see barriers removed for those who fail to move from one school year to the next, including improved access to alternate or informal education pathways. The Learning Pathways Education policy is a promising start; we recommend the SI Government, and in particular MEHRD and SI National University, report on the roll out of this policy in 2018/9 in order to assess its success and lessons learnt and enable its national implementation, particularly for rural students. Adolescent girls also noted the difficulties faced when applying for places at Rural Training Centres, which often require a CV and reference checks. We recommend MEHRD work with the Solomon Islands Association of Rural Training Centres (SIARTC) in order to remove any unnecessary barriers and introduce youth-friendly and inclusive application processes.

Recommendations:

- The Government, civil society and donors should invest in programs that transform gendered attitudes and behaviours to ensure girls get treated equally, and promote trainings for community, religious and political leaders to be allies and supporters for gender equality and girls' right to education:
 - Teach boys to respect girls
 - Equally distribute house duties among all family members
 - Apply school rules equally to all students
- The Ministry of Education should develop and adopt a Gender Equality in Education policy, in consultation with adolescent girls;
- The Government, schools, civil society and donors should consider girls' needs by embedding gender transformative policies and practice at all levels of society;
- The Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs to appoint a Minister for Girls' Rights;
- Families to provide time and physical space for girls to study and do their homework;
- MEHRD to pilot, learn from and scale up the Learning Pathways Education policy;
- MEHRD and the Solomon Islands Association of Rural Training Centres to remove barriers to applying to alternate education pathways such as Rural Training Centres; and
- Local councils and schools to install more school lights and street lights.



**BARRIER:
FAMILY PROBLEMS**



“THE DAY YOU RAISE YOUR HAND AGAINST YOUR WIFE, IS THE DAY IT AFFECTS YOUR CHILD’S EDUCATION”

– BY GIRLS IN HONIARA

“This arranged scene depicts a drunken husband beating up his wife, and a young girl crying beside them inside their house.

“When parents separate due to domestic violence, the girl has to stay home to look after the house and not go to school.

“WE CHOSE TO TAKE THIS PHOTO TO LET PEOPLE KNOW WHAT’S HAPPENING INSIDE HOMES AND HOW IT DISTURBS CHILDREN’S STUDIES, AND TO SHOW YOUNG PEOPLE NOT TO ENTERTAIN THIS KIND OF BEHAVIOUR IN THEIR FUTURE HOMES.

“PARENTS NEED TO LEARN HOW TO SORT OUT THEIR PROBLEMS THROUGH A DECENT CONVERSATION.”

TARGET 3-4



REDUCE MORTALITY FROM NON-COMMUNICABLE DISEASES AND PROMOTE MENTAL HEALTH

TARGET 5-2



END ALL VIOLENCE AGAINST AND EXPLOITATION OF WOMEN AND GIRLS

Across all locations adolescent girls identified “family affairs” or “family problems” as a significant barrier to girls’ education. This ranges from fighting or violence at home (including domestic violence between parents or caregivers, and violence directed towards the child); to separation and divorce; to the challenges faced by children of single mothers, without any parents, or adopted children living with extended family; and to child abuse.

Under- and over-discipline were also raised as an interlinking issue with violence: both are seen as bad, with under-discipline meaning children and young people can do whatever they want without any consequences, which can lead to more easily giving into peer pressure and other influences, whereas over-discipline is the disproportionately heavy-handed use of verbal or physical violence such as name calling, shouting at girls at home, in front of her friends or in public places, swearing, smacking, getting whipped and other physical abuse.

Adolescent girls spoke about how separation and divorce create real problems for girls to stay in school, whether because she will have to go and live with extended family who do not prioritise girls’ (and specifically their adoptive children’s) education, or because of the emotional impact whereby the girl becomes “distracted, sad and cannot concentrate in class, so she drops out of school altogether.”

Adolescent girls also spoke about how children growing up with single parents, particularly single mothers, face additional disadvantage and financial struggles. This can mean there is no money to send any children to school, or that boys will be prioritised if there is limited money to be spent on school fees. If both parents die, the onus is then on the extended family to send the girl to school.

Any or all of these elements of family problems has a profound impact on adolescent girls’ mental health and wellbeing, and particularly on their ability to concentrate and remain engaged at school.

A note on violence: it happens in schools too

It should be noted that, while violence in the home and physical violence perpetrated by boys on girls were raised during this research, violence in schools was also briefly mentioned. This includes authority figures abusing their power, using both physical and emotional violence, including favouritism and/or actively targeting a particular (group of) girl student(s). It would be important for further research to be conducted in order to understand more on this issue.

EMOTIONAL IMPACT



“Family Problems” by girls in Honiara.

“This drawing is of a girl who has an empty heart because her parents have separated.

“As a result, she can’t focus on her studies and doesn’t complete her education.

“Parents need to be more committed to their family, and not be influenced by things like drugs which leads to domestic violence.”



“Family Problems” by girls in Honiara.

“This photo is of a girl sitting in a classroom, but she is not doing anything, just thinking and crying about the problems in her family.

