

“Girls are like leaves on the wind”

How gender expectations
impact girls' education —

A closer look from West Nile, Uganda

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How gender expectations impact girls’ education — A closer look from West Nile, Uganda

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Introduction

In most places around the world, girls are now as likely as boys to be enrolled in primary school, and in some lower- and middle-income countries, girls are achieving higher levels of education than boys.¹ This is not the case, however, in most sub-Saharan African nations, where girls continue to fall behind boys, particularly at the secondary level. Secondary schooling is essential for both women’s empowerment,² and for sustainable economic development.³ Understanding why gender gaps persist, and in particular why girls are more likely than boys to drop out of school, can illuminate opportunities to enhance girls’ educational attainment and improve their transitions to adulthood.

To fill this gap in evidence and contribute to more effective secondary school programs and policies, the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) examined school dropout among girls in the West Nile sub-region of Uganda, where the gender gaps in educational attainment are acute. Funded by the MacArthur Foundation, the research was conducted in partnership with the Forum for African Women Educationalists, Uganda (FAWEU), alongside Ugandan research partners Applied Research Bureau and Wilsken Agencies, Inc.

The research explores the complex determinants of dropping out of school for girls in the West Nile sub-region, and it also builds on a growing body of global literature on how gender, socioeconomic status and other factors intersect to influence girls’ educational attainment. Multiple studies have pointed to the role of socioeconomic and demographic factors, including poverty, parents’ education levels, and household composition and size, in schooling outcomes for girls.⁴⁻⁶ In addition, some of these studies have suggested that the lower priority placed on girls’ education as compared to boys, coupled with an emphasis on the reproductive roles versus productive roles of women, can discourage girls from continuing in school past the primary or lower secondary levels.⁷⁻⁹ However, few studies have explicitly explored in what ways gender expectations and norms may influence girls’ education.

Early pregnancy and child marriage are often identified as reasons for girls’ dropout, but evidence from other sub-Saharan African settings suggests that the relationship between these events is not straightforward. Prior empirical evidence has suggested that the proportion of girls who get pregnant while they are in school is often lower than assumed within sub-Saharan Africa,^{10,11} and most studies

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that examine the relationship between pregnancy and dropout are unable to determine the causal order of events. Meanwhile, other factors such as girls’ previous school performance and their parents’ educational level or income may attenuate the relationship. In addition, many of these other factors that influence dropping out also predict early marriage or pregnancy.¹²⁻¹⁷

ICRW’s study examined the linkages between multiple potential determinants of dropout including socio-economic characteristics, school and household characteristics, gendered beliefs and practices, and girls’ experiences with romantic relationships, sexual initiation, early pregnancy and marriage. The findings offer insight into how gender inequality is related to other socio-economic and demographic determinants that influence girls’ educational experiences and opportunities. Although specific to West Nile, the findings have implications for policy and program development throughout Uganda and sub-Saharan Africa.

Research Setting: West Nile, Uganda

A predominantly rural sub-region in Northwest Uganda, West Nile is one of the more underdeveloped areas in a country wracked by years of war and conflict. During the protracted conflict with the Lord’s Resistance Army from the mid-1990s through 2006, an estimated 250,000 children were orphaned; some 25,000 children were abducted to serve as combatants or in service to fighting forces; and 2 million people were displaced.¹⁸ Many girls were raped and sexually assaulted by soldiers during the war, while others were victims of sexual violence in camps for displaced people. This conflict impacted parts of the West Nile sub-region, which also continues to host many refugees from bordering countries.¹⁹

The West Nile sub-region is also an extremely impoverished, underserved region: In 2011, more than 72 percent of households in the area ranked within the bottom two wealth quintiles in Uganda.²⁰ Most people live in rural communities and rely on subsistence agriculture for their livelihood.

The region has the highest gender gaps in school enrollment in Uganda. Men living in West Nile have levels of education that are on par with the national average; however, women’s rates of schooling are far below the national average (a Gender Parity Index of .85 at the primary level). Only six female students for every ten male students are enrolled in school at the secondary level, compared to a national average of eight out of ten.²⁰

Early pregnancy is common in the region: Fertility rates in West Nile are higher than the national average, both overall and among adolescents in particular (19.7 percent of 15-19 year olds had already had a child). Recent evidence also suggests that while adolescent fertility levels are falling elsewhere, they are rising in West Nile. Yet, the average age of girls’ first marriage in West Nile is similar to the national average age of 18.1 (for women 20-49), and the average age of first sex is slightly higher than the national average (17.8 as compared to 17.0).^{20,21}

ICRW’s research took place in the Arua and Adjumani districts of West Nile, where the dominant ethnic groups are the Lugbara and the Madi, respectively. Prior ethnographic studies of the Lugbara inform current gendered expectations and inequalities – accounts from mid to late 1900s describe the strength of the role of the patriarch among the patrilineal and patrilocal Lugbara. Traditionally, women’s position overall was subordinate to men, and tied closely to the reproductive lifecourse – prior to menopause, women held very little authority.²² Upon puberty, girls were no longer considered to fully belong to their father’s lineage. Boys were expected to remain in their village, where they would contribute to their natal household and community, while girls were expected to leave upon marriage and contribute to their husband’s household and community. As one young participant in a focus group summarized, boys were “like sticks to lean on” and girls were “like leaves on the wind.” While the region has been subject to significant upheaval in recent years, much of our research suggests that similar gendered roles and expectations prevail today, determining women’s position in society, and the context and timing of key life events, including marriage and pregnancy.

Methods

We collected data in two phases, beginning with formative research in July 2013 that consisted of workshops with key stakeholders and focus groups with community members. Results of the formative work guided the study instruments, sample and sampling strategy for the second phase of data collection, which occurred from December 2013 to April 2014. This main phase of data collection included both quantitative and qualitative methods and approaches.