“Parents/guardians should stop fighting so that their children can do well in their studies.

“Our government should raise awareness in our communities about family violence.”



“Low self-esteem” by girls from the Settlements, including White River and other areas..

“This photo represents the feeling girls have when they feel like they have nothing left for them in the world, which makes them feel like not attending school. This happens when there are family problems, or if girls aren’t prioritised and are left out at home.”

WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

When problems occur within the home, girls’ studies can be detrimentally affected. Instances of family violence within the home in particular create an environment that is not conducive to learning. Violence, whether or not it is directed specifically to the girls, impacts on their concentration, focus and study ethic. Ending gender-based violence and harmful practices is possible. Girls are at the forefront of making change happen. However, tackling this complex, multidimensional problem requires action at every level, from government, communities, families, schools, individuals and civil society organisations. Adolescent girls want to see domestic disputes resolved through open dialogue and conversation, and a reduction in the consumption of alcohol and drugs that can exacerbate violence.

Considering that a large number of girls are compelled to leave their homes in order to pursue their education in more urban locations, often staying with extended family, their treatment should also be nurturing. Regardless of their family situation, girls should be treated equally. Girls who are adopted have the equal right to access education, and thus should be given the same time and space to study so that they will thrive in their school environment.

Recommendations:



- The Ministry of Education and Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs should work to empower adolescent girls with the skills, knowledge and choices to be agents of change so they know what to do when they are affected by family problems, including gender-based violence;
- Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs to strengthen legal and policy frameworks to end harmful practices and gender-based violence, including reviewing the effectiveness of the Family Protection Act in relation to adolescent girls;
- Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs to ensure that justice, social welfare and child protection systems, including SAFENET, are responsive to adolescent girls’ needs;
- The Government to work with all relevant departments to collect better data on adolescent girls aged 10–14 and 15–19 and their experiences of violence;
- Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs to work with the National Peace Council to provide community workshops on non-violent conflict resolution, potentially through the Peace Committees and in collaboration with the Church, Chiefs and different civil society organisations, including training for parents on positive parenting and fair discipline; and
- Encourage families to treat children equally, especially adopted children.

**BARRIER:
BULLYING AND PEER PRESSURE**



“NO RESPECT FOR GIRLS”

– BY GIRLS FROM THE SETTLEMENTS

“THIS ARRANGED SCENE SHOWS HOW BOYS THINK THEY ARE SUPERIOR TO GIRLS AND DON'T HAVE ANY RESPECT FOR THEM, SO THEY FEEL THEY CAN DO WHATEVER THEY WANT TO GIRLS.

“WHEN BOYS BULLY GIRLS IT CAN MAKE GIRLS FEEL UNSAFE TO GO TO SCHOOL OR EVEN WALK AROUND IN THEIR COMMUNITY.”



Adolescent girls spoke freely of how bullying is a big issue in their lives, and that it is largely (though not exclusively) perpetrated by boys on girls, and includes physical, emotional and verbal attacks and abuse such as teasing, swearing and, increasingly, cyberbullying. They also mentioned that, occasionally, there may be bullying within families ridiculing girls who want to go to school.

Teachers confirmed that boys will bully girls in the classroom, though with a teacher present it is more likely to be verbal abuse, with boys “saying rude things and telling [girls] that they are not clever”, swearing, or being verbally aggressive or intimidating. Physical fighting tends to happen outside of the classroom. Many of the teachers expressed their frustrations at not having effective strategies for dealing with the issue to be able to protect girls.

The impact of bullying is profound; it can be so bad that girls do not want to go to school, caused by the resultant low self-esteem.

“BOYS WILL ALWAYS BE FIRST IN EVERYTHING, AND THIS TRANSLATES TO HOW THEY BEHAVE TOWARDS GIRLS IN CLASSES.”

Teacher

As distinct from bullying, which is primarily boy on girl, peer pressure (girl to girl) was identified by adolescent girls as an additional barrier that can lead to reduced school attendance or dropping out of school altogether. They can face pressure from peer groups made up of friends (or friends of friends) who have already dropped out of school, who encourage them to leave also.

The ‘pull’ factors tend to relate to social influences such as dancing, spending time on social media or being in a relationship (“boy business”). Adolescent girls spoke about boys sitting around “thinking and joking about which girl to lure away from school.” ‘Push’ factors on the other hand related to many of the other issues raised by adolescent girls in this report that increase a girl’s vulnerability, in particular family problems.

This can lead to girls getting suspended or expelled, missing classes, failing exams and ultimately dropping out of school.

Interestingly, this was the only issue where the teacher focus group clearly stated there was a major difference between now and previous generations. This generation gap means teachers, who did not experience such peer pressure when they were at school, do not know how to deal with it and effectively encourage students – and especially adolescent girls – to be able to stay in school.



“Setting our priorities straight” by girls in Honiara.

“This photo symbolises the decisions we have to make.

“The white cloth and green sticker represents the good choices and path, the black cloth and red sticker shows the bad path, stop and danger.

“The person is already facing the bad side – she’s trying to choose between the two but she’s being pulled to the bad because her friends are calling to her to follow them and hang out, and she doesn’t want to be left out.

“When she is influenced, she misses classes and ends up realising only when it’s too late. Then she drops out of school.”



“Peer pressure” by girls in Honiara.

“Without peer pressure, girls will be able to concentrate and fully complete their education. Then they will become leaders in the future.

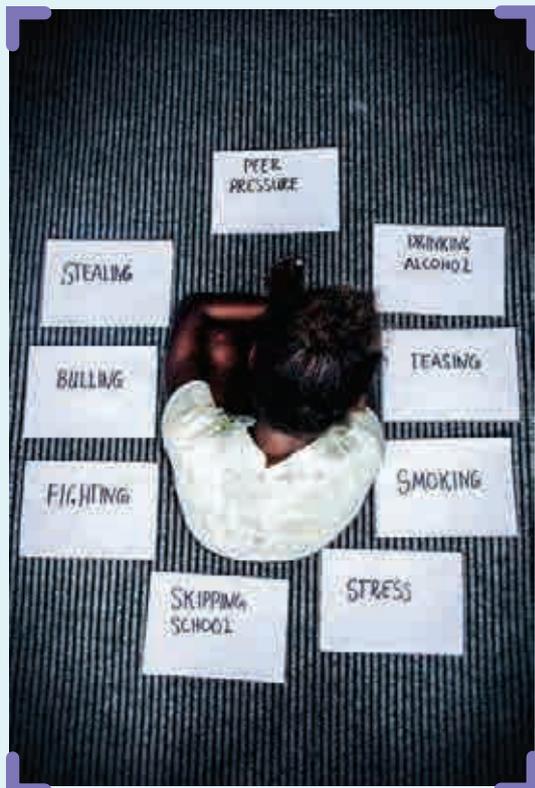
“I chose to take this photo to help the public realise this is what happens, and encourage parents and guardians to look after their girls, to talk to them about making good choices and not getting influenced by friends. Parents with adopted girls especially should be told to care for their adopted children as much as their own.”

WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?



“Peer Pressure” by girls from the Settlements, including White River and other areas.

“This photo shows all the bad influences we can come under, which can stop us from completing our education.”



“Peer Pressure” by girls from the Settlements, including White River and other areas.

“This photo shows a girl who is being pressured into doing things she doesn’t want to do, which leads to stress and dropping out from school.”

Adolescent girls want to see more awareness raised on how to say no to “bad peers” and to influences such as drugs. They are calling for a safe and secure learning environment, and want the SI Government to implement policies and programs on school-related gender-based violence. This could include talks hosted by schools with the participation of family members, so that they also may be part of the girls’ social support systems. Teachers should also be trained in best practices for the elimination of bullying, and should take a more active role in engaging with their students to ensure that such instances do not occur. We recommend that MEHRD, together with the Ministry for Youth and Ministry of Health, support schools to create safe and respectful school environments and prevent bullying, cyberbullying and other unacceptable behaviours by including a statement about bullying and cyberbullying behaviours in School Rules or other related policy documents.

Bullying undermines girls’ confidence and thereby hinders their ability to learn in school. We strongly recommend an increase in the number of counselling (emotional health and wellbeing) services offered by schools and communities, alongside a further action to destigmatise the need for these services.