Interviewers administered a face-to-face survey to 805 girls ages 14-18.^a In each district, the sample was drawn using a multistage, stratified design where sub-counties, parishes, villages and then households where eligible 14- to 18-year-old girls resided were randomly selected for participation. The survey asked girls about their households, educational experiences, and perceptions of the roles of women versus men. We also used a detailed life-history calendar to assess the timing of major life events and transitions relevant to school, union formation (cohabitation or marriage) and family formation. The qualitative data collection incorporated a sub-sample of 26 of the 805 girls included in the quantitative work, with an emphasis on those who had dropped out of school. In addition, we conducted interviews with 10 mothers and four fathers of adolescent girls and held focus groups with community members of both sexes, ages 18-24 and 40-55. These interviews compared the experience of school, romantic relationships and causes of dropout for boys versus girls, and also addressed broader social change in the community. Together, the qualitative and quantitative data provided a rich understanding of both the magnitude of girls’ dropout and how it is understood and perceived in West Nile. Throughout this report we highlight portions of interviews from two girls we spoke with – Unzia and Irene. The issues and challenges experienced by these young women echo those raised by many other respondents, and will be drawn on throughout this report.

Findings

We present results from our research below, beginning with a description of the study population, followed by an overview of the determinants of girls' school dropout. We then examine the sequence of important events in girls' lives as compared to dropout, including their reported first romantic relationships, sexual initiation, pregnancy and marriage. Finally, we look at these characteristics together to better understand which are the most significant determinants of dropout in the West Nile.

About the Study Setting and Population

The vast majority of the 14- to 18-year-old girls who comprised our study population (Table 1) lived in simple, thatched-roof homes, and had, on average, 5.2 siblings. About one in five of the girls said their family had been impacted in some way by recent political conflict, with nearly one-third of those impacted having lost at least one parent to war.

The majority of respondents' parents had not been educated beyond primary school. Mothers' educational attainment was significantly lower than fathers', which underlines the extent of gender inequality in schooling in the previous generation.

Respondents described how union formation patterns have shifted over just a few generations in the West Nile. Marriages were once formally negotiated between fathers and male relatives of the prospective bride and groom's families, and bridewealth was paid to the father of the bride upon marriage. While producing children was the most important role for women, it was expected to take place within marriage. These practices were shifting even by 1960, when ethnographic accounts describe the increasing individualization

of marriage and brideprice – grooms had begun making payments directly to the bride's father; women began to take on lovers in the absence of suitable grooms due to young men's migration to urban centers for work in the market economy.²³ While marriage with bridewealth payment is still considered the ideal union, formal negotiated brideprice has become increasingly rare in the West Nile and is being replaced by elopements or marriages forced by pregnancy.

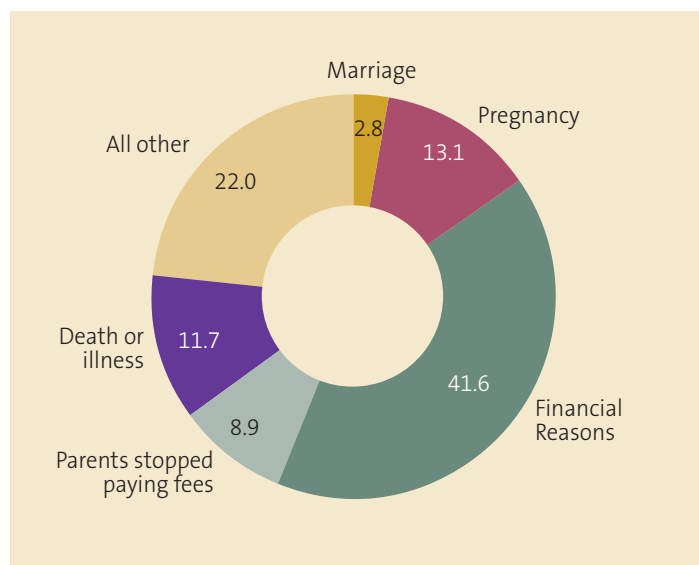
Overall, 10.4 percent of girls in our study reported ever having been pregnant. Qualitative methods explored respondents' attitudes toward premarital adolescent pregnancy. While parents expressed fears that their daughters would get caught up in a relationship that would lead to pregnancy and academic ruin, girls shared reasons why they may seek or permit romantic relationships. They suggested that boys, particularly classmates, often provided girls with needed scholastic and material support, particularly school supplies. Out-of-school and working boyfriends also were considered to offer a better life for girls in struggling households.

The Frequency and Determinants of Dropping Out of School

Overall, 31 percent (n=248) of 14- to 18-year-old girls surveyed had dropped out of school, and the average age of dropout was 15.3 years old. Among those who had dropped out, 84 percent dropped out in primary school, suggesting that most girls had either started school late or had repeated grades. The recommended age to start school is six, but 29 percent of our survey respondents began after age nine. Among the full sample, the median highest grade completed was Primary 6, the second-to-final year of primary school.

Below, we explore in greater detail the household, individual and school-related determinants of dropout, with a focus on how expectations concerning the role of women in family and society influence schooling outcomes. We then describe how relationships, sexual initiation, pregnancy and marriage are related to girls dropping out of school.

FIGURE 1: Main Reason For Dropping Out of School (n=214)



Girls' Stated Reasons for Dropping Out

An important starting point in examining the determinants of girls leaving school are their own explanations as to why they had to stop going to school.