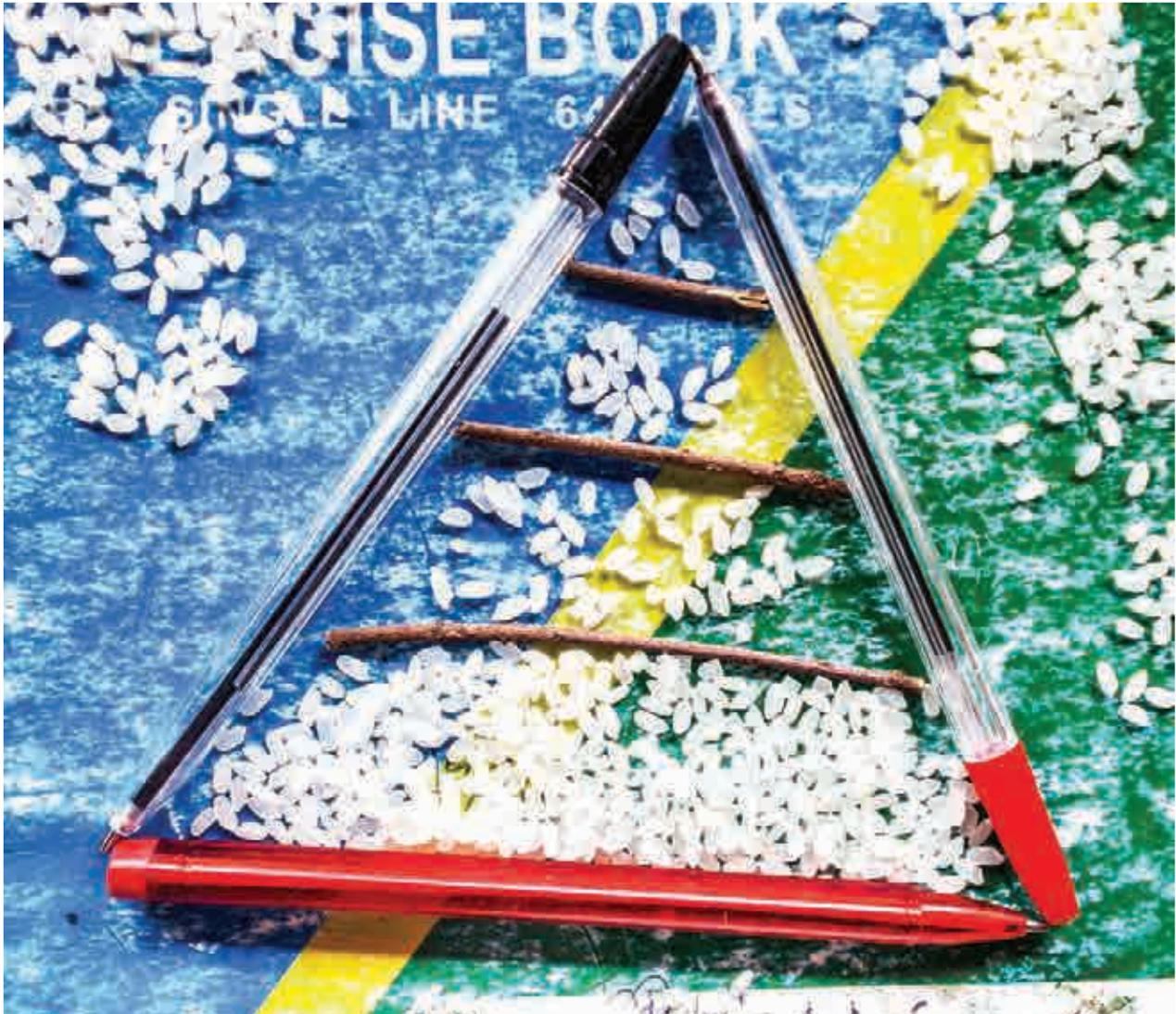
Recommendations:

MEHRD should work with schools to adopt a whole of school approach, including school culture, to address school-related gender-based violence and promote gender equity by:

- Promoting and supporting safe and respectful learning environments where bullying is not tolerated;
- Putting in place whole-school anti-bullying strategies and initiatives, including school talks and other awareness-raising initiatives;
- Developing a Student Engagement Policy, School Rules or other relevant Policy or Code of Conduct that includes processes and strategies to prevent and respond to incidents of bullying and other forms of unacceptable behaviour, including identifying contact points in the school community to report (cyber)bullying;
- Working in partnership with families and the community to raise awareness, reduce and manage bullying and cyberbullying; and
- Taking a whole-school approach focusing on safety and wellbeing.

BARRIER:

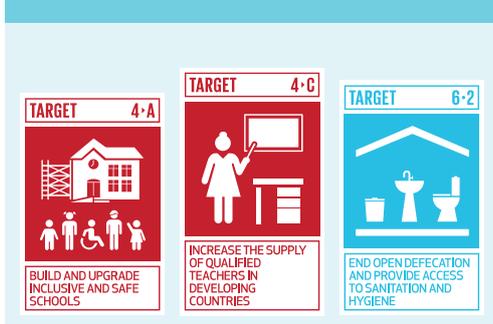
QUALITY EDUCATION AND INCLUSIVE INFRASTRUCTURE



**“NO SPACES FOR GIRLS
IN SCHOOL”** – BY GIRLS IN HONIARA

“This photo represents the pyramid system in the Solomon Islands. It shows that there are lots of primary schools but as you go up the pyramid [i.e. to secondary and tertiary education], there are fewer schools and spaces are limited. This shuts down girls’ ability to access and complete secondary education.

“THE NEXT TIME SOMEONE IS ASKED TO REPRESENT OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM, I WANT THEM TO DO SO USING A SQUARE SHAPE INSTEAD – WHERE THE GRAINS ARE EQUALLY DISTRIBUTED FROM THE BOTTOM RIGHT UP TO THE TOP.”



Adolescent girls identified the barrier of there not being enough spaces for girls in school: whether due to too few schools, or due to limited spaces because of over-crowded classrooms. In Honiara, for instance, girls will often be in a class of around 70 students.⁵⁶

They also spoke of a lack of gender-inclusive facilities. For instance, boarding schools often have far fewer dormitories for girls; this is attributed to school spaces being allocated on – and infrastructure built to – a ratio determined by exam pass rates. As discussed elsewhere in this report it is important to recognise the reasons why pass rates are lower for adolescent girls and therefore why these ratios are partially flawed. This perpetuates a vicious cycle for adolescent girls and curtails the potential for equal opportunities and for adolescent girls to learn and succeed.⁵⁷

This can mean it is hard to get adolescent girls into secondary school, and even harder to re-enrol them if they fail an exam.

MENSTRUAL HYGIENE: MISSING SCHOOL EACH MONTH

Menstrual hygiene was raised as a specific subset of the broader issue of inclusive infrastructure through the workshops, however probing questions had to be asked in order to get a deeper understanding of this sensitive issue.

Adolescent girls spoke of how, even when they are able to attend school, they often find that there are not enough toilet or shower blocks – and fewer for girls than for boys. The ones that do exist can be a long walk away, which is off-putting and potentially unsafe. When they have their period, they will therefore often stay home. This means missing classes, which can lead to them falling behind with the consequent problem of potentially failing exams.

The national minimum infrastructure standard for toilet:student ratio is 1:60 (male) and 1:40 (female). For adolescent girls attending secondary schools, this ratio is only met in National Secondary Schools (1:34). In Community High Schools it is 1:88 and in Provincial Secondary Schools 1:62, whereas for adolescent boys the average is well above the standard at 1:45.⁵⁸ Further, there is also a lack of supporting infrastructure such as running water or incinerators to burn the rubbish.⁵⁹

In addition to the availability and suitability of ablution blocks, adolescent girls spoke about the difficulty in accessing sanitary products. Girls in Honiara felt relatively well-equipped to manage their periods as they have better access to sanitary pads now, whereas outside of Honiara this was not the case. Stakeholders also identified both the lack of sanitary products available to buy in school and the lack of money girls have to afford them.

Everyone noted that this can result in adolescent girls' lower participation and higher absenteeism in secondary school.

It was especially encouraging to hear MEHRD speak to the need for more facilities for adolescent girls – including ensuring that school grants, of which a percentage gets spent on infrastructure, are spent on gender-inclusive infrastructure. They also discussed providing free or subsidised sanitary products so that no girl need miss school each month.

“MAYBE GIRLS SHOULD BE ENTITLED TO HAVE SIX OR SEVEN PACKETS OF PADS PER YEAR, AND THEN WE CAN SUPPORT THEM NOW, TO BE IN CLASS.”

Stakeholder interview, MEHRD

WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

Adolescent girls want to see all schools that are of high quality, particularly so that parents can choose schools close to homes. They also want to see more spaces available for girls, and gender-sensitive and inclusive infrastructure that enables them to attend school. They are calling for better teacher training, smaller class sizes (i.e. two classes of 35 instead of one of 70), more teachers, and more facilities for girls.

Access to good menstrual hygiene is critical for girls of secondary school age, especially since there is a significant number of girls above the recommended age for their year level in the Solomon Islands. With \$8 million already earmarked for Education Infrastructure Program, it is recommended that a portion of these funds be allocated specifically towards providing suitable facilities for girls. This should include dormitories and shower blocks in addition to infrastructure such as incinerators for rubbish disposal. The distribution of free sanitary products in schools to anyone who menstruates would also be greatly appreciated, so that they do not have to miss classes due to menstruation.

Recommendations:

- MEHRD and donors to have a continued focus on human resources development through teacher training, to lift the quality of all schools;
- MEHRD to work with schools towards smaller class sizes, meaning more classes with fewer students in each class (i.e. where there are now classes of 70, there would be two classes of 35);
- MEHRD to work with schools to provide enough schools and classes for all students, to achieve gender parity;
- MEHRD to work with schools to encourage more teachers, especially women teachers, into the profession, and enable them to progress in their careers and take on leadership positions;
- MEHRD to deliver and prioritise gender-sensitive infrastructure budgeting, resulting in more dormitories, shower blocks and other facilities for girls (such as incinerators); and
- MEHRD to provide free sanitary products in schools.



INTERSECTING ISSUE: GIRLS LIVING WITH A DISABILITY



**“Without working together, no school fees for her!”
by girls with disabilities.**

“This photo demonstrates how family members and relatives need to come together to support a girl with disability to complete school – whether because her parents are unemployed or have limited income, or because she has no parents because they have both died. Members of the extended family must give support.”

Globally, 90% of children living with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school; this corresponds with available statistics in the Pacific region, including in Solomon Islands (SI).⁶⁰

Adolescents living with disabilities have long been invisible in SI education policy and practice, and there is currently no clear data available on the number of students with disabilities in or out of schools.⁶¹ In 2016 however the SI Government introduced the National

Disability Inclusive Education Policy 2016–2020, which passed by the National Education Board late 2018,⁶² with one aim being to improve data collection in order to deliver tailored training to teachers.

Despite this commitment, stakeholders and adolescent girls with disabilities noted that the Convention on the Rights of Persons of Disabilities is yet to be ratified by the SI Government, and that there is a subsequent lack of best practice in government policy and practice, alongside a lack of allocated budget.

Adolescent girls and young women with disabilities spoke about how each of the barriers identified through this photovoice project all relate to them, and how they face additional layers of disadvantage within each barrier.