Figure 1 illustrates a few points. More than 50 percent of girls stated that economic factors (either "financial reasons" or "parents stopped paying fees") were the primary reason they had to drop out of school. (It is important to note that "parents stopped paying school fees" indicates the respondent perceived that her family chose to withhold the money for fees, not necessarily that they lacked the funds.) Pregnancy is the second highest single response given, with 13.1 percent of girls indicating this was the main reason they left school. Nearly as many (11.7 percent) said that either their own or a family member's illness or a death in the family led to them dropping out. The remaining 22 percent provided a host of other reasons, namely school-related factors, such as poor academic performance, no longer enjoying school, and feeling too old at school, as well as household factors, such as parental divorce or separation.

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TABLE 1: Individual and Household-Level Characteristics by School Status, Girls Ages 14-18, West Nile, Uganda, 2013

Individual and Household Characteristics of Respondents, Girls ages 14-18	Percent Overall (n=805)	Percent In-school (n=557)	Percent Out-of-school (n=248)
Household Socio-Economic Status			
Lived in thatched-roof home at age 12	91.2	89.4	95.2 **
Father's education primary or lower	60.3	55.3	70.8 ***
Mother's education primary or lower	86.6	83.6	93.2 **
Household Socio-Demographics			
Lost at least one Parent	27.6	24.2	35.1 **
Did not live with either biological parent at age 12	23.9	22.3	27.4 n.s.
Was affected by recent political conflict	19.8	18.2	22.8 n.s.
Average number of siblings	5.2	5.2	5.2 n.s.
Household Gendered Characteristics			
Domestic burden affected schooling a lot at age 12	15.3	9.7	27.9 ***
Felt parent's did not support idea of her being in school at age 12	26.9	19.8	43.2 ***
Paid own school fees in most recent term attended	6.7	4.5	13.2 ***
Individual School-Related Characteristics			
Self-rated performance at school below average/poor	7.8	5.0	14.1 ***
Started school after age 9	29.0	25.2	37.7 ***
Individual Gender-Inequitable Beliefs (percent agreeing with statement)			
Boys should be more educated than girls	36.0	30.7	47.9 ***
If a girl stops schooling, the best thing for her is marriage	33.5	25.5	51.4 ***
Women sometimes deserve to be beaten	29.2	24.9	38.8 ***
Men should have the final say in family matters	62.6	58.9	70.6 **
A girl must get married to a boy if she spent the night with him	38.3	32.6	51.2 ***

Note: Asterisks indicate a statistically significant difference by school status *p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001; n.s. = not significant

In spite of these multiple challenges, the vast majority of respondents indicated that they deeply value education. Girls and their parents recognized the growing importance of completing secondary school in order to access skilled employment opportunities. Indeed, 81 percent of girls who had dropped out expressed an interest in continuing school if given the opportunity.

Individual and Household-Level Determinants of Dropout

In Table 1 we present the association between girls' dropping out and socio-economic, demographic and school-related factors, as well as family and individual gendered beliefs and practices.

Household-Level Characteristics

The household characteristics that were statistically significantly different for girls who had dropped out as compared to those in school included living in a thatched roof home at age 12, having a father or mother with low educational status, and the loss of at least one parent. For example, 35 percent of girls who had dropped out had a deceased parent, while 24 percent of those still in school had lost a parent. While we tested a number of household wealth variables, overall, the role of poverty on dropout rates in this region is not adequately reflected in the survey data only because it is so pervasive; without enough wealthy households in our sample, it is

Case Study

Irene – Age 17, married, Arua District

Irene's parents were fully supportive of her education – paying her school fees, and encouraging her to attend class and study hard – when she started school at the age of eight. Then, two years later, her father died. Everything in Irene's young life changed.

Though her mother tried to support Irene and her brother and pay their school fees, it soon became too difficult. So when Irene was 11 she and her brother moved in with their uncle. Her uncle helped pay some of her school expenses at first, but it wasn't enough. "I began looking for ways of earning a living to support myself in school," said Irene. Eventually, when she was 16, her uncle stopped contributing to her school fees altogether and she was forced to drop out.

Now 17, married and the mother of one child, Irene reflected on the events and experiences that led up to her decision to leave school. Before living with her uncle, life with her mother had been decidedly less stressful, with few responsibilities. She explained, "If I ever did housework, it was petty work." But at her uncle's home, she was required to do "serious housework," unlike her cousins and school friends. Irene says she felt deeply mistreated in this new home environment: "At times I would lack food.... I would hardly read my books in the evening due to lack of paraffin for the lamp." She did not, however, attribute her disadvantage to being a girl; rather, she explained, it was because "I was not living with my biological parents." She added that, in fact, her uncle provided her more material support for school than her brother because she was the better student.

Irene enjoyed school, especially physics, chemistry and math, because of the quality of her teachers in those subjects. It became harder as she grew older, however. "I used to perform better in primary school than in secondary simply because I had more time to read my books...I was busy most times with housework or petty business during the weekends."

Ultimately, she attributes her decision to drop out of school to a number of factors, including having to live with her uncle where she was overburdened with housework and would

go late to school.... The death of my father and the inability of my mother to pay my school fees made me do petty business to support my schooling...I would miss classes sometimes.

After leaving her education behind, Irene made another life-changing decision:

When I dropped out of school, I opted for marriage.

Though she had two boyfriends prior to her marriage, she chose John, a driver she met in town, because he "used to give me gifts... [and he] was well behaved and kind hearted." Irene had initially believed that marriage might have been an avenue for her to continue schooling:

John saw that...my uncle had failed to provide...school fees I needed [and] suggested that we get married and that he would send me back to school in [the] future.