For instance, they discussed how non-disabled children will be preferenced over children with disabilities when families decide who to send to school if they cannot afford to send all children; and thus, as a girl with a disability, they are doubly unlikely to get to school. An adolescent girl living with a disability often has to pay her own way, especially if she wants to go to secondary school.

Even when she does get to school, facilities for students with a disability do not really exist, whether accessible classrooms, toilets or transport to/from school, which can lead to them having to drop out. In addition, they are often even more vulnerable than other girls when travelling to school, as they are more likely to be targeted (especially if they have a visible disability) and less likely to be able to get away.

Another key issue was social stigma and attitudes to disability. If families feel a sense of shame they will often keep their child at home, out of sight, rather than send them to school. Other negative attitudes relate to the value of educating children with disabilities, with a lack of understanding as to what they can achieve. Adolescent girls and young women with disabilities



**“No opportunities for girls with disabilities”
by girls with disabilities.**

“This photo depicts a tin can, which girls with disabilities – who have either never been to school or have had to drop out of school – pick up to sell in order to make a living.

“More people need to be aware of the importance of girls’ education, especially for girls with disabilities.”



spoke about how they rarely have the freedom to speak out because their family and community ignores them, doesn't value them and doesn't support them. This can translate to bullying, including from non-disabled students (if they are at school) and even friends. This can lead to them feeling they are not valued and makes them ashamed of their disabilities, which in turn leads to low self-esteem. As such, self-pity was ranked as the top issue holding girls with disabilities back from living happy, fulfilled lives; by contrast, confidence and self-acceptance comes when families and communities demonstrate their love and support, including by sending them to school and valuing their education.

Many of the girls and young women with disabilities had not been formally educated, having been kept at home instead. They had, however, found community education programs offered through CSOs. Their success when able to access such programs speaks volumes: some have been to the United States to engage in the Commission on the Status of Women, others have trained as community educators, and still others have excelled as professional athletes. These successes often translated to greater acceptance and support from their families and communities, however they also spoke about how they still encounter major difficulties getting schools, community members and government officials to respect and listen to them.

WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

Children and young people with disabilities have an equal right to access an inclusive, quality education, and a right to the support and adaptations necessary to facilitate their learning. A high level solution is for the SI Government to ratify the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as soon as possible. This was adolescent girls with disabilities' number one priority for their advocacy going forwards.

Flowing on from this is to support the roll out and implementation of the SI National Development Strategy 2016–2035 and the National Disability Inclusive Education Policy 2016 – 2020 to ensure schools are more inclusive and teachers are supported to meet the learning needs of all their students.

An adolescent girl living with a disability faces double stigma and discrimination. Schools and legislators should ensure an allocated budget for Disability Inclusive Education, and ensure priority spending towards children with disabilities.

Adolescent girls and stakeholders spoke about how facilities for students with a disability do not really exist, and recommended learning from others – domestically and internationally – to ensure best practice in government policy and school practice on inclusive infrastructure.

Social stigma and attitudes to disability also impact on school attendance, so community education programs are needed to reduce stigma and discrimination and encourage girls with disabilities to go to school.

Overall, adolescent girls and young women with disabilities are calling for “nothing about us, without us”.

Key Recommendations:

- The Government to ratify the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities;
- MEHRD to support the roll out and implementation of the National Disability Inclusive Education Policy 2016–2020, including allocating a budget for Disability Inclusive Education;
- MEHRD, community and family members to support girls with disabilities to go to school, whether through support from extended family to help pay for school fees, or a scheme similar to the Girls' Fund for girls with disabilities;
- MEHRD, community, school and family members to respect, value, listen to and consult with girls with disabilities, particularly their lived experiences and ideas for Disability Inclusive Education;
- MEHRD to learn from others – such as other Ministries of Education, educators, schools, Disabled Peoples' Organisations, or other experts – who are being successful at including girls with disabilities, whether in Solomon Islands or overseas;
- MEHRD to review the curriculum to ensure that all children are supported to achieve learning outcomes and progress in a wide range of subjects, irrespective of gender or disability; and
- Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs, civil society organisations and donors to fund and run community education programs to reduce stigma and discrimination and increase girls with disabilities' self-esteem.

OUR FUTURE WITH EDUCATION



“Leadership” by adolescent girls in West Guadalcanal.

“This photo symbolises the potential strength, power and confidence of the many girls in Solomon Islands if we are given the chance to complete our secondary education.”

“Where will education take you?”

This was one of the questions answered both in the workshops and through the peer surveys.

Overwhelmingly, and regardless of their own level of education or location, adolescent girls see the main benefit of education as the increased chance of getting a job and thereby earning a steady income. This has the positive flow-on effects of being able to provide for their family and support others, including sending more girls to school.

Others spoke of how completing education enables and empowers women and girls, in particular to become role models and leaders at all levels of society, including in the space of fighting for women and girls’ rights and freedoms as well as contributing more broadly to community development.

Leadership was also linked with the ability to have a say and make decisions, again at all levels – from the household (particularly regarding finances) through to national parliament.