Instead, very soon after they began living together, she became pregnant. The couple is now raising their 1-year-old child – a family that Irene acknowledges was not formed in the ideal way: "I did not have [a] traditional marriage; [bridewealth] is not yet paid. Right now I merely do garden work."

But she finds her marriage to be a caring one, as she explained:

John gave me and still gives me advice concerning life issues.... He also provides financial support. I support him by being a good wife – carrying out wifely duties like childbirth, keeping the house clean and organized.

Still, she wishes she could return to school, even though she's aware of the challenges including raising school fees and balancing school with marriage and family. For now, her hopes for the future are simple – Irene wishes only "to get an income-generating activity to...be able to financially support my family and children."

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hard to observe the benefits of greater wealth for education. That said, the interviews with girls, parents and community members emphasized the weight of poverty-related issues, including a high burden of disease, a need for school-aged children to contribute to domestic labor or income-generating activities, and an overall lack of financial resources within these struggling households. These findings correspond to a large literature that demonstrates the importance of household wealth on schooling attainment.^{5,24}

Both Irene’s and Unzia’s stories illustrate the confluence of these issues as well as how the death of a father compounds the effects of poverty and displacement. These factors likely influence both boys’ and girls’ education, but there is some indication that girls may be affected more than boys, in the ways we describe below.

Household Gendered Characteristics

Our survey included a series of questions concerning expectations for the roles of women and girls as compared to men and boys, in their own households and in society more broadly. We explored this theme in our qualitative research as well. The household gendered characteristics that were significantly associated with school status were: the girl’s perception of her domestic burden at age 12, perception of her parents’ support for her being in school at age 12, and the girl’s responsibility for paying her own school fees in the most recent school term attended.

Nearly 28 percent of those who dropped out suggested that chores severely interfered with their schooling, a factor more likely for those living with single fathers or with relatives other than their parents. In our in-depth interviews, while a number of girls described heavy domestic chores, they did not always recognize this as a form of gender inequality, but rather a natural state of affairs, illustrating the challenge of identifying and measuring the impact of deeply entrenched gender inequities on individual lives. For example, while Irene had significant domestic responsibilities, which she clearly articulated as hindering her ability to learn, she suggested that she had received more support for school than her brother. Parents too, for the most part, insisted they supported and valued education equally for daughters and sons, yet also explained that girls, unfortunately, “as girls” had a higher domestic burden that sometimes interfered with their schooling.

In terms of covering school costs, some girls were doing this on their own due to sheer poverty and parents’ inability to provide the required fees. In a few cases, parents or guardians opted to withhold school fees. Unzia is an extreme example, detailing in no uncertain terms that her brother had been given full financial support while she was not, such that she was being “sent away” until she could produce adequate fees. Parent interviews suggested that they might withhold fees if there was suspicion that the girl was no longer as interested in education as she was in boys. Indeed, parents reported being concerned that their daughters would get pregnant and disappoint them by ruining their investment in their future, as detailed in the words of one mother of a 15-year-old girl in school.

If right now I see my daughter in a relationship with a boy, I will do everything possible to stop that relationship ... I know if I allow such a relationship to continue my daughter might in the end get pregnant, and bring that child to be raised again by me. ... Secondly, if she conceives, that will mark the end of her schooling which means my school fees would have been dumped in the water for no use.

-mother from rural Adjumani

Individual School-Related Characteristics

Our study did not assess the school environment itself, but focused on respondents’ own perceptions of their schooling experience. Girls who rated their performance at school to be below average or poor were significantly more likely to be out of school. Also, girls who started school after age nine were significantly more likely to be out of school. The age that girls begin their education is arguably a gendered predictor, as girls reported they were sometimes held back to look after younger siblings. However, without comparable data on boys we cannot confirm that this occurrence was more prevalent among girls.

Individual Gender Beliefs

Finally, we examined girls’ own beliefs about the differences in opportunities, roles, abilities and expectations for them as compared to boys in the community. The responses to some of these questions are provided in Table 1, and the differences by school status for each response clearly illustrate that how girls are socialized to understand their role and place is highly linked with their school status. For example, 70 percent of girls who were no longer in school agreed that “men should have the final say in family matters,” while this was the case for 59 percent of those in school. Nearly 48 percent of girls who had dropped out agreed that “boys should be more educated than girls,” while only 31 percent of those who remained in school agreed with this statement.

It should be noted that some of these statements – for example, the belief that a girl must marry a boy she spends the night with, or that if a girl is no longer in school the best thing for her is marriage – reflect cultural expectations about family formation processes. Such beliefs are aligned with more traditional value systems that were more prevalent in the previous generation. However, the responses to these questions indicate that, for many, these beliefs persist today. It is also important to note that we asked girls about their beliefs at the time of the interview, and it may very well be that girls who had already dropped out might reflect understandings of gender roles and expectations that are in line with their having had to leave school. In other words, their having dropped out might influence their responses to these questions rather than the reverse. That said, these beliefs of what is acceptable or appropriate are also likely developed early (through socialization processes starting at home) and slow to change. Below we explore how key events along the transition to adulthood reflected in these beliefs are related to dropout in this setting.

Schooling and Key Sexual and Reproductive Life Events

Our study explored how educational attainment is influenced by a number of important sexual and reproductive life events for girls and young women, including their first experience with a romantic relationship, sex, marriage and pregnancy. First, we review the frequency of key sexual and reproductive life events in this population (see Table 2). Overall, 23.5 percent of girls reported having had sex and 10.4 percent said they had been pregnant at least once. Therefore, nearly one out of two girls who had had sex became pregnant, indicating that few girls used contraception. Indeed, among those who reported being sexually active, only 40 percent reported ever having used any form of modern contraception. Overall, only 49 percent of all girls in our survey knew how to prevent a pregnancy and fewer still, 39 percent, knew where to obtain family planning methods.