Confidence and the ability to be “bold and brave” was also mentioned, particularly the ability to speak up in situations where uneducated women and girls would otherwise feel uncomfortable or unwelcome. This increased confidence would also apply when speaking to visitors (foreigners), which was also seen as important.

Conversely, without education adolescent girls spoke about being constrained to traditional roles and responsibilities, struggling to have enough money, lacking in confidence, having little control over decision making, being locked out of leadership roles, and experiencing hopelessness.

WHAT’S THE SOLUTION?

Adolescent girls, when given the tools, the opportunities and the confidence to lead, can be powerful agents of social and political change.

Adolescent girls must be recognised as a key stakeholder who should be consulted and engaged with in the community, so that development and programs may be specifically targeted to their needs. These opportunities provide them the experience needed to be leaders, trainers and peer educators achieving change not only for themselves, but also for their wider community. Girls’ interests, concerns and opinions should be heard at all levels; from the household, to community, to governance and management systems at school, to national level policy development and beyond.

Supporting girls to be bold and brave leaders is essential to foster women leaders. A supportive family environment, the presence of role models and formal education are important interventions. Leadership skills, such as decision making and negotiation, equip girls with the knowledge that allows them to confidently express their views, negotiate power dynamics and influence and motivate others. Working with girls to strengthen their voices is crucial to unlocking their potential.

Girl-led hubs and networks have also proven to be an important part of strengthening girls’ power. These networks are spaces where girls can share their views and their experiences, learn new skills and collectively identify approaches to remove the barriers in their way. This photovoice project has been an example of this in practice, with adolescent girls speaking of and demonstrating greater confidence and leadership skills throughout the process, as well as driving the change they wish to see.

Recommendations:

- The Government, civil society organisations and donors should promote girls’ leadership, by investing in promoting and developing girls’ leadership capabilities and encouraging women in leadership to include girls as well; and
- MEHRD to work with the Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs to ensure the curriculum is clearly linked to future opportunity, enabling all learners to acquire the skills to succeed in employment or entrepreneurship (skills-based and work-ready focussed curriculum).

CONCLUSION

We know that between the ages of 10 and 19, girls' lives are marked with extraordinary challenges. Precisely because they are girls, they are abused, mistreated, denied an education, stigmatised and pushed behind. Responses designed to reach adult women or younger children simply do not take into account the specific and unique needs of adolescent girls in these vital years.

But there's another side to this story. One of hope and optimism, of boldness and confidence; one of leadership and change.

By consulting with and listening to adolescent girls,

by designing gender transformative education policies and programs,

by engaging the community to understand and protect girls' right to education,

by removing the barriers blocking adolescent girls from accessing quality, inclusive and equitable secondary education,

we can all stand with girls and work with them to complete 13 years of schooling and positively transform their lives and entire communities.

We can unlock countries' economic prosperity. We can achieve the Sustainable Development Goals for all. And we can build a world where every girl grows up with equality, justice and full access to her rights.

The positive news is that girls are already leading this change. In their homes, their classrooms, their communities and their countries, girls are taking on power structures, demanding an education, challenging harmful practices and proving that they can do anything.

It's time for all of us to stand with girls – like those behind this report – and help them succeed in this transformation.

To **individuals in the Solomon Islands, in Australia and around the world**, we call on you to stand with girls. To amplify the voices of Solomon Islander girls so that they can be heard loud and clear by those with the power to create change and enable them to complete their education. We call on you to ask your friends and family to join us as allies.

To **families, communities and schools**, we call on you to listen to girls and provide safe environments that enable girls to learn, lead, decide, thrive and survive. This includes challenging harmful gender norms and stereotypes, and fostering gender equality in the home, at school, and within the community.

To the **Solomon Islands Government**, we call on you to turn your commitment to gender parity in secondary education into real change for girls. We call on you to work to remove the barriers identified throughout this report, to see more girls enrolling in and completing 13 years of education.

To the **Australian Government**, we call on you to reflect the Solomon Islands Government's commitment to increasing girls' access to secondary education in the 2019/20 Aid Investment Plan and all other related policies and programs.

To other **donors**, we call on you to invest in girls and in their education. To recognise that as supporters, businesses, philanthropists and institutions, you have the power to end inequality, violence and fear, and replace them with education, safety and economic empowerment for the world's next generation of leaders.

And to **girls across the world**, and particularly in the Solomon Islands and across the Pacific, we call on you to stand strong, to keep learning and leading and fighting for a better future. Together, we will change the world.

**STAND WITH US.
STAND WITH GIRLS.
STAND FOR EQUALITY.**

ENDNOTES

- 1 420 million people would be lifted out of poverty by completing secondary education. This would more than halve the number of people living in poverty. UNESCO 2017, 'Reducing global poverty through universal primary and secondary education', in *Policy Paper 32 / Fact Sheet 44*, p11
- 2 One additional year of school can increase a woman's earnings by up to 20%, and women report more decision making power over their earnings. Wodon, Q., C. Montenegro, H. Nguyen, and A. Onagoruwa (2018). 'Missed Opportunities: The High Cost of Not Educating Girls', in *The Cost of Not Educating Girls Notes Series*. Washington, DC: The World Bank, p12-4, 38
- 3 *Ibid.*, p21-3
- 4 *Ibid.*, p30-8
- 5 Wodon *et al.* (2018), *op. cit.*, p50
- 6 UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2018). 'One in Five Children, Adolescents and Youth is Out of School', in *Fact Sheet 48*, p8
- 7 Plan International (2018). *Pacific Girl report*, p45
- 8 MEHRD (2017). *Performance Assessment Report 2015 & 2016*, p12
- 9 UNICEF (2015). 'Education: Secondary gross enrolment ratio – Percentage', in *Global Database*.
- 10 *Ibid.* data.unicef.org
- 11 MEHRD (2017), *op. cit.*, p43
- 12 *Ibid.*, p44
- 13 *Ibid.*, p51; Dawson, G. (2017). *Solomon Islands Education Sector Support Program: Independent Assessor Report*. Cardno. p15
- 14 *Ibid.*, p43-4, 52
- 15 Asian Development Bank (2015). *Solomon Islands Country Gender Assessment*. <https://openaccess.adb.org>. Available under a CC BY 3.0 IGO license, p29
- 16 Solomon Islands National Statistical Office (2014). 'Report on Gender', *2009 Population and Housing Census*, p12, 58
- 17 MEHRD (2017), *op. cit.*, p13
- 18 Fangalasu, J. and A. Bateman (2015). *SI Education White Paper*, MEHRD, p57
- 19 Ministry of Development Planning and Aid Coordination (2016). *SI National Development Strategy 2016 – 2035: Improving the Social and Economic Livelihoods of all Solomon Islanders Ministry*. p13
- 20 *Ibid.*, p39
- 21 UNICEF Office of Research Innocenti (2017). 'Adolescence', *Innocenti Research Digest 08*, p2
- 22 Guadalcanal and Honiara are two of the four provinces which, when combined, have around 72% of the entire Solomon Islands student population (the other two being Malaita and Western provinces). MEHRD (2017), *op. cit.*, p18
- 23 Equal Rights Trust (2016). *Stand Up and Fight: Addressing Discrimination and Inequality in Solomon Islands*. The Equal Rights Trust Country Report Series: 6. p105-7.
- 24 Ministry of Development Planning and Aid Coordination (2016), *op. cit.*, p13
- 25 Dawson, G. (2017), *op. cit.* p15
- 26 DFAT (2015). *Aid Investment Plan Solomon Islands 2015-16 to 2018-19*. p11
- 27 *Ibid.*, p11
- 28 DFAT (2018). 'Table 15. Australian Education Official Development Assistance, Type of Assistance by Region of Benefit', in Australia's Official Development Assistance (ODA) Standard Time Series, viewed 19 February 2019 <https://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/aid/statistical-summary-time-series-data/Pages/australias-official-development-assistance-standard-time-series.aspx>
- 29 Devlin, M., S. Kift, K. Nelson, L. Smith and J. McKay (2012). *Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds: Practical advice for teaching staff*.
- 30 Dawson, G. (2017), *op. cit.*
- 31 Stakeholder interviews, MEHRD, November 2018.
- 32 UNDP, UN Women (2018), *op. cit.* p13
- 33 Honiara City Council, School Fees, viewed 3 January 2019 <http://honiaracitycouncil.com/index.php/education-and-recreation-2/hcc-schools-parents-2/school-fees-2/>
- 34 World Bank Data, *Solomon Islands*, viewed 6 February 2019 <https://data.worldbank.org/country/solomon-islands>
- 35 Asian Development Bank Poverty Data, *Solomon Islands*, viewed 6 February 2019 <https://www.adb.org/countries/solomon-islands/poverty>
- 36 The report highlights how "[t]he ability to earn cash is an important determinant of whether a person is poor or not. Even in the Solomon Islands, where a large share of household consumption is self-produced, cash incomes are needed for essential non-food items such as school fees [...]" When taking into account that "people living in households where the household head earns wages have significantly lower poverty rates than other Solomon Islanders", and that only 30% of households earn such wages, we can establish that 70% are in the more precarious position of not having enough cash to pay for "essential non-food items such as school fees, kerosene, and garden tools." Solomon Islands National Statistics Office and the World Bank Group (2015). *Solomon Islands Poverty Profile based on the 2012/3 Household Income and Expenditure Survey*. p20-1
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Interviews

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Design

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Photos

All photos were taken by adolescent girls as part of the photovoice process. They are identified by location but not by individual photographer, as per the photovoice ethics process. All the captions were written by the photographer(s) as part of the process. The photos have been graded by Room3 in order to ensure consistent quality; however any special effects come from the photographer(s) experimenting with the camera settings themselves.



“Stronger Together” by girls from the Settlements, including White River and other areas.

“This photo symbolises that strong bonds between girls and boys will help encourage girls to continue with their studies. Boys think they have more power than girls and are better than them; but by working together and breaking down the differences, girls will be able to achieve and complete their education.”

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