Association and Timing of Key Events with Dropout

In examining key sexual and reproductive events by girls' school status, the "Ever Experienced Event" section of Table 2 demonstrates that romantic relationships, having had sex, and having ever been pregnant

or married are all far more commonly reported among those who left school than those in school at the time of the survey. This information alone, however, does not provide an understanding of any causal role these events may play in school dropout. In order to discern the timing and sequencing of these important events, we collected detailed information, including the use of an innovative calendar method in our survey.²⁵ We examine the timing of these events in a number of ways.

First, the "Timing of Event" section of Table 2 analyzes distinctions in the average sequencing of events in the lives of girls in our study, in relation to their school status. If relationships or sex caused dropout, one would expect them to occur, on average, earlier among dropouts as compared to those still in school. However, these findings suggest the average age of girls' first sexual experience and first relationship did not appear to differ by their current school status. We also found that marriage, on average, tends to occur at an older age than pregnancy among those who have dropped out of school. This is consistent with growing concerns in the West Nile about premarital pregnancy and

TABLE 2: The Association and Timing of Key Sexual and Reproductive Events

	Overall (n)	In School (n)	Out of School (n)
Ever Experienced Event			
Percent ever in a romantic relationship	58.2 (466)	47.6 (263)	81.9 (203) ***
Percent ever had sex	23.5 (189)	11.9 (66)	49.6 (123) ***
Percent ever pregnant	10.4 (84)	0.7 (4)	32.3 (80) ***
Percent ever married or living with man as if married	9.3 (75)	0.5 (3)	29.0 (72) ***
Timing of Event			
Mean age at first relationship		14.8 (244)	15.0 (154) n.s.
Mean age at dropout		n.a.	15.3 (199)
Mean age at first sex		15.4 (59)	15.7 (97) n.s.
Mean age at first pregnancy		n.a.	15.9 (58)
Mean age at first union		n.a.	16.3 (48)

Note: Asterisks indicate a statistically significant difference by school status *p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001; n.s. = not significant; n.a. = not applicable

Case Study

Unzia — Age 18, married, Adjumani District

Unzia, who is now 18, “only stopped going to school at 16 years... because I conceived and my relatives took me to my husband’s home to live with him.” Her pregnancy, she says, was the final straw in a series of hardships that contributed to her decision to leave school: her father’s illness and death; her family’s subsequent financial strains and difficulty paying her school fees; and her own experience of being treated unequally at home.

While it’s now relatively common for girls in this region to seek financial and material support from boyfriends, 18-year-old Unzia suggested that what she valued was moral and scholastic support. “I do not ask for things from boys, so [my boyfriends] did not help me with any material thing,” said Unzia, who indicated she had three romantic, though not sexual, relationships between ages 14 and 16. About one of those boyfriends she explained, “He only used to tell me to concentrate on studies. And I, too, used to give him the same advice.” At first it was the same with her fourth boyfriend, who is now her husband and father of her child, but then it changed.

He used to encourage me a lot to read hard so that I become a responsible person in life. But thereafter he deceived me, I had sex with him and it turned to be a baby.

Soon after she conceived, Unzia’s relatives took her to live with her (now) husband. She dropped out of school.

Unzia valued her education when she was still in school, however. She particularly excelled in her coursework on agriculture, biology, geography and history – it was her dream to become an Agriculture Officer. She also surrounded herself with smart, supportive peers including a few boyfriends. She and her best friend

used to talk about education – she wanted to be a nurse and I wanted to be [an Agriculture Officer]. We used to enjoy reading and going to school. We also used to encourage each other and as such, we were serious.

Unzia suggested that at home and in school girls face certain challenges that boys don’t, such as bearing a heavier burden of responsibilities at home, and receiving less parental support for education than their brother(s). She explained:

I used to do [household work] while my brother went to school without having to do anything first. I would reach school late and find the teacher already in class.

When her family struggled with the financial weight of her father’s illness and subsequent death, they stopped paying Unzia’s school fees, but not her brother’s. Her parents and relatives bought “him books, attended parents’ meetings at school and now he has been sent to a government boarding school.” She reported that missing classes due to household responsibilities, lack of school fees or health reasons “[made] my performance worse than those who attended classes.”

If she could go back and change anything about her life, Unzia explained she would have avoided

leaving school due to pregnancy.... [It has] created a difference between me and my peers who have sat senior four this year. There is a big difference between staying at home and going to school, especially in terms of acquiring knowledge and advising others.

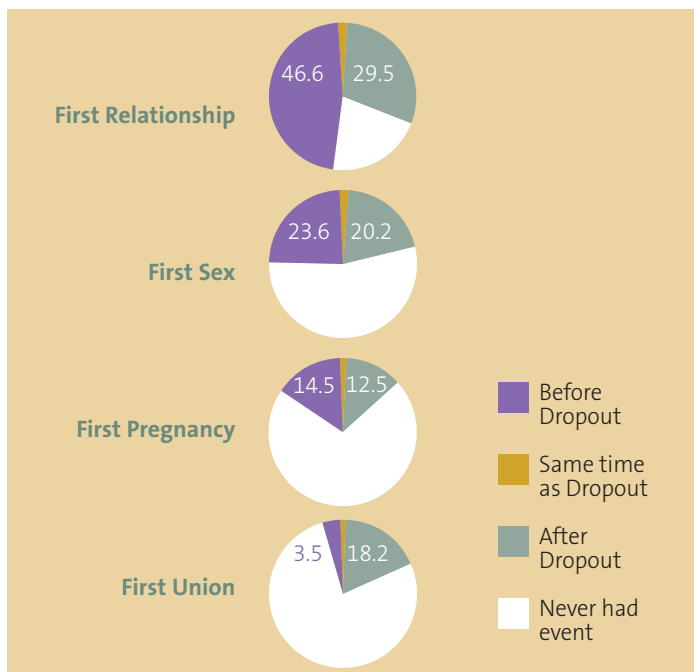
But she still has hope for her future: “If I can pray and God listens to my prayers I want to go back to school, get salary, and become an important figure in my community.”

with reports of an increased prevalence of what participants described as “pregnancy-forced marriages” in the current generation. Finally, the findings presented in this table indicate that pregnancy and marriage are both nearly mutually exclusive to being in school.

Below, we provide additional analyses of the timing of key events in girls' lives, relative to when they dropped out of school (Figure 2). Specifically, we show the percent for whom the event came *before* dropout, *coincided with* dropout (within the same month or same three-month school term), or occurred *after* dropout. We then show (Figure 3) the percentage of girls who experienced each event prior to dropping out of school, as compared to those who experienced the events and are still in school. This comparison furthers our understanding of the potential effects of each event on schooling.^b

First romantic relationship and sexual experience: We asked our respondents about any past romantic relationships, which we defined as “relationships of both short or long duration where you had an emotional attachment or were physically or sexually involved with someone who is not a family member.” Our analysis found that 46 percent of the girls in our survey began their first romantic (but not necessarily sexual) relationship before dropping out, and 30 percent did so after leaving school, suggesting that romantic relationships are more likely to begin before dropout. However, Figure 3 shows that girls still in school were just as likely as dropouts to report having had an earlier relationship, thus indicating relationships may not play an important role in dropping out.

FIGURE 2: Timing of Life Events Relative to Dropping Out Among Dropouts Ages 14-18 (n~200)*



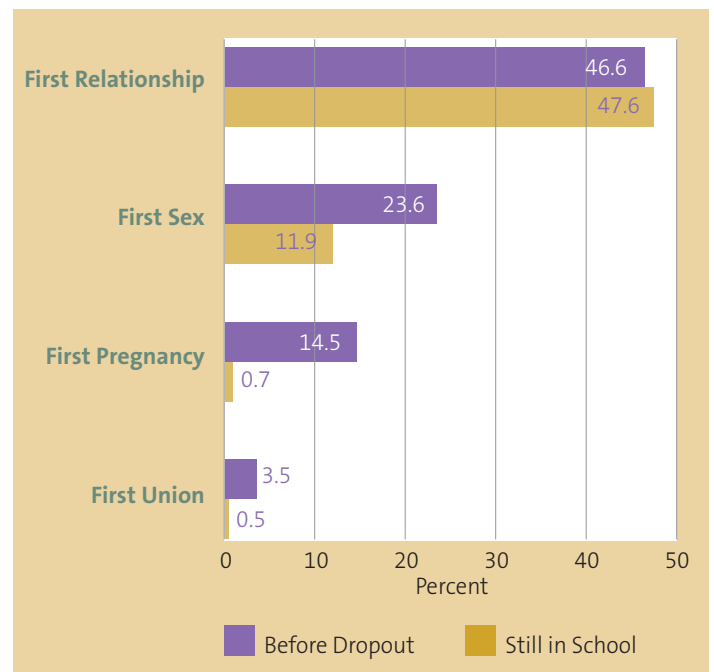
*The number of girls included for each event vary depending on the cases for whom reliable data were available on both timing of dropout and specific event, the range is 193-208.

The picture is different when looking at the timing of girls' first sexual experience. Figure 2 shows that among those girls who had dropped out, nearly as many reported having had their first sexual experience after dropping out (20.2 percent) as before dropping out (23.6 percent). However, Figure 3 shows that the latter group is much larger than those who had sex and then remained in school (11.9 percent). This suggests that having sex may have an impact on dropping out.

Pregnancy: Our data reflect the complexity of the relationship between pregnancy and dropout, and indicate that pregnancy is nearly as likely to be a cause as a consequence of dropout. We found that pregnancy almost as often follows dropout as it precedes it in the West Nile: Among dropouts in our study, 12.5 percent of girls became pregnant after dropping out and 14.5 percent became pregnant before dropping out. However, the data also very clearly demonstrate that for those girls who become pregnant while still in school, it nearly always results in dropout; there are only four cases of girls enrolled in school who reported having ever been pregnant.

Marriage: We found the timing of marriage relative to dropout to be quite different from other key events in girls' lives. Figure 2 clearly demonstrates that the majority of first marriages or the start of first cohabitations begin after a girl drops out of school. In our study population marriage almost never precedes dropout, as only 3.5 percent reported marrying before dropping out versus 18.2 percent following dropout.

FIGURE 3: Percent of Girls Who Experienced Key Life Events While in School, Dropouts vs. Still in School



“Girls are like leaves on the wind”

The above key life events are all guided by dynamic gendered assumptions and expectations that can influence girls’ schooling. Girls who have become pregnant are forced to leave school and often escorted to the father of the baby for marriage. Some parents and participants recounted suspicion of sexual intercourse resulting in a forced marriage or a withdrawal of parental support. Finally, while marriage does not precede dropout in this setting, it can often result from it. As Irene stated, in the face of a high domestic burden rendering her ability to keep up in school extremely difficult, she “opted for marriage.” Another participant explained that her mother’s watchful eye on her whereabouts completely relaxed after she left school; she reasoned her mother felt that “if education has failed it is better I got a man to marry.” That said, about two-thirds of dropouts were not yet married or cohabiting, suggesting that marriage does not generally immediately follow leaving school.

Identifying the Most Significant Determinants of Dropout

To understand the relative importance of the different determinants, described earlier, that lead a girl to drop out of school, we ran multivariate logistic regression models that predicted the likelihood of a girl dropping out of school. With these models, we assessed the relative contribution of household and individual socio-economic and demographic factors alongside school characteristics and family and individual gendered perceptions and expectations. We explicitly examined the role of having sex in predicting dropout, as our previous analysis pointed to its potential importance. To do this, we looked at only those girls who were still enrolled in school at the age of 14.5 (90

percent of overall sample) and examined the effect of having had sex before this age on dropping out anytime after this age. We chose this age cut-off to both ensure that the majority of the sample were still in school and to allow for a relatively sizeable population of girls having already experienced a sexual event (25 percent of sexually active girls had had their first sexual experience before age 14.5). Therefore, our sample is reduced to 14.5- to 18-year-olds who were still enrolled in school at age 14.5.

We present above both the unadjusted and the adjusted odds ratios for dropping out of school for girls who were in school at age 14.5, but had had sex prior to that age. The unadjusted model, which does not account for any other factors that might also lead to dropout, shows that among those girls still in school at 14.5 years old, having had sex before this age was of borderline statistical significance in determining dropout. This model suggests that girls who had had sex before 14.5 were two time more likely to drop out (OR = 2.04) than girls who had not. We then tested to what extent having had sex before age 14.5 remained a significant determinant of dropout when considered alongside the following factors: household socio-demographic and economic characteristics, school-related factors, and gender beliefs and expectations. The final model, shown in Table 3 below, includes the factors found to be the strongest determinants of dropout in the West Nile sub-region for girls ages 14.5 to 18 who were still enrolled in school at age 14.5. Once we account for other factors, having had sex at an early age no longer significantly increases the odds of dropping out.

TABLE 3: Multivariate Logistic Regression Predicting the Odds of School Dropout for Girls Enrolled at Age 14.5

	Unadjusted OR (n=641)	Adjusted OR (n=520)
First sex before age 14.5	2.04 [^]	1.66
Age in months and years		2.50 ***
Mother's education (ref: none)		
Primary level		0.46 **
At least some secondary		0.33 *
Self-rated school performance at last term (ref: excellent/good)		
Average performance		0.82
Below average/poor performance		3.20 *
Started school after age 9		1.40
Felt domestic chores interfered with school at age 12 (ref: not at all)		
A little		1.23
A lot		2.89 **
Progressive gender expectations (scale)		0.55 ***
Perceived parents did not support the idea of her being in school age 12		2.74 ***

Note: Asterisks indicate statistical significance [^]p<.1 *p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001; OR = Odds Ratio

Gendered Expectations Have a Powerful Impact on Girls' Educational Attainment

Our multivariate analysis found that the girl's mother's education, her self-rated school performance, and every gendered expectation variable (perceived domestic burden, parental support and progressive gendered beliefs) were the most significant determinants of dropout. We found that overall the set of gendered expectation variables has the most powerful impact on girls' dropping out of school in the West Nile sub-region. How a girl is treated at home, and her own, internalized perceptions of what it means to be a girl, factor very significantly into whether or not she will stay in school. Girls who perceived that their domestic chores interfered with schooling when they were 12 were three times more likely to have dropped out, and girls who believed their parents didn't support them being in school at age 12 were over two times more likely to have dropped out. Finally, the odds of having dropped out of school were 45 percent lower for girls who held more progressive gender expectations (disagreeing with the gendered statements described in Table 1).

We also found that a girl's self-reported school performance and her mother's (rather than father's) education level were important determinants of dropout in this population. When a girl rated herself as a poor or below average student, she was three times more likely to have dropped out than if she rated herself as an excellent or good student. Finally, the findings regarding mother's education suggest an intergenerational transmission of gender expectations and norms. The odds of dropping out were 54 percent lower for girls whose mothers had some primary education than girls whose mothers had no education. The odds of dropout were 67 percent lower for girls whose mothers received any secondary education.

It is also important to raise what was not identified as significant in this study: household wealth and conflict. While the literature has demonstrated a relationship between household wealth and schooling attainment, we did not find a significant relationship here, almost certainly due to the fact that the vast majority of the households interviewed were very poor, providing little basis for comparison between households of varying wealth. However, the influence of poverty on schooling attainment came through clearly in qualitative interviews. Second, while nearly 20 percent of the interviewed girls suggested their family was impacted by recent civil and political unrest, this was not found to have a significant effect on school dropout, and was very infrequently raised as having had a direct impact on school in the in-depth interviews. It is likely, however, that conflict is a major background factor, and has directly or indirectly contributed to poverty, death of a parent, and parental separation, all of which were described by girls as playing a significant role in dropout.

Summary and Conclusions

This study confirms that school dropout among adolescent girls in the West Nile region of Uganda is very prevalent: Thirty percent of the girls we surveyed had left school, with most of these leaving school before transitioning to secondary school. Less than 50 percent of these girls age 14 to 18 knew how to prevent a pregnancy, but nearly 25 percent had already had sex. The qualitative findings demonstrate the negative effects of poverty, disease and parental death on schooling attainment in this region. Our findings also highlight the role of gendered beliefs and expectations in determining girls' dropout: a heavy domestic burden alongside girls' and their parents' beliefs about the roles and expectations for girls, as compared to boys, profoundly alters their life trajectories.

Girls' departure from school coincides with other important life events that are also influenced by gendered expectations and beliefs; however, the sequence of these events is not as straightforward as often assumed.

Romantic relationships often precede but do not appear to cause dropout; in fact, qualitative data suggest that sometimes romantic relationships help provide social and material support for girls to remain in school. The relationships between first sex, pregnancy and dropout are not straightforward. Our findings regarding the role of pregnancy in dropout are in line with previous research demonstrating the complexity of the relationship between pregnancy and dropout.

For those girls who become pregnant while in school, dropout is nearly universal, and reflects the lack of a specific retention or re-entry policy in Uganda for pregnant schoolgirls. Our findings can be contrasted with those from South Africa where policies are highly inclusive, and where studies have found between one- to two-thirds of adolescent girls who have had a pregnancy return to school.^{16,26} Our estimates indicate that 14.5 percent of dropouts can be attributed to pregnancy in our study. However, it also should be noted that among all of the girls in our study who reported ever being pregnant, nearly half became pregnant after dropping out of school, emphasizing that pregnancy is not always a cause of dropout, but also may be among its consequences. Sexual activity alone does not appear to predict dropout, once we account for other household and individual factors.

Our findings differ from other studies in how explicitly we model and demonstrate the role of gendered expectations at the household and individual level on dropout. We show that these expectations are in many ways related to life events, such as sex or marriage, that have been shown in other studies to strongly determine dropout for girls in particular. This analysis revealed that, overall, a girl's own gendered beliefs (or understanding of what she can and should be), alongside her own self-rated school performance, her family's gendered expectations for her, and the education level of her mother are the strongest determinants of whether or not she will stay in or drop out of school. Each of these areas represents opportunities for strengthening policies and programs related to girls' education and social development.

Implications for Research, Programs and Policy

Overall, this study substantiates the need for more investments in girls' education in this region. The findings deepen our understanding of the challenges girls face, and point to opportunities for how research, programs and policies can help us meet those challenges.

Research Implications

- **Examine determinants of dropout among boys as compared to girls:** While outside the scope of this study, it is important to assess the magnitude and causes of dropout for boys and the role of gendered expectations in schooling for boys. More research into boys' experiences and perceptions, as well as more nuanced explorations of relationships between girls and boys, would help us better understand the gendered dimensions of schooling experience.
- **Build further evidence on the role of domestic labor in schooling experiences:** Rigorous time use studies can more carefully interrogate and demonstrate any gendered distinctions in how time is spent for adolescent girls as compared to boys, underline any inequities, and serve as the basis for community dialogue and reflection on how to better support girls' advancement in school.
- **Examine school fees more closely:** Data should be collected at the individual level, and aggregated to school and community levels, to be able to more carefully assess both variability in school fees and related costs and the role of such variability in dropout.

Programmatic Implications

One of the most significant findings in our study was that girls' internalized gender norms and expectations were strongly associated with the likelihood of dropping out of school, which points toward the need for transformation of gender norms and expectations at multiple levels, including:

- **Community and the household:** Gender-transformative programming can help relieve girls of their domestic burdens, enhance society's perceptions of the value of girls and women, and enhance communications in and equality of relationships between men and women, boys and girls. Community dialogues and local public education campaigns can work to enhance the value of girls' education, and to unravel subtle forms of discrimination against girls.
- **Schools:** Gender-transformative programming in schools can help improve relationships between boys and girls, and reduce gender-inequitable attitudes and behavior. For example, the Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS) program, which has been evaluated to show improvements in gender norms and relationships among girls and boys in India, can be adapted to be relevant and effective in settings such as the West Nile region.²⁷

- **Girls' knowledge, skills and attitudes:** Girls need and deserve a quality education that provides them with information, skills and networks that prepare them for their futures. In addition to academics, schools can enhance important life skills, including communication and negotiation skills, body literacy, financial literacy, civic engagement and human rights.

- Programs targeting girls should also engage parents in order to improve intergenerational communication and support for girls.
- While sexual activity is relatively high among adolescent girls in West Nile, their knowledge about how to prevent pregnancy, and where to obtain family planning methods is low. It is critical that the education and health sectors coordinate to ensure that comprehensive sexuality education is provided in school, and sexual and reproductive health information and services are available to young women (and men) in communities.

Policy Implications

The research findings highlight two important areas for improvements in reform, implementation or enforcement of policies.

- **Ensure girls start school on time:** Girls who start school at the appropriate age and maintain grade-for-age progression have the best chance of completing their educations. Information about existing policies for starting school should be disseminated to parents and community authorities, and these policies must be adequately funded and effectively enforced.
- **Strengthen policies on re-entry and retention for pregnant girls:** While the National Adolescent Health Policy in Uganda indicates girls should return to school following a pregnancy, there is no explicit policy to encourage retention or re-entry. In addition, there is no enforcement of the existing policy. The education and health sectors must work together to formulate, legislate and enforce retention and re-entry policies so that schools encourage girls' continued education.

Ultimately, the findings on the importance of mothers' education to girls' school experiences strongly substantiate the fact that girls' education has valuable, multi-generational advantages. An accessible, safe and high-quality education equips and empowers girls for healthier and safer transitions to work, citizenship, marriage and parenthood. These healthier transitions at the individual level create the conditions for a range of positive outcomes at the societal level, including improved maternal and child health, more inclusive economic growth, enhanced political participation, and greater gender equality and human rights. In order to realize these wide-ranging benefits, more concerted and coordinated action is required immediately to keep girls in school through at least the secondary level – in the West Nile region and in countless other settings where girls have yet to be supported to live up to their vast potential.

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Endnotes

^a We specified this narrow age range as the formative research suggested that dropout, relationship formation, sexual initiation and dropout due to pregnancy often occur during this span.

^b Note that the denominators for the calculations in Table 3 (and the analysis presented in Table 4) vary as a result of differences, by each outcome, in the numbers of respondents who had both experienced the event and for whom we had reliable (internally consistent) reports on the timing of each event.



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